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This review exists through the voices it gives expression to, in their variety. All contributions are welcome. Please write to *Here-notes from the present*, via Bastia 11, 20139 Milano, Italy, phone-fax 0039-02-57406574, email: massimoparizzi@alice.it.

This issue was edited by Johanna Bishop, Mariela De Marchi, Lella Fusi, Erica Golo, Bea Mahieu, Bruno Manelli, Marina Massenz, Giorgio Morale, Massimo Parizzi, Laura Zanetti.

Memories

Here

notes from the present

In this issue of “Here”, our idea was not really to collect memories, but rather to try to capture certain movements of memory. Movements of the mind and emotions.

Each of us has memories (Maria Ofelia’s crate, p. 71). Every object and place in the world (“every building, every backyard” of Kiev to Veronica, p. 79), to someone, is also or only a memory, or on the point of becoming one. It is a twin life, a semi-secret one, which surrounds and envelops us. Memory, Paul Auster wrote, is “the space in which a thing happens for the second time”.

Memory partakes of being and not-being, and is thus a bridge between the two. This means, in part, that it is a bridge between truth and falsehood; between reality and imagination, hope, utopia; between reality and desire (“April is the cruellest month... mixing memory and desire”).

Memory does not partake of being, of “what is”, merely because it is a memory of what was, and can summon up its smell, taste, colour, shape; it also partakes because it partakes of the present: what now is. This, in part, is what drives it. And if it partakes of what is not, it is not only because it is a memory of what no longer is, but because it belongs to the world—the intangible world—of inner life.

Massimo Parizzi

In *The Invention of Solitude*, Penguin Books, New York, 1988, p. 79.

T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, Norton, New York, 2001, p. 5.

In nostalgia, being and non-being are set against each other, and like complementary colours, they make each other brighter. The more vivid the memory of what was, the more agonizing the awareness that it no longer is, the more one seeks consolation in a more vivid memory, bringing what was and no longer is back to life. “All that remains”, Boyarin writes (p. 27). It is a spiral and can become an obsession, driving both individuals and communities to insanity. It happened in Serbia; it happens among Israelis and among Palestinians. So is it wrong to indulge in nostalgia? But how can we avoid it? And how can we bring ourselves to forego it? Nostalgia “mixes memory and desire”: that is why it is cruel. But that is why it is a form of love: Jihane’s “birthplace” (p. 9), Maria’s house (p. 11).

One kind of nostalgia, both possible and which actually exists, is not a lament for bygone times, a fixation, a grudge against the present, a desire to destroy it. A nostalgia not dominated by hatred and impotence. But how can this be possible, if it is not possible to choose one kind of nostalgia over another, one memory over another? If, when nostalgia and memories do us and others too much harm, it is only possible to repress and erase them? Perhaps what “chooses”, leading us at last to feel a nostalgia that is love, and can even be hope and vision, is one element of memory, the present, and one element of nostalgia, desire. If memories cannot be chosen, we can choose in the present; if nostalgia cannot be educated, we can educate our desires. (“I once believed that our future depended on our will; and its better or worse outcome on whether our wishes were more or less good. So I

Johanna Bishop wrote to me in an email: “...the enormous pleasure one finds in memory, as an affirmation of identity, of life lived... Reading the piece by Nives [p. 66] after a visit from my parents, I found myself wondering whether the thing all children ask—“tell me about when you were little”—which I always thought of as primarily motivated by the wonder of hearing about a world in which you did not yet exist, might not be equally fuelled by the desire to see the pleasure on the face of the parent or grandparent telling their story, a pleasure you don’t aren’t yet directly acquainted with but that you perceive

cherished them, I mean my wishes, and beautified them day after day”, Giorgio Morale wrote in issue 17 of this review).

second-hand, maybe even without understanding half of what they're telling you. It's the pleasure of accumulated meaning in a life".

Jihane's nostalgia for the hills of Casablanca, “once green”, now blemished by “abominable buildings” (p. 9). The nostalgia of Hao Wu and his father for “pipes hissing with steam”, now “sophisticated art” (p. 81). What love, what desire, what choices are inscribed there?

Often what emerges in nostalgia, hidden behind love for life, is a grudge against it. Because life passes. Changes in a place where we used to live makes us suffer, not because they are changes for the worse, but because they preclude our return. They deny us repetition, eternity.

This is not what Simone Weil had in mind when she wrote, “On the one hand, to love everything without distinction; on the other hand, to love only good”. And yet these words, in this context, are uniquely illuminating.

In The Notebooks, trans. Arthur Wills, Routledge, London-New York, 2004, p. 224.

What difference is there between Jihane's desire, in her nostalgia for “once-green” hills and that of Hao Wu and his father, in their nostalgia for “pipes hissing with steam”? Jihane probably wishes that the hills were green, the way they used to be, and therefore can be; her memory is a choice, and—it depends in large part on her—can become a hope and vision. It is a “no longer” that can turn into a “not yet”. It's unlikely, on the other hand, that Hao Wu and his father really long for pipes and steam. The object of their desire, in the nostalgia they feel, is a different one.

Memories cannot and should not be bridled: they would no longer be memories: i.e., in part, mes-

sages that are from ourselves, but seem to come from someone else, in some ways familiar, in some ways unfamiliar, and that must be listened to in order to be known and understood.

We need to listen to memories. Among other things, they tell us about our present, and the future we conceive of in our present. That's why some memories, in a given period of our lives, become more vivid, sometimes even forming a biography, while others tend to fade. Some lie, though we don't know it, and can even become memories of something which never happened—"that's not how it went"—but which might have happened, had the past had obeyed its future: "memories of the present". Is there anyone who has never come across some of their own?

Some memories disappear, seem to never quite take shape; the present dominates them from the outset, the instant that "being" becomes "non-being". Others drift, fragmentary, isolated, and sometimes suddenly assail us: "assail us", because they can make us quaver, and even—it sometimes happens—lose our balance. Then, usually, they retreat, go back to drifting: they have no place in memory. Memory, it would seem, has and is a sense. It has a direction; it is a future, which we head towards in the present.

Memory often takes the same approach with us that countries and political movements do with their citizens and members: it builds a past in relation to the present and the future. Without stopping at lies and censorship. Often, like nations and political movements, we don't like to be contradicted. We claim that the way things are is the

way they have always been. But in life as in history, memories that contradict us will not always let themselves be completely erased. Sometimes, as in Bir'im (p. 28), vestiges survive among the memories "with no place" in memory. Stubbornly waiting there to find a place in some different memory: a different present and a different future.

No one can avoid remembering, and in doing so, putting a distance between themselves and the present. Memory may be the only experience, shared by all, in which the tyranny of the present, its claim to being the only possibility, is overthrown.

A passageway thus opens up from the past to the future: from memory to imagination, hope, utopia, vision. From the "no longer" to the "not yet". And it becomes clear that the power of the present is illusory; that the stubbornness and resistance to change attributed to it stem from an error. From the fact, perhaps, that we mistake the present for reality and reality for matter; and matter has weight. The present plays on this error: "It thinks it's right as opposed to the immediate past" writes Alberto Savinio (in *Maupassant e "l'altro"*, il Saggiatore, Milan, 1960, p. 85); but it is a "phenomenon of vanity and autosuggestion". Memory reveals that its stubbornness is docility, its power weakness, its resistance tractability: it will let anything be done to it. It has let everything be done to it. It was just one of many possibilities.

On this point, Bruno Manelli observed: "The leap from the past to the future could offer comfort/hope. Immediately, however, the future must return to the present and till it, break its crust, as the seed of possible choices: keep the present from letting its inertia triumph and remain entrenched, murky, to muddle and obscure the life contained in memories. The future peers into daily life through the filter of criticism and awareness in the construction of the present".

Tangiers, my birthplace

Here

notes from the present

Tangiers, my birthplace. Even if, for me, nothing of it remains [...]. The day grandma decided to leave us she took away with her the only relation I had with this city, beautiful by night as it is by day, in spite of the abominable buildings which have marred its once green hills. Now they are greyish, because the drug trader didn't have enough paint to finish the job. Or pink, the vestiges of a Saudi with bad taste (a pleonasm) passing through Tangiers on a "business" trip.

Jihane Bouziane

In the evening, after an awful day at work, I get into my car, craving some open air. I drive fast. I know by some instinct which roads to take. Amazingly, I find myself exactly where I wanted to go. [...] In the terrace cafés by the drains are families, young people, emigrants who have come back home, and that typical accent I've never liked but I'm very fond of hearing in some people. My grandmother spoke *tangérois*.

I'd like to go and knock on her door. Tangiers has no meaning without her. I did not know her well—nobody knows their grandmother well, I suppose—but her memory remains with me. Thanks to her I came to know something terrible. Death. She is the only close relative who has left us. The day before she passed away she whispered so many things in my ear and, if I examine my life, I realise I am always following her advice.

I am not blonde, but my hair is lighter than that of any other member of my small family. So she would call me “the blonde” and her last words for me were: “The blonde with black eyes never escapes the prince’s gaze.”

After my little outing I go back to the hotel. There are three not very respectable-looking women at the door. The hotel porter won’t let me in. I tell him bluntly that I have a room there. Apologies. The manager, who is watching the scene from a distance, notices that I am a bit agitated and comes up. We start talking. He suggests a guided tour of the night entertainment offered by the hotel.

A crowded bar, girls galore, an orchestra playing tunes of very questionable taste, and a small group of men. I sit at a table out of the way but from where I can see everything... Tangiers... she prostitutes herself, too, but she does so with the refinement typical of the people from the north, heavy but not vulgar make-up, sexy but not shocking clothes. And yet, there is always this faint air of sadness After Marrakech and Agadir... the same fate has befallen this pearl of a city.

The tour turns out to be really guided. A detailed resume of each girl. Average age twenty. Reasons: parents’ divorce, own divorce after an arranged marriage, a love story ending with a pregnancy. Family unemployment, dependant relatives. They come from Salé, Oujda, Azrou and Tangiers. “Yes, even girls from Tangiers do it now, you see...”

I go up to my room, a well-appointed one, as they say. I go out onto the balcony: a clear view of the beach, Malabata and the lighthouse. Memories surface again. I miss grandma; her life was never easy but she gave birth to my father and us...

The house where I was born

Here

notes from the present

Just outside the ancient town walls of Potenza Picena, along a road flanked by lime-trees and overlooking a wide valley stands the house where I was born, grew up and lived with my family until I was twenty-five. My grandfather Domenico built it with the money he had earned as an emigrant to Argentina in the first decade of the past century. He had departed with his three brothers, one of whom had eventually died of malaria fever in the pampas, thus remaining in our family memories and lexicon as *buon'anima di Salvatore* [something like “dear old Salvatore”]. My grandfather came back, built the house and got married.

Maria Granati

It is a high narrow building, with a garden-kitchen garden at the back: a very long narrow garden at the bottom of which a pig and some chickens, each in their own separated areas, lived under a huge fig-tree and near an elder hedge which marked the border between us and our neighbours. There were a few fruit trees and lots of vegetables, together with herbs and flowers, a very high palm tree and, above all, between the house and the kitchen garden, a huge terrace with two pergolas of *Isabella* grape, which my grandfather had partly grafted onto *Sangiovese* or *Montepulciano* grapes—I cannot remember well. From such a mixture of grapes he obtained a small cask of a light, rather aromatic wine, which he served during our cold winter eve-

nings with sugar, cloves and a bit of cinnamon, so as to obtain *vin brulé*.

That very *Isabella* grapevine still brings back to me the sweet smells and flavours of childhood through those opaque purplish grapes I used to nibble surrounded by buzzing wasps without even waiting for them to be completely ripe. During the hottest period in summer, the fresh, shady, green light of the tightly intertwined grapes welcomed those mounting the stairs to the upper level, where the kitchen-garden and the garden were situated, since the house had been built on sloping ground. A few years ago one of those grapevines dried up and we tried to fill the hole in the pergola by planting in its place a creeping plant which is full of wonderful bluish-mauve bluebells in the summer. And yet, the grapevine suddenly appeared again and yielded many bunches of *Isabella*, returning, in its second life, to its original essence.

In past decades, since we had moved to Modena, the house was empty during the winters, while we lived there in the summer in an attempt to save it from deterioration. The grapes were looked after and “treated” to stop them from rotting. But in vain: every year, in July, the *Isabella* bunches started to rot inexorably. In the past three years we have let the house to a young Macedonian immigrant, who, besides not paying the rent, has not kept his promise of looking after the house and the garden, nor has he “harvested the grapes”, thus leaving dried-up bunches from the previous year hanging from the vine shoots. And yet, this year, rather amazingly, not only are the grapes not rotten, but they are also better than ever before, as if they concentrated in themselves all the sweetness and flavour held back over so many years; the roses, the plants of

verbena, the paper-reed, the oleanders and the hibiscuses are all in full bloom, having won over thirst, parasites, diseases and abandonment. And now, after having hesitated long and reconsidered things, we have decided to sell the old house, because, although we all love it, we can no longer live there: too many stairs, too many ordinary repairs, and above all, too many houses—terraced houses—surrounding it, and then cars—lots of them—along the provincial road running just in front of the house, a place which used to be the reign of my games, where almost only bicycles and oxen-drawn farming carts went by, heading for the nearby mill. My home seems to have turned from being the centre of a vast, spacious universe of green and light into being a melancholy fortalice resisting the racket and the cars, with its ancient scent of strawberry, rosemary and mint, its four o'clock flowers coming out everywhere, spontaneous bay trees and Japanese pittosporums, a verbena plant finding its way along a low wall despite drought and neglect. Swallows, serin finches and robins keep nesting under the gutters and on the pergola. Sometimes we can hear the peeping of their nestlings and see traces of them on the terrace floor as long as some predatory bird or a hoopoe—does not destroy their nest and eat the small eggs—as it has sometimes happened. Every so often a robin, disturbed by our intrusions, hops around us annoyed or maybe curious, not at all scared. And we think it could be my mother, or my father, or my grandparents—who spent almost all of their lives there and died in those rooms—coming to see us through love and yearning, as a young English friend of our son's argues; she claims she can "feel" their discreet yet affectionate "presence".

We are selling it so that someone else can look after it and use it, possibly respecting and loving it; someone who will mow the lawn for the joy of the blackbirds which immediately go and peck insects; someone whose children will look in surprise and with a bit of fear at the mysterious grotto that opens below the terrace, which was dug up once in order to keep wine and olive oil cool; it is a long, dark, damp grotto, which I never wanted to enter when I was a little girl, because I thought only witches and bats inhabited it. Someone who will not turn the big room on the ground floor into a garage; in that room, in front of a window overlooking the road and the valley, my mother used to sit and sew in the summer, waving her hellos to people walking past who often stopped and talked to her. Every morning I had my hair combed there, when I went to secondary school and wore plaits. . . . Finally, someone who will love the shady narrow courtyard where I used to sit and read comics (“Kit, the Little Sheriff” or “Mickey Mouse”), with my back against the wall, during those quiet, scorching summer afternoons; or that hidden corner at the bottom of the kitchen-garden, where we planted a hibiscus hedge. But it is no easy task. Some houses around have been sold to construction firms which are refurbishing them to make “compact flats” or “studio flats” to be sold or let. My cousin says we must give in. No one will ever buy that house but to “refurbish” it.

But when we get into the car to go to the seaside, our little nephew Arturo often asks us to drive along what he calls a *secret road*. It is only one of the several solitary country roads shaded by oak trees and pine trees, used as shortcuts across cultivated land, with very few houses. Are we going to find

someone who loves *secret roads* and old houses
with *Isabella* grapevines?

Progress and memory

Here

notes from the present

[...] Over time, the role of memory has profoundly changed. Much of historiography had been built up against memory, seeking to produce truths making use of specific procedures of knowledge. From this point of view, there was a drift away from certain forms of oral, and, later, written, transmission, from certain processes of identification or of re-identification, placing memory outside the field of history. [...] Things have changed over the past generation: memorial demands stretched the field of historiography (including the scientific area), memory became the object of history: historians, that is, started studying memorial phenomena as they would have studied any other type of phenomenon in time. Furthermore, memory itself gave rise to forms of historical production, which is a phenomenon that runs directly counter to the credo of the historians. This fits in the context of a process that only now, and not without difficulty, can we begin to describe: our societies have become memorialist. [...] Up until the sixties or seventies, our societies had been living for nearly two centuries in the idea of a positively oriented linear progress: one went from less to more. There could be inci-

Jacques Revel

From an interview with Chiara Pastorini, in “Diogene” (www.diogenemagazine.com).

dents (even serious ones) along the way, such as World War I or II, but, in spite of it all, there was an evolution that overall was perceived as positive. For our societies, instead, the future has become extremely uncertain, the present practically undecipherable, and hence even the past has changed status. It is no longer just a point of reference that we can use to gauge our progress, but it takes on the value of “refuge”. I believe that the memorial surge has its roots here [...] Thus, there is a close link between the change in the idea of progress, today in crisis, and feelings about memory. [...]

The fullness of memory

Here

notes from the present

It’s hard to fish up a day, an hour, a feeling that is unique: a discovery. And yet! Aren’t we always in formation?

Giorgio Morale

Two or three memories, maybe even ten, have become set in place like film stills, growing ever fainter. They date back to the first years of my life. Few people believe they are genuine, and many have conjectured that they are pictures I put together based on stories heard from early childhood on. That’s not what happened; they are memories I’ve gone back to again and again, coaxing them back to the surface. In the end, in some the image remains and the emotion is dulled.

Recent memory is patchier.

Once written down, words lace together, fill in the gaps. That's the fullness of memory.

Some memories linger on mingled together with the words used to express them. Others are still casting about, they float up and down, not yet ready to flow out onto the page. I have different formulations for some, like snapshots taken from different angles.

Most, unexpressed—not due to any romantic bent, an escalation of emptiness, a vendetta of impotence, but rather because sometimes you can't find the words, sometimes the emotion is missing.

We imagine something else behind what we are reading, an additional, unexpressed resource: nothing to be done about it, everything that's best is there.

I'm infected with the itch to write. It's like when the train is about to leave and there seems to be so much left to say, though we don't know what. But there's no more time to linger, the railwayman is already raising the whistle to his lips, the train is moving—and standing here on the platform, we are unsure of our balance.

The art of oblivion

Here

notes from the present

I have always wanted to forget. My specific problem consists in forgetting. I have always had a lot of things to forget, and this has kept me rather busy

Andrea Inglese

during my forty-one year long life. Unfortunately, like everyone else, I have memories. You do not choose to have memories, because memories are always there before, in the folds of your present, as strange, unpredictable streams that draw you away from things and people closest to you. There are many more memories than real objects: the world is haunted by them. Shunning memory is a job, but becomes a habit in the end, a wonderful, disturbing automatism. You may start as I did, with a few specific memories you want to forget. Quite a few memories, above all childhood memories. You may have had a hellish childhood. Or even just partly hellish. Childhood never goes smoothly and it is by no means an easy time, but sometimes it can be the worst time a human being happens to experience. My childhood was only partly hellish: rather than with loving parents, I had to deal with sadistic nutcases. Not always, for pity's sake. As a matter of fact, I cannot say my childhood was perfect hell. There were ample pleasant spells, some of which were really bright, full of joy or even love. Despite that, my main task has been one of destroying a great number of memories dating back to those times. I have to make one thing clear at once. There is a technical word to describe this kind of destruction: "repression". However, this lovely word does not cover the whole range of experience for one who needs to get rid of memories. "Repression" seems to conjure up a sort of pious mechanism which sinks a hellish area of our past into nothingness in an automatic way and in less than no time. Given that each of us may take advantage of a certain dose of repression, there still remain a number of memories that must be cancelled consciously, through a certain amount of effort. This

voluntary cancellation is called oblivion. Forgetting is an active action, and it entails effort, exercise and talent. The problem for those who want to forget a partly hellish childhood, for example, is one of having to choose what to forget, which is hard. When you get used to forgetting, that is, you become clever at rejecting all that pullulating mass of memories arising at every moment, you then come against serious problems concerning the selection of “good” memories you want to keep. After all, there are no good memories for those who practise the art of oblivion. Memory represents a chaotic store where both horrible and radiant memories are always inextricably intertwined. That is why forgetting means forgetting everything. That is why I hardly have any memories from my forty-one year long life. I have fixed a few motionless scenarios and events belonging to my most remote past, but I have not retained almost anything of the events that took place afterwards. My memory consists of my friends and the women I have loved. And I refrain from accessing such memory, were it only because I would be ashamed of doing it. Those who remember everything always have good reasons to be ashamed before themselves, but those who forget everything are ashamed before others, friends and lovers, for their inability to share bits of the past. There is constant reproach for one who forgets amusing and colourful episodes in a friendship, not to mention forgetting events that are part of love intimacy. But when the art of oblivion is picked up in childhood and practised with ever-growing familiarity, it is really hard to think of changing course. Getting rid of memories, neutralizing them, rendering them harmless, vague, fuzzy, indefinite and almost imperceptible: these are the targets peo-

“To remember was to die. It took me some time to realize that the enemy was memory. Anyone who summoned up his past would promptly die. It was as if he had swallowed cyanide. How were we to know that, in that place, homesickness was fatal? [...] It was so tempting to give into a daydream of the past, a parade of images that were often rose-colored, sometimes hazy, sometimes crystal clear. Raising the specter of a return to live, they would arrive all out of order, fragrant with festivity, or, even worse, with the scents of simple happiness. [...] Unfailing, absolute resistance. All doors shut. Seeling yourself. Forgetting. Emptying the mind of the past. A clean sweep. Nothing left lying around in your head. Never looking back. Learning not to remember anymore. [...] Whenever memories threatened to invade me, I would marshal all my strength to bar their way, snuff them out. [...] My cell was a tomb.” (Tahar Ben Jelloun, This Blinding Absence of Light, trans. L. Coverdale, Penguin Books, London, 2006, pp. 17-18)

ple like me set themselves. And this happens in particular with memories of a past love, of long-gone love stories. In this case you have to be drastic: in fact, nostalgia is an absolutely noxious and hateful experience. Nothing is more poisonous or more insane than nostalgia. I regard this inclination towards inhabiting the past, living in it and preferring its unreal, dreamlike dimension to the boredom and shocks of the present as an unhealthy tendency. Maybe my shunning nostalgia springs from the fact that when memories, in particular memories of a love story, take possession of myself, I risk being killed by them. Nostalgia is a sort of experience I cannot afford: it would wear me out and produce such moral pain as to affect my body with disastrous effects. Lived-through, cultivated, squandered nostalgia would soon draw me to paralysis and blindness. I am absolutely sure of that.

Forgetting everything is nevertheless a sentence. A life without memories is a two-dimensional life. It is a confined sphere, lacking breadth and depth, and it is like walking along dark corridors where you only see objects into which you end up crashing. Living without memories means shifting the unreality of the past into the unreality of the future. But the past, unreal as it may be, possesses a density of colours, sounds and smells. The future, on the contrary, is a blood-drained horizon, in which only outlined silhouettes develop against abstract, hospital-white, bureaucratic-white scenarios. One who always forgets all the time drains his own life of blood and has little identity; he is the shadow of someone or a mere hypothesis which will have to be verified each time in days and hours to come. When the champion of oblivion, the exterminator of memories, the great talent of nothing-behind-

his-shoulders realizes all this, he feels the need to take immediate corrective action. That is how the obsession for writing often arises. The written page becomes a place where to entrap something belonging to one's own present. One never writes in the past, in fact, but only in the present. One does not collect nostalgic evocations, retrospective narrations and restorations of magnificent or terrible events. One tries to lend substance to the present, to that small circle that casts some light on people and things which are always on the brink of being forgotten and disappearing. Here, writing does not mean seeking things and people once they have become memories and have reached us from the past in an ever-unpredictable way and according to a changeable delay. Here, the writer catches above all what is left at the margin of events and situations, or else what will not become stuff for memory, and, as a consequence, will not undergo cancellation by means of voluntary oblivion.

Georges Perec described this connection between oblivion and writing, though he did so in a yet candid way. Perec was a man for whom repression was not enough. Perec was a man who had a partly hellish childhood to forget (both his parents had died in the Second World War: his father at the front and his mother at Auschwitz). Perec was a great talent of oblivion. He was so talented as to ignore the fact that oblivion was his own product, the outcome of his own art, and not a need enforced by a hostile fate. In a text dated 1977 and entitled *Les lieux d'une ruse*, Perec directly deals with the matter of writing seen as a barrier against oblivion. He writes: "And at the same time a sort of memory failure set in: I started being afraid of forgetting, as if, unless I recorded everything, I was not able to retain any-

In *Penser/Classer*, Seuil, Paris, 2003.

thing about my fleeing life. Every night, I took to writing a sort of diary scrupulously and with manic consciousness: it was the opposite of a secret diary, as I entrusted it with nothing but what had happened to me ‘objectively’: what time I had got up, how I had used my time, my movements, my shopping, the progress—measured in terms of lines or pages—in my work, the people I had met or simply seen, details about my meals in the evening at this or that other restaurant, what I had read, the records I had listened to, the films I had seen, etc. This fear of losing my own traces came together with my frenzy at keeping and filing everything.” In fact, the failure of memory corresponds to a success in the art of oblivion. But such a success terrifies you: it makes your life an accurate, secondary and evanescent experience. Hence, salvage not through memory, which has by now been banned, but through recording *what is not memorable*: waking up times, ordinary dinner menus, everyday shopping, etc. However, this is how a “second memory” forms, a memory of what Paul Virilio (Perec’s fellow-traveller) called the *infra-ordinary*, that is, what lies *between* the events that catch our attention and narrative interest. This “second memory” cannot but be a product of writing, a spontaneous extension of it. “Questioning what seems to have stopped surprising us for good”, Perec wrote on another occasion.

Today, October 16, at about 6:30 pm in via Volturno in Milan, for the second successive day I saw hundreds of birds perched on the horizontal jib of a red crane, singing. Flocks of other birds formed fluid shapes in the sky like clouds of atoms aggregating and coming apart. Even the two Sicilian body repairmen came out of their garage

to look at that spectacle. I threw away a long, rectangular, mock-leather key-ring. It had become a washed-out green, like that of a frog crushed on the road. I bought a new one which costs 15 Euro (a black leather one). It looks less interesting and has a “v” imprinted on one of the flaps. Other things happened and are happening, memorable things perhaps, more important events, which are getting ready to plunge into the dream-like matter of memory, but my “second memory”, the only written one, is concerned with something else, with all that does not have enough strength to mould an anecdote.

As autumn falls

We are here waiting
wrapped in golden leaves.
The world does not end with dusk,
and only dreams
have their limits in things.
Time leads us
through its labyrinth of blank leaves
as autumn falls
in the yard outside our house.
Wrapped in the incessant fog
we go on waiting:
Nostalgia is living without remembering
what word it was we were invented from.

Here

notes from the present

Giovanni Quessep

From *El ser no es una fábula*, Tercer Mundo, Bogotá, 1969, p. 41.

Palestinian ruins

Here

notes from the present

My primary concern here is with the heritage of Palestinian dispossession—a history that constitutes an unmasterable past, for Israeli Jews and for all Jews, insofar as they identify with the State of Israel. This past that is not yet mastered is not over. It is still happening. [...]

Jonathan Boyarin

From “Ruins. Mounting toward Jerusalem”, in *Wrestling with Zion*, edited by T. Kushner and A. Solomon, Grove Press, New York, 2003, pp. 323-336.

A set of ruins [is] available to the perceptive viewer from the highway leading up from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Where the most famous Jewish ruins in Israel—the Western Wall and Masada—are monumental relics of ancient Jewish state power, these Palestinian ruins, which easily blend into the landscape, stand as witness to domesticity and to local communal life. [...]

Is the dialogic model of ethnographic fieldwork appropriate to an encounter with such ruins? Is a “dialogue” with ruins possible at all? Even my idea that the stone remains of prewar Palestinian life can be made to speak is a reference back to a Jewish source: a volume of photographs of synagogues and Jewish cemeteries in Poland published after World War II and titled in Yiddish *Shteyner dertseyln*—Stones re-tell. To the extent that we confront the Other only in relics, we are cast back even more on our own codes than in conversation with another living person. [...]

Rather than “settle” the question of dialogue with ruins, it may be helpful to document a series of such encounters with ruins of pre-1948 Palestinian life that are visible from the modern Tel Aviv-Jerusalem Highway [...]. I hope thereby to suggest something about the way in which ruins either remain part of the background or alternatively come to the forefront of consciousness—a coming to consciousness that is always incomplete. [...]

The stretch I will be visiting and revisiting here begins at the place called in Arabic Bab-el-Wad and in Hebrew Sha’ar ha-Gay, both meaning “the gate to the valley.” From this spot the new four-lane highway winds upward for perhaps fifteen miles before reaching the edge of Jerusalem, the first several miles through a narrow and steep pass.

Of my first visit to Israel in 1967, all I remember is what was doubtless pointed out to me: the hulks of armored cars on the side of the highway, relics of the battle for access to Jerusalem during the 1948 war. In several trips during the past years, I have noticed that these wrecks are periodically painted with rust-free paint, precisely to prevent their merging back into the landscape.

On later visits, I began to discern the remains of agricultural terracing on the dry, steep slopes of the wadi. Toward these I experienced an inchoate, doubtless romanticized nostalgia [...], but already mixed with a vague need to distinguish them from the landscape. Then, during my extended stay in 1991, as I took the bus back and forth between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, these terraces began to come into sharper focus for me. On July 26 I wrote in my journal:

“The more times I travel back and forth along the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv Highway, the more clearly I

see the traces of the artificial [...] terracing on the hillsides—places where there are just the ruins of stone walls, places where the terraces are intact but the fields are not in use, a few places where the terraced fields are still in use. [...] In at least one place where the natural striation of the rock was relatively stable, it has humanly produced rock walls on top of it, so there the distinction that worried me the day I first came up, about which was natural and which was a trace of Palestinian settlement (which, in fact, reflected my worry about my own biases—I didn't want to sound like a jerk talking about abandoned Palestinian fields which were actually just “undeveloped” mountainsides), was dissolved. Presumably if there were places where the natural striation was adequate to provide terracing, then they just used that”. [...]

The expositions mount, and the ruins themselves do not cease to pile up. Not always through destruction, but sometimes indeed through a “restoration” that distorts them beyond recognition of their original, lived-in outline. The Israeli journalist Danny Rubinstein records the following incident that took place in the village of Sataf near Jerusalem, restored by the Israelis as “a model of mountain agriculture.” As a result of the Israeli conquest in 1967, refugees from Sataf are sometimes able to visit the homes they were completely barred from between 1948 and 1967:

“One summer day in 1988, when the site was filled with Israeli visitors, shouts were suddenly heard from an elderly woman in traditional Palestinian village dress. She was ranting against the Israelis at the top of her lungs, in the rural dialect of Arabic characteristic of the area. It turned out that the wom-

In *The People of Nowhere*,
Times Books, New York,
1991, p. 12.

an was a native of Sataf who now lived in a refugee camp near the West Bank city of Ramallah. One of her sons, who was living in Kuwait, had brought his family for a visit, and she took them all to her native village—a custom widespread among refugees. The woman's ire had been kindled by an error in the restoration. She discovered, to her outrage, that the wall rebuilt next to the well should not have reached as far as the mulberry tree. 'It's a lie,' the old woman shouted. She recalled that her little sister had once fallen there, so there couldn't have been a wall."

Whether through restoration or obliteration—and even where, as in the case of the [...] Israeli armored cars from the 1948 war, an attempt is made to preserve ruins in their pristine ruined state—the physical remains taken for the rock of memory often prove slippery. The double character of ruins—better, the double perspective with which we approach them—is captured in the prosaic title of an encyclopedia of destroyed Palestinian villages: *All that remains*. These stones, we hear at first, are the only things that persist; this is all that remains. And yet also the very possibility of an encyclopedia implies a plenitude: *all that remains...* in our memory. Both memorial books and physical ruins can constitute sites of memory. The existence of Palestinian ruins within an Israeli landscape bears witness to a collective struggle for control of space. Can that struggle be overcome in memory? Is there a possibility of commensuration within a shared ethos of memory as constituting particular yet non-exclusive humanity—not, that is, the monumental commemoration of triumph but a ruinous commemoration “under the sign of mourning”? [...]

The place we are moving to now is a hilltop in the northern Galilee, close to the Lebanese border. Until 1948, it was inhabited by Maronite Christian Arabs. They were forcefully evacuated from their homes during the 1948 war, and, although they remained within Israel and have struggled ceaselessly to be permitted to return to their homes, they never have been allowed to move back. During the early 1950s, their homes were destroyed by the Israeli army. [...]

The village is called Bir'im in Arabic. It is an ancient settlement—so old that it is mentioned in the Talmud—and it is also an archaeological site called Biram on Israeli maps. This slight change: Bir'im, Biram, is an unusually literal example of *differance*. The place with an *i* as its second vowel is the ruin of an Arab village. The place with an *a* is, at least for the Israeli government, the site of an ancient synagogue. It must be added that many Israeli Jews—both individuals and political parties—have disagreed with that government, arguing alongside the villagers that their right to return home must be honored. [...]

The visitor to the excavated and partially restored ancient synagogue at Biram is surrounded by the ruins of Bir'im. The site has obviously been landscaped and designed so as to encourage visitors to walk straight to the synagogue site and then to return to their cars without examining too closely the destroyed Arab houses. Thus one sign at the parking lot informs us, in Hebrew and in English, of the significance of the place:

“Site of one of the many Jewish settlements in Upper Galilee during the period of the Second Temple. Remains of the beautiful third century (C.E.) synagogue reflect the high standard of religious and

cultural life maintained by the Jews of the region, even after the destruction of the Temple. The work of restoration and landscaping was carried out by the Department for Landscaping Improvement and Development of Historical Sites of the prime minister's office".

The didactic point is not lost on anyone familiar with the politics of settlement and land control in the Galilee since the establishment of the State of Israel. The "Judaization" of the north has been a fairly constant priority. The excavated synagogue (which is indeed quite beautiful) is not only a tourist attraction but a mark of the Jewish claim to this area and of the persistence of Jewish habitation in Palestine after the end of the second Jewish commonwealth.

Another sign cautions: "National parks contain antiquities, natural sites, and hazardous terrain. Visitors are therefore advised to be careful during their stay on the grounds".

"Antiquities" presumably are things visitors should be careful not to harm by stepping on them. "Hazardous terrain" is a place visitors should avoid for their own safety. But why should anyone be cautioned about avoiding "natural sites"? The copula that joins "landscaping improvement" and "development of historical sites" in one bureaucratic slot gives us a clue here: these natural sites are freshly planted. The state is trying to grow ruins into the landscape. Please don't interfere by looking at them too closely.

This visitor and his companions—one a Palestinian professor of anthropology at Bir Zeit University, the other a Palestinian-American graduate student doing fieldwork on the role of archaeology in Israeli national culture—ignored the warnings about

hazardous terrain, examining closely the ruined houses, the still intact church (used occasionally for weddings and the like), and the graveyard, where by court order the people of Bir'im are allowed to bury their dead. On the wall of perhaps the most impressive house in the village, a cross carved into the lintel had been destroyed by vandals; the date the house was built was partially legible: 19... but the last two digits had been obliterated.

The professor from Bir Zeit—himself a native of the Galilee—further broke the spell of nature cast on the ruins by the landscaping department by engaging with the Druze gatekeeper in a detailed conversation, reminiscing about the fates and present whereabouts of various former residents of the area who were all mutual acquaintances of theirs. Doubtless there cannot be a dialogue *with* ruins: stones speak only in our metaphors. But it seems there can indeed be dialogue *around* ruins.

On the back wall of the church at Bir'im, there are graffiti in three languages: “*Biram ahuva*”—“Beloved Biram,” in Hebrew; “*Hona bakun*,” “Here I will be,” in Arabic; “Biram forever,” in English; most poignantly ironic of all, and also in English: “Let my people return.” It is interesting to note that not only do the residents—or more likely, their children—express their longing to go home in Hebrew and in English but that when they do so, they now call their home Biram.

Clearly the site of the Arab village of Bir'im/Biram is not only a ruin. It also functions as a memorial. But it remains a place of contention, so clearly it does not serve the same healing and unifying function as the usual state memorial. It is tempting to think of the destroyed village with its graffiti as a *Gegendenkmal*, an “antimonument”. [...] Norbert

Radermacher, the designer of the antimonument, “suggests that the site alone cannot remember, that it is the projection of memory by visitors into a space that makes it a memorial”. Different memories are projected by different visitors to this site in the Galilee, with and against the connivance of the state. Perhaps the destroyed modern village surrounding the restored ancient synagogue serves as a sort of antimonument for at least some Israeli visitors and as a memorial for the villagers of Bir'im who have become visitors to Biram.

But in any case the ruins of the village are in no way an allegory or a prototype for all the ruined Palestinian villages. This is evidenced by the particular circumstances in which the people of the village still find themselves—refugees of a sort and Israeli citizens at the same time. In the larger sense, unlike the double destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem that has become the prototype for all Jewish experiences of catastrophe, there is no prototypical ruined Palestinian village. They were lost, to borrow a phrase, “one by one by one”.

Any attempt to understand the persistence of Palestinian nationalism will have to face that loss and the ruins that testify to it; any genuine reconciliation between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs will have to make room for the different modalities of the losses and commemorations that are at the heart of their respective national identities. At Biram, the attempt to impose a sense of the place as uniquely and properly Jewish is effectively undercut by the remains of an Arab village. Through their periodic returns to their homes, the villagers and their descendants ensure that this is more than a passive effect. They make their stones tell a story against the story told by the Department for Landscaping

Improvement and Development of Historical Sites of the prime minister's office.

In parody of the little booth with the lonely Druze gatekeeper inside guarding the way from the parking lot to the synagogue site, one house near the church has a single word, painted in English over its empty doorway: "Information."

Remembering our Nakba

Here

notes from the present

April 27, 2004, was the Nakba (Arabic for "catastrophe") commemoration day four years ago; it was a day I will never forget. We were imprisoned in our homes. It seems this is the only way for Israelis to "peacefully" celebrate their so-called "independence day". Impose curfews on the people in Palestinian towns in addition to the daily closures and restrictions on movement. During this time, in which we remember our "Nakba", when thousands of Palestinians fled their homes in 1948 and became refugees, the Israelis celebrate the anniversary of the establishment of their state on our land. That day it felt like we were being held under house arrest so that we would remain calm, allowing them to celebrate in peace. We felt as though we were being punished like naughty school children!

I was awakened in the early morning, a little before 5:00 am, by a sound from a loudspeaker placed on

Rana Qumsiyeh

an Army Jeep announcing curfew for my hometown. In a bad Arabic accent, the announcer was repeating: "Inhabitants of Beit Sahour, you are under curfew until further notice". This was the case the day before as well. But then, it seemed they were late in their curfew decision, because we only heard the announcements at 7:00 am or a little after, when school kids were already carrying their backpacks and were on their way to school. Teachers and workers had already left their homes, and so this news about a curfew created chaos! You would see people running around looking pale, yelling for a missing child or husband.

Luckily, I was still at home getting ready to go to work at the YWCA in Beit Sahour. Normally, my work is at the YWCA office in Jerusalem, but my Israeli-issued permit that allows me to pass the checkpoint to get to Jerusalem (mostly not when there is a closure), expired a few days ago. The Israelis would not renew it until further notice. So, I used plan "B", which was to work from the YWCA office in Beit Sahour. But this day, I couldn't even do that!

My youngest niece "Maram", six-year-old, was listening to the sound bombs and the yelling outside and was looking pale and shaken with fear. Suddenly, she started banging her chest and gasping for air. She said she couldn't breathe and then she held her stomach and said she was about to throw up. I tried to calm her and tell her that the soldiers would not come into our house, but she kept asking, "what if they do?!"

I stood at our window watching the empty streets. It had been some time since I witnessed a curfew. I was in the United States during the "40-day in-

vasion” as everyone calls it, when curfew was imposed on the whole Bethlehem area for forty days in early 2002.

The military Jeeps left and life gradually started going back to normal; people just ignored the orders and went on about their daily business. For me, that was new! In the old days, during the first Intifada, people would abide by the orders and stay at home, unless there was an emergency. But it’s different now. People simply didn’t seem to “care” about the Israeli orders! I decided to do the same and go to work.

An hour passed, and then the Israelis came back. Four Israeli military vehicles entered the city. When the soldiers found that the curfew was not being observed, they became violent. They started shooting sound bombs and tear gas bomb, yelling at shop owners to close, banging their doors shut. They screamed at people in the streets to go home. Soldiers used their jeep to push a van full of people backwards on one of the main streets. It was scary! We decided to leave the YWCA; it was risky to stay at work longer. I managed to make it home safely and remained there all day.

A little before midnight, an Israeli tank rumbled through the otherwise calm and quiet and seemingly deserted narrow streets of the city. It was just a show of power. The tank passed in front of our house, making a terrible noise and waking those of us that had been sleeping. We had no idea why we were under curfew or how long it would last. Luckily we had enough bread for the day. But we knew that if the curfew went on, it wouldn’t last much longer and that soon we would need more prescription medications.

War is a state of mind

Here

notes from the present

Some years ago I talked with a young Israeli writer. I was struck by the fact that in spite of being very successful and acclaimed by the critics, and that at a relatively early age, she somehow exuded an air of insecurity. When I asked her about it, she broke down. “I never told this to anybody. My whole childhood was hell. I did not know that both my parents had been in Auschwitz. They never talked about it. I only knew that there was a terrible secret hanging over my family, a secret so awful that I was forbidden even to ask about it. I lived in constant fear, under a constant threat. I never had a feeling of security.”

This is violence—not physical violence, but violence nonetheless. Many Israeli children have experienced it, even when the State of Israel became more and more powerful, and Security—with a capital S—became its fetish. We, Israelis and Palestinians, are living in a permanent war. It has lasted now for more than 120 years. A fifth generation of Israelis and Palestinians has been born into the war, like their parents and teachers. Their whole mental outlook has been shaped by the war from earliest childhood. Every day of their lives, violence has dominated the daily news.

In many ways, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is unique. Putting a complex historical process in its simplest terms, it goes like this:

Uri Avnery

Lecture presented in a conference on *Raising Children Without Violence*, Berlin, October 20, 2005.

120 years ago, many Jews in Europe realized that the growing nationalism of the various peoples, almost always accompanied by a virulent anti-Semitism, was leading towards a catastrophe. They decided to become a nation themselves and set up a state for the Jews. They chose Palestine, the ancient homeland of their people, as the place to realize their dream. Their slogan was: “A country without people for a people without a country.” But Palestine was not empty. The people living there objected, of course, to another people coming from nowhere and claiming their country. The historian Isaac Deutscher has described the conflict in this way: A person lives on an upper floor of a building that has caught fire. To save himself, he jumps from the window and lands on a passerby below, injuring him grievously. Between the two, a mortal enmity ensues. Who is in the right?

Every war creates fear, hatred, distrust, prejudices, demonization. All the more so a war lasting for generations. Each of the two peoples has created a narrative of their own. Between the two narratives—the Israeli and the Palestinian—there is not the slightest resemblance. What an Israeli child and a Palestinian child learn about the conflict from their earliest years—at home, in kindergarten, in school, from the media—is totally different.

Let’s take an Israeli child. Even if his parents or grandparents were not Holocaust survivors, he learns that Jews have been persecuted throughout history—indeed, he learns that history is nothing but an endless story of persecution, inquisition and pogroms, leading to the terrible Shoah. I once read the reports of a class of Israeli schoolchildren, who had been asked to write down their conclusions

after visiting Auschwitz. About a quarter of them said: My conclusion is that after what the Germans have done to us, we must treat minorities and foreigners better than anyone else. But three quarters said: After what the Germans have done to us, our highest duty is to safeguard the existence of the Jewish people, by every possible means, without any limitations.

This feeling of being the eternal victim still persists, even after we have become a powerful nation in the State of Israel. It is deeply imbedded in our consciousness. Already in kindergarten, and then every year in school, a Jewish child in Israel experiences an annual series of national and religious holidays (there is no real difference between the two) commemorating events in which Jews were victims and had to fight for their lives:

- Hannuka, commemorating the fight of the Maccabees against the Greek oppressors
- Purim, the victory over the Persians who tried to exterminate all the Jews
- Passover, the flight of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt
- Remembrance day, devoted to the Israeli soldiers killed in our many wars against the Arabs
- Independence Day, our desperate fight for survival in the 1948 war in which our state was founded;
- Holocaust Day
- The 9th of the month Av, when the Jewish temple was twice destroyed, once by the Babylonians and five centuries later by the Romans
- Jerusalem Day, when we conquered the Eastern part of the city, and much more, in the Six-day war.
- Only Yom Kippur is a purely religious holiday, but in our mind it irrevocably connected with the terrible war of 1973.

On each of these occasions, year after year, there are special classes explaining its meaning, imprinting its significance. The climax is the Seder on the eve of Passover, commemorating the exodus from Egypt, when in every Jewish home around the world an identical ceremony takes place. Every member of the family, from the oldest to the youngest, has a role and every sense—seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling and touching—is engaged. No Jew, however secular he may be, is ever free from the memory of this hypnotizing event in his childhood, experienced in the warmth of the assembled family.

In the mind of the child, all these events become intermingled. My wife Rachel, who for many years has been a teacher of the first and second elementary school classes, says that the children do not really understand who came before whom—the Romans or the British, the Babylonians or the Arabs. The cumulative effect of this is a world-view in which Jews at every period in every country had been threatened with annihilation and had to fight for their lives. The whole world is, always was and always will be, “against us”. God—whether he exists or not—has promised us our country, and no one else has any right to it. This includes the Palestinian Arabs, who have lived there for at least 13 centuries. With such an attitude, it is hard to make peace.

Now let’s take a Palestinian child. What does he learn?

- That they belong to the Arab people, who had a glorious empire and a flourishing civilization in the Middle Ages, when Europeans were still barbarians, and who taught Europe science and brought it enlightenment.

- That the barbarian Crusaders perpetrated a horrendous bloodbath in Jerusalem and ravished Palestine, until they were driven out by the great Muslim hero, Salah-al-Din (Saladin).
- That the Palestinians were humiliated and oppressed for many centuries by rapacious foreigners, first the Turks and then the European colonialists, who brought the Zionists to Palestine in order to suppress all hope of the Arabs achieving freedom in their own countries.
- That in the great Nakba (calamity) of 1948, half the Palestinian people were driven out of their homes and country by the Zionists, and that since 1967 all the Palestinians have been vegetating either as refugees or as victims of an endless, cruel occupation.

Every Palestinian child grows up with a deep feeling of resentment and humiliation, the feeling of being the victim of a terrible injustice, able to redeem his people only by violent struggle, heroism and self-sacrifice.

How to make peace between two peoples in the grip of two contradictory, seemingly irreconcilable, narratives? Certainly not by diplomatic maneuvers. These can ease the situation temporarily, but cannot in themselves put an end to the conflict. The history of the Oslo agreement shows that without dealing with the root causes of the conflict imbedded in the minds of the peoples, an agreement is nothing but a short-lived cease-fire.

Peace is a state of mind. The main task of peace-making is mental: to get the two peoples, and each individual, to see their own narrative in a new light, and—even more important—to understand the narrative of the other side. To internalize the fact that the two narratives are two sides of the same

coin. This is mainly an educational undertaking. As such, it is incredibly difficult, because it first has to be absorbed by the teachers, who themselves are imbued with one or the other of these world-views. Let me tell you a little story. Rachel was teaching her class the Biblical story of how Abraham bought a plot in Hebron from Ephron, its owner, in order to bury his wife, Sarah. First Ephron offered the plot for free, and only after many entreaties named a price, 400 silver shekels, saying "What is that betwixt me and thee?" (Genesis 23.) Rachel explained to her children that that is the way business is conducted between the Bedouin in the desert even now. It is crass to come straight out with the price, one has to offer it first as a gift. Thus the transaction becomes polite and life more civilized. In the intermission, Rachel asked the teacher of the parallel class how she had explained the chapter to her pupils. "Simple," she answered, "I told them that this is a typical example of Arab hypocrisy. You can't believe a word they say. They offer you a gift and than demand a high price!"

For peace to become possible, you need to change a whole mentality. That is what my friends and I, in the Israeli Peace Bloc *Gush Shalom*, are trying to do. Is this possible at all? Speaking here, in the center of what used to be the capital of Prussia, I am reminded of my childhood, when I was a pupil in what was then Prussia, which was then still governed by the Social Democrats. Once, when I was nine-year-old, in pre-Hitlerite Hanover, the teacher was speaking about the statue of Hermann the Cherusker in the Teutoburger forest. "Hermann stands with his face to the arch-enemy (Erzfeind)," she said. "Children, who is the arch-enemy?" All the children answered in unison: "France! France!"

Today, after centuries of war, Germany and France are not only allies, but partners in the glorious enterprise of a united Europe. If this could happen here, peace is possible anywhere.

Let's keep an eye on our humanity

Here

notes from the present

They asked me to talk to you about Beslan. You all know what happened at Beslan?

On September 1, 2004, a group of Chechen terrorists mined and then attacked an elementary school in this town in Ossetia, in the Caucasus, and took hundreds of pupils, parents, and teachers hostage. It was the first day of school. On September 3, shots and explosions were heard in the school, and the Russian special forces stormed the building. Hundreds of people died, many of them children. This happened, and there's nothing that can be done about it. It happened.

So why should we remember? Memory is a rebellion against this "irrevocability": it's a way of telling the dead "you are still alive in our memory", and telling those who killed them "you have not killed them in our memory".

But memory is not reality: it can't bring back the dead. This makes it weak. And fills it with a feeling of frustration and impotence—"there's nothing I can do to undo what happened"—that is hard

Massimo Parizzi

From a talk delivered to several high school classes in Milan for the "Day of Remembrance" in February 2007.

to bear. This makes it fragile. And explains why it is so easy not just to forget, but for memory to turn into ritual—ritual can stand on its own—or worse, for it to be “exploited”, as they say: each person chooses to remember what is convenient for himself and for his own group, his own side, now.

Even here one can find an exhortation coming from a day like this: we must make memory less weak, less fragile. One way can be to question it, and question ourselves, deeply and without mercy (towards ourselves), even as we remember.

I'm the editor of a review called “Here - Notes from the Present”. [...] The issue that came out in February 2005 was made up of journal entries covering the months from September to December 2004. The Beslan massacre took place on September 1, and we gave this issue the title *And suddenly it's Beslan*. In the papers on September 4, we read a dialogue, if one can call it that, which struck us deeply, so much so that we printed it at the beginning of each section in that issue, like an obsessive refrain that was stuck in our heads. We wanted it to stick in the reader's head as well. It was just a few lines:

“A thirteen-year-old boy tells his story: ‘Some of us pupils said to the terrorists: let us live, we're just children’; one of them replied that ‘it would have been worse if we had grown up’.”

The monstrosity of that reply and the reason why it struck us so deeply are clear. There's no need to explain them. But over time, these words that stuck in our heads gave rise to other thoughts. I'll tell you about them.

What did that terrorist see in that boy? He saw a future Russian soldier who would go to kill his people in Chechnya. He saw this, one could say, sta-

tistically. Statistically, the great majority of Russian boys become Russian soldiers, and if their government sends them to fight in Chechnya, they go. That terrorist was “predicting” that boy’s future; he didn’t see him as an unpredictable being, who could become anything at all. Was he right? In terms of good and evil, of course not. Seeing an enemy as someone to be killed is monstrous, and seeing a child, “statistically”, as a future enemy is worse than monstrous.

But is that “statistical” vision truly foreign to us? Isn’t it a vision we cultivate ourselves, “innocently”, when we talk about deaths in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Palestine, in Israel, or even in car accidents, in terms of statistics, of numbers? And when we talk about “Americans”, “Arabs”, “immigrants”, aren’t we learning not to see an individual? We’re certainly not training ourselves to see one. Let’s think about that, please.

And then—to continue questioning ourselves mercilessly—in terms of truth and falsehood, probability and improbability, unlike those of good and evil, was that terrorist completely wrong? Unfortunately not. Most Russian boys are indeed “destined” to become Russian soldiers, and if they’re ordered to go fight in Chechnya, they go. To some degree, their future is predictable. But theirs and theirs alone? Is this unique to Russia? And what about our future, your future? Here one can find an invitation: to take our future in our own hands and not allow anyone—even the demands of the “job market”, for example—to construct it in advance or channel it onto paths that are not the outcome of a personal choice and history. And that means not allowing anyone to treat us merely as interchangeable tools, numbers in a statistic. But...

hold on... doesn't the advertising industry treat us just that way, for instance?

The attack in Beslan caused an outpouring of emotion and grief around the world. Rightly so. It targeted children. And children are innocent, naive, defenseless. A human instinct, even an animal instinct, was violated. The instinct of adults to protect children the way animals protect their young. The killing of children always elicits more emotion than the killing of adults. That's right, it's natural. But emotions always hide a dark side, not necessarily sinister, but one that's not clear, not obvious. Let's try to look at it.

Couldn't it be that we are moved by the deaths of children more than the deaths of adults in part, *in part*, because children are all alike and adults are not? The thousands of families who would willingly adopt an Indian child, or who welcome children from Chernobyl into their homes every year: would they be willing to host an Indian adult for a month? We can find an answer in a report published in "Repubblica" a few days ago. There are landlords in Rome, though they surely exist in Milan as well, who rent out "bed shifts" to immigrants, meaning that one person sleeps while the other is at work, taking turns. These rentals are often in run-down buildings; the landlords make six or seven thousand euros a month off of them, and then when they've earned enough, they turn the tenants out, use the money to renovate the building, and then rent to Italian families. In short, like that terrorist, do we think—to be merciless with ourselves—that's it's worse if children grow up?

I'd like to end with a final doubt, or question, the one that in some ways I feel to be most pressing.

You see, more and more, in these years of war and

massacre, when I look at the “special”, “unique” emotion that I naturally also feel over the deaths of children—and which, I should repeat, is right and natural—I feel a sort of unease. As if the “special status” granted to children were also a way of saying “*at least* save the children”. At least save the children, because we’ve given up on saving the adults. As if we can no longer manage to feel grief for adults. If this happens, then we should be vigilant; it means that the greater emotion we feel over the killing of children paradoxically corresponds to a lesser humanity on our part. A dwindling of our humanity.

A few evenings ago I started reading a book, a book I think is invaluable, by Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman from Holland who died at Auschwitz in 1943. It’s her diary. On March 15, 1941, when she was 27 years old and still in Holland, free and (relatively) safe, she wrote: “It is the problem of our age: hatred of Germans poisons everyone’s mind. [...] Indiscriminate hatred is the worst thing there is. It is a sickness of the soul. Hatred does not lie in my nature. If things were to come to such a pass that I began to hate people, then I would know that my soul was sick and I should have to look for a cure as quickly as possible”.

In the next issue of the review I mentioned, there is a journal entry from a young woman in Baghdad, who by some strange coincidence is the same age Etty was then, 27. She says: “Here we come to the end of 2006 and I am sad. Not simply sad for the state of the country, but for the state of our humanity, as Iraqis. We’ve all lost some of the compassion and civility that I felt made us special four years ago. I take myself as an example. Nearly four

years ago, I cringed every time I heard about the death of an American soldier. They were occupiers, but they were humans also and the knowledge that they were being killed in my country gave me sleepless nights. Never mind they crossed oceans to attack the country, I actually felt for them. Had I not chronicled those feelings of agitation in this very blog, I wouldn't believe them now. Today, they simply represent numbers".
Let's keep an eye on our humanity.

From Palermo to Milan

Here

notes from the present

One of the public gardens in Palermo is Villa Sperlinga, where I would go every day in the late afternoon, knowing that I would be bound to meet virtually all my circle of friends and intellectuals, and girls, sitting around the tables in the small square enjoying sorbet and ice-cream. It was in a totally gratuitous time dimension, stolen away from the quick city pace, cadenced by the mere pleasure of being in company. The real, deep trauma of my move up North and my eventual transfer to Milan came from the total impossibility of recapturing that dimension, discovering that I was inescapably caught up in an industrialised society with its work-dictated tempo. Many years later an Italian philosopher described this "Mediterranean"

Attilio Mangano

trait of *slow time* very well, even depicting it as an alternative value, while I came to discover that even within the time space of a moment, albeit fragmentary and always unvarying, there is room for the personal view, even for antagonism, that it all depends on the person in question and what use he puts his time to.

Today perhaps I wouldn't be so ready to contrast a vision of a static South, where nothing changes, with one of a dynamic North, perhaps because I have learned that these stereotypes do exist, but are only true up to a certain point. And yet I too, like all the left-wing intelligentsia, have shared this image of a polarisation with its two variations (backward and static South versus advanced and dynamic North; the South with its sound Mediterranean values, the North corrupted by industrial society), only to discover that the city dimension is indeed one of seclusion and freedom—just half a mile away nobody knows you, you are anonymous like all the rest—but in the street where you live there are the same rules as in a village, they know all about you and everybody greets and checks up on everyone else, like in the Italian deep South.

Of course, someone like me—I wrote my degree dissertation on Elio Vittorini and have met and rubbed shoulders with Leonardo Sciascia and Vincenzo Consolo, all of them Sicilian-born writers—cannot fail to have realised that “*Sicilitude*” really does exist, that in the world as it is today we are nomads who roam freely yet something ties us down inside, our “*Sicilianity*”. It is difficult for me (but perhaps also for everybody else) to keep this sense of identity distinct from the need to distance myself from it. In my memory is a jumble of a thousand small and not so small family dramas,

where, like in other stories, a need for rebellion and escape, a youthful hate for conformity and traditions clashes with the tenacious hold of the affections. I grew up studying the deep-reaching damage of amoral *familism*, and having had first-hand experience of this dimension, I have learned over the years how one's close affection for brothers, sisters and relatives can serenely co-exist with a desire to distance oneself from their way of life. And in the memory of my experience as a '68 activist in Palermo, the generation gap crisis, an unbearable distaste for the *paramafioso* logic of the favour that must be returned, the Spanishism of revelling in public exhibitionism and scenes, the Arabism of yearning for a quiet, accommodating life are mixed with friendships and utopian yearnings, styles and counter-cultures, all in all identical to those of the French May protests.

Of course, my Palermo in '68 was in its own way a protected city, having a government minister like Restivo who didn't want any hassles on his home turf, but even so the daughter of the minister came and joined the sit-in at the Faculty of Letters to spite him. So even today, every time I return there is the same ambivalence. You meet up with everybody again and you ask yourself how they manage to live there, then you discover that even there you can find "the best", doctors who are full of passion for their work, businessmen who know how to run their affairs and companies with clean hands. You get back that common ground of understanding but discover you still see the Palermo way of life as unbearable, with its cars *triple*-parked, its absurd traffic, its thieves and pick-pockets, its mixed, variegated scenarios, its football fans rooting with the

same passion as AC Milan or Inter supporters, only that here it comes mixed up with popular festivities and feasting. The basest Sicilianism coexists with the Sicilitude of the intellectual, cultured and aloof, and the beau monde of the grand families with their clans of intellectuals who love avant-garde music and experimental theatre. And the eternal question: would you live in Palermo, would you ever return to live in a city and in a world which you have cursed at for its hypocrisy, its murder victims, its dark secrets, its gangs, its protection rackets? The eternal reply: no—just passing through is okay—but never again.

That doesn't mean that I've become a Northerner, as if the shops in Milan didn't have to pay their protection money and other things weren't the same. I don't mean this to be an apologia for a new Northern Question to use as a contrast along with the northern dynamism. Perhaps it's because it's all the same the whole world over and in the end you come to see the malaise of modernity and the upheaval typical of the post-modern condition as a general process involving everybody, including the *terrone* and non-EU immigrants, nor is the hardship and misery of the suburbs of Milan something that can be forgotten, pretending that there isn't the same hatred of gypsies that you find elsewhere. I don't want to and cannot renounce my Sicilitude, I could quote dozens of writers to explain its code and its intrinsic value. I think that a young person today in Palermo is doing the right thing in fighting for a city without loan sharks and without extortion, but that remains the youthful yearning of a citizen of the world, for whom I used to and still sing "Nostra patria è il mondo intero..."

terrone: a disparaging term used by northerners to refer to the inhabitants of central and southern Italy.

"Our homeland is the whole world..." from the song *Stornelli d'esilio*, written by exiled anarchist Pietro Gori in 1904.

My first disappointment

Here

notes from the present

[...] My first disappointment with friendship dates back to when I was still actively involved in politics as a member of a left-wing collective. One winter evening a friend of mine and I wrote “DOWN WITH MISSILES AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS” on the prefecture building. We were immediately caught by the patrol on duty, as we had not seen there were surveillance cameras. After an interrogation at the *Carabinieri* office, they let us go since we did not have a criminal record, but we were charged with wall defacement and reported to the police as subjects to keep under control. Then we got a 200,000 Lira fine, which was quite a lot of money at the time.

We were students with temporary part-time jobs to pay for our studies, and when I took the fine to my collective, I expected general solidarity. I thought we would pass the hat around and everything would be sorted out: that sum of money, if divided by ten or fifteen, was something one could cope with. After all, what was personal was political, too. Instead, a few of them laughed at our action, while others at the fact that we had let ourselves be “caught”; so I did not have the courage to claim anything: I paid for the fine, but something inside myself cracked for good...

However, I still believed in the movement, since

Renata Borghi

From an e-mail to her psychotherapist

I thought that what we were fighting for would lead to a better world. After a period of involvement with collectives devoted to helping comrades in prison, I joined the *Counter-information* collective: we tried to interpret the world in our own way, unaware of the fact that the model we aimed at had caused the same damage we were condemning.

I attended University—Humanities with a specialization in Arts—and shared my time between supporting a visually-impaired junior-school pupil and working at an architect’s office. I simply could not do everything well and did not know what I cared for most so, while I was trying to picture things out, I went on. The first thing I gave up was University. I did not like going there and coming back home alone to study by myself; it all seemed so difficult. So, after four exams, which I had passed quite well all in all, I gave up my academic hopes.

Our lives were already moving in different directions: those who had managed to finish University tried to get more or less permanent jobs, others tried to get temporary jobs in an attempt to conjugate their desire for change and a need to invent new, more creative and useful types of jobs. For example, I set up a “no profit” co-operative together with other people, who organized afternoon courses for primary school children and provided services for the disabled. Social work had gathered our desire for change and had directed our energies towards helping children and those who were worse off than us.

Then things changed again. Only those who were supported by their families could afford to work for the co-operative, which did not provide enough income for us to be independent. Some, including me, left. I was still in search of new directions and

tried to get into the sector I had studied for, Interior Design; by moving from one office to another, I finally got into one run by a very good architect. My greatest concern was to be able to support myself. I wanted to travel and see a bit of the world. By then politics had become a job for pundits, and with the eighties' repression and reflux, the *Counter-information* collective had lost its own identity. We were unable to find our own role inside a political party, and between one discussion and another we sought evasion in "joints", becoming ironical about ourselves and everything. That was until fewer and fewer people started going to the collective venue, which was let to two of us who set up a small book-binder's workshop. In the meanwhile I had started working for an interior design company seriously. It was 1989. The Berlin Wall came down and the oppression of many, as well as our dreams, ended with it. My emotional energies, which had all gone into my relationship with F. since 1983, demanded that I could at last create a true relationship based on love and passion, as well as support and tolerance, and I persevered even after I found out about his first affairs. I thought my love would outlive all that; after all, I was the only one he loved, and with him I still felt that kind of energy-charged elation which would enable me to surmount all the odds against our true future together. [...]

At last I found the courage to leave home; I was thirty. F. would not follow me; he had met another woman. We split. I suffered, and was alone in my new little house. In 1991 I learnt he was getting married: it sounded impossible, so quick. How could he have forgotten? Then in 1992 he came back to look for me, and I opened my door to him again. It was like re-opening a whole life; dreams,

feelings and emotions came out again, as before. He said he had never forgotten me, I was sure he would leave his wife, as what we felt was so strong... we made love without a condom: "I am ready to take whatever comes" he told me. And I got pregnant. For the sake of our love and this baby I was prepared to go against everything and everyone. F. instead was scared and uncertain: he had only been married for ten months. But I was ready to face my family, I was ready for any sacrifice, I did not care what people would say. I would keep the baby. I could make it, I had a job, and his father would change his mind, he would be persuaded himself. Instead...

When they brought him to me in my hospital bed, I recognized him. He was the same baby as in my dreams during all those months. He was the exact image of what I had in my mind. I felt strong and powerful: I told myself that our thought is able to create, and I would try to create a beautiful, harmonious, fair life for him. I was in love with my son, and for three years I shut myself inside my idyllic life with him; I even managed to find my family again. He won my parents and my sister. Although I was just a mum and worked full-time, I was happy: happy to bring my son up beautiful, untroubled and intelligent although his father was not there. In fact, after having appeared once when M. was three months old, F. had disappeared.

Then, at the beginning of 1996, my mother, who already had heart troubles, got worse and was taken into various hospitals for then months in a row. That was a very trying year: two or three times a week I left work to go to the hospital and take over from my sister. After nursery school and a baby-sitter, my son was "parked" at various

friends' houses who in turns kept him till nine o'clock at night. Then my mother died in November.

I can remember her last night, when I spoke to her at length, even though she might not have been able to hear me any longer. I thanked her and told her she had been the best mother I could ever have wished for. She asked me if I could comb her hair. With her pale comb I went through her thinning hair slowly; I had often done her hair up and she used to tell me I was clever and she trusted me. I was not prepared to lose her, but did not want her to suffer any more... By then, only drugs kept her alive. Her body was swollen with liquids and drugs and her skinny face with sunken features maintained its delicate beauty. How beautiful my mother was!

She pronounced my name. "I'm here" I answered. It was five o'clock on a dark November morning and I was alone in the ward. The other patients were asleep. Either she told me or I just guessed it from her eyes: I want no more injections, no more drugs, and I don't want them to touch or handle me any more. She said: "Mum, Dad, take me... wait for me". She was in pain. She could not recognize me any more. I looked for the doctor. He told me it was a matter of hours, maybe one day. I went back to her and took her hand. The nurse came in to change her drop-feed and give her an injection. I told him to go away. I told him not to touch her any more. Then I looked her in her eyes and without letting either her hand or her eyes go, I kept repeating softly: I love you, Mum. Then her eyes lost their light and her heart stopped beating. I was alone.

Light and shadows

Here

notes from the present

Light

The first light you see is the light in people's eyes, the clearness of their gaze. A gaze that looks to the sky, to the clouds, to the trees, to the changing seasons; but also a laughing gaze entranced by the game of the moment; or a serious, meditative, almost sullen gaze that turns within, as words flow around and spring back up within the circle of the group.

The other light is in feelings of tenderness, and these were infinite. For each other, for others, people who were suffering. Tenderness, but not pity; something for which prayers were not enough. From the start, there was this need to become involved, to do something to produce change, in the here and now...

Our gaze widened; from people suffering from handicaps, to children at the orphanage, to a sense of injustice that was deep, heartfelt. There was light in the fact that our indignation knew no bounds. That it was expressed without regard for any hierarchy.

There was also light in the form of our stride; elbow to elbow, a loose, rapid stride, hands in our pockets but shoulders thrown back, we went "towards" things, with open bodies, open faces, aiming forward. And it was always that way; wherever we went, we fell into that curious, powerful

Marina Massenz

A group of old friends and comrades are reunited after thirty years. Back then, in the Seventies, they worked together on social causes, under the name G2, within the Catholic Church. Later, when the group broke up and abandoned the church, each of them became active in politics. This is an email written by one of them, Marina, to the others after their meeting.

stride. Because we were headed towards a better world, we were going to build one, fearlessly, tirelessly, cheerfully. And not just cheerful because of youth; not that alone, anyway. Not even because we all came from happy backgrounds, untroubled families; no, far from it. Cheerful because of an inner joy, spurred on and even overwhelmed by the time spent together working towards an ideal, of which “transcendence” was only a part.

Shadows

Now we’re outside, sitting in front of the church. Not inside it. They didn’t give us the letters, the ones from the children; a petty, contemptible, unbearable thing. The shadow of the Church invades the courtyard; we sit there, in that shadow, unable to leave. We got up, aching. The shadow was of a power greater than us; defeated for the first time, we turned our gaze beyond it...

Light

Beyond it was the outside world, where suffering was of a different kind; the Vietnam War, social injustice, labour struggles, student uprisings... We were looking for a new frontier into which to plunge the feelings that bound us together, the values we were vaguely striving towards... love, justice, freedom... but also imagination, music, song, street theatre, our everyday joking, miming, games. The photos show how we could play with a wheelbarrow, an improvised bow, two black hats, trees, pieces of wood, ants, the kitchen ladles used to serve everyone’s lunch... That’s what was “contagious”, G2 always grew through “contagion”. The virus had no need to be spread through evangelism; we didn’t preach, never. But we talked, a

lot. I wish I could know about those words, rediscover them, grasp the language, the language back then, before...

Shadows

...of Marxism-Leninism. I'm not a turncoat, let me make that clear; I cherish and remember those ten years of struggle, of involvement in a political movement that still constituted an ideal, perhaps much like the former one, in some ways. In others not. We learned many things, we grew into adults, into women and men.

The experiences were extraordinary; the struggles beautiful, the floods of people, all those with whom we shared an immense political season. Changing the world; but then comes talk of revolution. And not the kind that we used to say would come through love.

In this shift, though, something was lost, something important. And this is just the question I ask myself, that I ask you, that I asked yesterday evening. Perhaps because I'm convinced that through this, the rediscovery of the "something" that got lost in the shift from the courtyard of the Church to radical leftist groups, it's possible to start again.

Because there is an analysis of the defeat that was never really carried out; the historical and political defeat of a generation, of our generation. There's no use in only aiming our gaze outside (political analysis, the P2 Masonic lodge, state-sponsored bombings, terrorism, etc.); that's not enough. We could have changed, transformed, remained a touchstone for society, for politics, for thought. We were swept away; this generation, the part of it that was beautiful, uncorrupted, intact (my friends, it was such a joy to find you that way the other evening, seeing

"If in some sense the world imprints itself on our minds, it is equally true that our experiences are imprinted on the world. [...] To wander about in the world, then, is also to wander about in ourselves. That is to say, the moment we step into the space of memory, we walk into the world."
(Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1988, pp. 163-164)

some of you again after thirty years...); it disappeared from view. Some people died; some were even destroyed, I remember, I remember them... others, the ones who were corrupted, turn up on television, and we don't like what we see.

*Why, then? Where did we go wrong?
Analyzing the shadows is important...*

It's since the G8 in Genoa that I feel I can no longer stay out of it; that this has to do with me. I was afraid for them, for those young people, our children; I was afraid they were heading into our same errors, that they would choose the path of violence or not understand they would fall victim to it. I remember that July, because for nights on end I dreamed about demonstrations, charging police, nuclear war, the end of the world... Dreams I hadn't had for twenty years. A sense of anguish that mingled my story, my experiences, with what was going on then, in the streets of Genoa.

A comeback, a foretaste, a call.

I think we need to be present, but how? Our gaze is more weathered, life has left its mark; we are critical, not naive, and rightly so, perhaps bitter, disillusioned... (actually, you all seem full of life to me!). Still, I suggest that we go on, I think the analysis of light and shadows will take us far, or at least I hope so. The analysis of shadows is not just a Jungian legacy for the integration of the individual; I would like to extend it to an entire generation, and to its relationship with history.

Maybe I'm going too far... I don't know: everyone has their own role. Since I lack your talent for irony and sparkling quips (which I have to say are quite funny...), I'll keep to my "staid" role (the

one you stuck me in, off the bat, by giving me this task...) and I'll leave what comes next to you. While I may have skimmed on the levity, I've been generous with the lyricism; now the canon can be inverse, or follow on... It's up to you to give a stroke of the plume (from the wing).

History begins in reverse

by Marco Saya

Here

notes from the present

History begins in reverse,
newborn cries in a South American cottage,
snails on the walls
peeled white paint
with the Atlantic at its feet.
“where’s Daddy?”
“going around the world”, nanny picked me up
already tossed from hand to hand...

The kites, with that wind,
were an upward tug of war.
I lack a firm hand,
a doubt that I have always had,
an answer lost among the fine sand.
“what are you waiting for to go home?”
the little legs run,
the ritual days run one after the other.

The window smiles at the small green patch
—now—enclosed by dust walls.

“where’s the cycle track?” and “that tram that waved at me?”
and “the teenager who scaled the peak of life?”

The uncouth Milan
peeks from other balconies,
burnishes images
of figurines, copies of residents.

The wave came towards me,
a friend playing spray.
The Corcovado hugged us
with its heat and joyous colors.
I knew no poverty.
I knew no syphilis.
I knew no multinationals.
I knew I was happy.

The greyness of an open space office
in phony suburbs, adorned
with pseudo-Versailles street lights,
lost like slack white swans around
four Thonet cafe chairs.
“what are you having?”
to kill boredom
before the sunroom because
new rays anticipate the sunshine.

The road meandered up,
a pit stop banana kiosk
anticipated the view of Christ.
Today all the streets are the same.
A photograph, faded in patches,
marks a trail of crosses.
I lost that Father
in the childhood of my mind.

A stranger asks: “did you prepare the bid?”
My mother said: “did you do your homework?”

Now I understand the convergence of purposes
born of desperate rage
resigned to a vow of chastity:
how to belong, how to be in this world
and be aware of its enclosure
because it's pitch dark outside.

Time helps you to die
“what time is it?”
Memory is life backwards
like when you retrace your steps,
like when the trees
zoom madly past
because your eyes
see fragments of gaps
and history begins in reverse.

November 4, 1966

Here

notes from the present

November 4, 1966. It was Friday. A Friday morning. I remember seeing my mother behind the counter of our village shop in Telve, and my grandfather standing in the doorway, his voice anxious, saying “I’m worried about Lorenzina and the animals.” “Yes, father, I’ll call Serafino now to take you up the mountain, but calm down: the Pieroti and Macalasti *casère* are still open. She’s not on her own.” And she prepared a bag with a bit of everything, small pasta, Maggi stock cubes, a few

Laura Zanetti

Casère: typical Alpine shelters, relatively spartan and originally used by seasonal

lemons, sugar and coffee. Especially coffee. “With this weather you may have to stay in there longer than you were planning on,” she added. “Mountain” and “in there” were for us common terms to talk about our mountain, Val Calamento.

My grandfather Clemente would live up at Pupille, from April to November, between our old house, the *casèra*, the cowshed and his animals, with his sister Lorenza as his only helper. A few days earlier he had come down from Pupille to cut the maize stalks in his field at Telve. So they set off, my father and grandfather, before midday, in the little ivory-coloured Fiat 600. The sky was a dull grey and it was pouring with rain.

“I had a sort of premonition” my father told us later on. And he left his 600 this side of the bridge, walking the rest of the way with grandfather, to the deep rumbling of the Val Scartazza which was already overflowing its banks onto the track to Villa San Lorenzo. I can imagine aunt Lorenza, when she saw them coming, adding another two eggs to the pan and bringing out the plates with the fine blue rim and heating up the old Neapolitan coffee pot on the corner of the wood stove. They ate in silence, as usual. “And what are you going to do, cut off up here?” my father asked “Don’t worry,” they replied “we’ve got milk, sorghum, butter, cheese and a few hens in the roost. Then there’s the old beech tree which will defend us from trouble. That’s what happened in the 19th century and in the floods of ‘25 and ‘45 as well.”

Grandfather was anxious and, focussing his spy-glass on the exact point where the old larch-wood bridge connected the two banks of Pupille, said: “Serafino, don’t think I’m sending you away, but believe me, you’d better leave. Right now, before

herders, now mostly by excursionists.

the bridge goes.” And as it was, father only had a few seconds to run over the wooden bridge with the water up to his thighs and get onto firm ground before he heard the bridge crashing behind him, swept away by the swirling water. He drove off in the 600 but at the Lagorai hotel he decided to stop. “You should stay here” insisted Isacco, the night porter at the hotel. “No, no, I’m going back. Downstream the bridges are higher and in twenty minutes I’ll already be at Telve.” “There’s all hell let loose outside. Listen: I’m coming with you. We’ll take the car up to Villa Strosio. There it’s completely sheltered. Then if you really have to... you can make it to Telve on foot.”

My father had never liked the mountain, he was distressed by the memory of that very long winter up in Val Badia where he had already become a *kromer* at the age of twelve. After parking his car and saying goodbye to Isacco, he set off towards the valley, now quickly now slowly because of the lightning. He passed by Pontarso. The road, now more of a mountain stream, was interrupted at Laoscio by a furious gaping hole which had swallowed up trees, water, rocks and, naturally, the bridge.

At that same moment at Telve things were hardly any better: the old Via Longa was a river in full flow, taking with it branches, clumps of earth, a number of hens, dazed if not already dead. I remember the sound of the stones which, carried along by the wind, were beating against the doors of the house of the de Vettori, and water, water the terrible colour of the flood. The village by five in the afternoon was completely cut off and it was pitch black. We kept the shop shut. Hours went by. Very, very long hours. My mother left

Kromer, word of German origin meaning a peddler, who especially in winter would walk about the valleys and the more inaccessible higher Alpine farming settlements (*masi*) with a *Kraizera* over his shoulder (a wooden contraption with a small box containing various compartments), selling small cheap wares and odds and ends (needles, sewing and embroidery thread, zips, buttons, elastic tape, socks, scissors, little toys etc.: I remember the tiny little dolls). My grandfather’s area was Cortina; my father’s Val Badia.

the house at six to go and look for my father, passing through the *contrada todesca* quarter, but at the Casina the road was blocked. She came back crying.

I remember the dinner. The *griez*, turning and turning the boiled potatoes on my plate and the voice of my grandmother who was blaming her sister-in-law Lorenza, “always that mountain, that mountain!”, alluding to all the forecasts of bad weather given even by far-away Radio Capodistria. Sister-in-law Lorenza, for her part, after barring the door of the hen-house, and filling the lamp with oil and the ash-blue box seat with firewood, offered up the olive branches blessed on Palm Sunday to Saint Barbara.

Up and down the valley nobody slept that night. Grandmother stayed with us far into the night until we heard a knocking at the door. It must have been four or five in the morning. It was father, his clothes torn, his arms and legs full of bruises and his face contorted with fear. He was shivering with cold and crying and speaking, in a broken voice: “At Laoscio I tried to get down skirting the wood by way of the *crozi* [rocks] of the Corno, but the *maso* was frightening. Then I tried to climb back up. I thought that it would be less dangerous climbing. Instead I got lost and I’ve spent the night wandering around. It seemed as if the whole Musiera highland was coming down. It was horrible. I kept thinking I wasn’t going to make it”. And he talked about frightening scenes of trees being uprooted and massive rocks crashing down everywhere. We never knew if he had returned via Val Calamento or directly from the Musiera, coming down through Restena, because fear had worked like an anaesthetic on his memory. He

Griez: a type of semi-liquid soup, made with semolina, half water half milk. It was eaten almost every evening (then it was deadly boring, now it is an “exclusive” food). The term is Ladin.

stayed in bed a couple of days, but the trauma of that night came back to haunt him for years.

My grandfather and aunt left Pupille with their animals in early December, taking the *pontèra* [steep track] and the pathways as far as Pontarso, passing close to the Agostini *casère* before climbing back up to the Corno and the valley road. The last animal to leave Pupille was the pig: it took three people, a four-hour walk and numerous mouthfuls of polenta to get it back to the village. Father got his 600 car back thanks to a game of *dobelon* at the inn and to Piereto Carboniero, the timber merchant originally from Gallio, his playing partner at cards: “What? Your 600 is still up at Calamento? I’ll see to it, Serafino. As soon as the thaw arrives”. “Yes, but how?” my father asked. “Simple, just like I do with the *bore*, with a pulley and ropes!” answered Piereto.

It was the spring of ‘67. My father got his ivory-coloured 600 back and took us on a trip to Venice. Grandfather went back to Pupille in April but without his animals now. During that winter he closed up the little cowshed in the hamlet for good. The same went for his *caseificio turnario* at Pupille (a small seasonal dairy where grandfather would work from April to June and then from September to November—in the summer months the animals would go up to the *malga* pastures—where the milk would come from the small cowsheds of the *maggenghi*, and the butter, cheese and ricotta would be divided among the herders following the ancient custom, according to the weight of milk sent).

Yes, the flood was a memorable one for this too. After ‘66, with livestock farming already a dying occupation since ‘64, the rural scenery of my val-

Dobelon: a card game played in Valsugana and especially at Telve.

Bore: trunks of pines and larches stripped of their branches and bark and usually piled up near a road, to be taken downhill by the timber men, *boschieri*, in my times already on a lorry, but earlier over the rapids of the Maso mountain stream.

Maggenghi (from maggio, May) refers to the intermediate pastures between the winter shelters down in the valleys and the summer high Alpine pastures or *malghe*.

ley began to change slowly but surely. The end of the *caseifici turnari* in the *maggenghi*, in the villages, and the senseless forestation of the pastures, marked the decline of another civilisation, that of the *malghe*, which had developed from the original *caselo di monte*.

I was twenty

Here

notes from the present

I was twenty and I found myself in Sanremo. I was leaving behind me Fabio Leonardi, who stood for my teens, outings in the country, days playing truant from school, trips to Riva on the boats in a pink angora jumper, dancing to the rhythm of Duke Ellington and his absolutely taboo music.

I had come down to the Italian Riviera with the children from Libya, the children of the twenty thousand settlers sent from the Veneto region to Italianise Africa. It was '42. The war was in full swing, the British army was down there and we Italians had to get out. Many of these children were sent to Candriai, in Trentino, to these big cold huts. All they had on them was a Fascist Youth cloak, one for every two of them, and clogs without socks. The Town Hall, through the ONAIR (National Association for Assistance to Liberated Italy) was organising assistance for these desperate children and I, a very young teacher, offered my services. In the

Interview with **Nives Fedrigotti** on 17 April 2007 in Rovereto by Laura Zanetti.

hut was a Becki stove kept going with the wooden supports of the saplings planted in memory of the Fascist martyrs: “Tonight we gonna burn mister Mario Aramu” they would comment in Veneto dialect. One day we phoned to Trento to ask what was to be done with these half-naked children. Finally, after some time, they told us to get them ready to leave for another destination: we were bound for Sanremo.

Here eight thousand children from Africa were spread out among the best hotels Sanremo had to offer. It was the period when Hitler was attacking France, Italy was occupying Provence. My cousins also passed through there dressed as officers on their way to Menton, then from there they were later to join the Resistance.

I was given thirty three-year-old children to look after, all of them wet and crying, asking for “suor Rogieta” (Sister Rosetta). I felt I couldn’t cope and wanted to quit. The administrator then proposed a transfer to the Logistics office where I was to have the job of allocating beds and blankets. In the Logistics office I was working with someone called Ermogeno who I called Ermo, a bit of a devil who would amuse himself by unscrewing the office stamps and mixing them up, to the great annoyance of the boss who of course would mess up all the papers using the wrong stamps. From the Logistics Office, after a promotion to head of office, I was sent off to the Savoy.

That was my situation when I was close on twenty. I was getting a good wage and the evenings off. Down there was a seamstress called Aldina who would make me clothes for free in exchange for my ration card: how elegant I was! In that way I got to know a second lieutenant in the orderly room

named Renzo. We would go down to the beach and have fun shooting at tins. One evening, attracted by the sound of the shots, some soldiers came and we fled into the Villa Ormond gardens and hid in the middle of some cactus plants. I spent ages pulling out the prickles, with the soldiers still looking for us with flashlights.

On the sixth of March was my twentieth birthday. That day I dabbed on my *Felce Azzurra* perfume and put on a sepia-yellow light woollen dress under a velvet jacket with embroidered pockets, stockings with seams and wedge shoes. Erica Waupetic, from Trento, put some strange powder in my hair, “to give your hair a wine colour” she said. Masses of flowers arrived: an enormous bouquet sent by a certain Fabio, fifty red roses from Mingo, a local flower grower, a bunch of tulips from the Office. Renzo that morning had gone to Arma di Taggia and cut down a whole wood of mimosa, loading it onto the back of a mule. In other words, the room was overflowing with flowers and when I walked in I asked myself: “My God, have I died?”. Seized with a sort of panic I called my workmates and asked: “Do you think I’m alive or dead?”. They replied: “You look live enough to us, but with all these flowers you could be dead!”. So I got rid of them, taking them to the beautiful Russian-Orthodox church.

I was a bit crazy then, oh yes! For example, I’d done this experiment, going on a number of dates with three different men to see what would happen. The result? I got a few good slaps in the face. Erica, the girl from Trento who worked with me, was just as bad. She was in love with a certain Giuseppe, who she called Gius. One morning they told her that a person in uniform was waiting for her at the

entrance. “Oh lord, it’s my Gius.” We saw her shoot off down the stairs like a rocket but then she suddenly stopped, turned and came running back up again. “What’s the matter?” we asked. “I forgot to curl my eyelashes!”

I really liked Renzo, though. I think he later went off to Russia. For a while we wrote to each other then we lost contact during the Resistance period. He—incredibly enough—decided to look me up the day my first child was born.

The personal sense of history

Here

notes from the present

[...] Over last few decades History as a discipline has changed substantially as its anthropological dimension has expanded. Recognition of the uniqueness and indisputable value of individual experience for historical reconstructions (and, consequently, the necessity of interviewing the immediate participants of historical events) gave a stimulus for a rapid development of a new field—the oral history. [...]

The autobiographical approach, which is often used in oral history research, brings an individual’s life inscribed in its immediate milieu (micro environment) into the center of the study, so the subject’s reflections upon his/her own life as well as his/her social, political, and cultural entourage are in focus simultaneously. At the same time, in-

Oksana Kis

From *Writing about Talking: Orality and Literacy in Contemporary Scholarship*, edited by Keith Carlson, Natalia Shostak, and Kristina Fagan, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2005.

depth autobiographical interviews can shed light on the origins of some people's latent attitudes, thoughts, and deeds, even if they are stated marginally or completely silenced. Joan Scott first stressed the necessity of simultaneous study of the past on individual and societal levels at once in order to get the most accurate historical picture: "To pursue meaning we need to deal with the individual subject as well as social organization and to articulate the nature of their relationships" [...]

Leaving aside the long discussion about reliability of a personal interview as a research source, I agree with [the] statement that the social world is constructed and transformed every minute by actions of ordinary people, who are both observers and agents of reality, and that reality itself consists of individual experiences of particular participants of social, economic, political and cultural processes. Reading autobiography as a social and cultural construct, the researcher is not interested in how true or correct the descriptions of events are. Rather, the meanings attributed to them by the narrator are of primary importance. The person constructs his/her past using a set of cultural patterns, discourses, and values which may be identified and extracted from an autobiography and analyzed further.

Oral history is not only about the reconstruction of events or the documentation of facts by means of individual testimonies. "The first thing that makes oral history different is that it tells us less about *events* than about their *meaning*... Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did" [*italic in original*], as Alessandro Portelli correctly argued. Therefore, an oral history research is not for the sake of any

In "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis", in *Feminism and History*, edited by Joan W. Scott, Oxford University Press, New York, 2000, p. 167.

In *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and Other Stories*.

‘historical truth’, which is incognizable by definition. Done in the form of the in-depth autobiographical interview, oral history allows us to reveal people’s hidden attitudes, to understand the origins of their thinking, and the motives of their deeds, especially those which are not directly articulated or silenced. Indeed, in narrating a life story, one is talking not much about events he/she witnessed but rather about meanings those events have produced in the context of one’s individual life experiences. By this means, the personal sense of experienced history is produced. [...]

Form and Meaning in Oral History, State University of New York Press, New York, 1991, p. 48.

My yesterdays

Here

notes from the present

A few weeks ago, the memories of lots of people I have met during my thirty odd year long life called on me. I set out to choose [...] what I wanted to keep out of a one-square-metre crate half-full of books, notebooks, papers and mementoes which my mother had gathered together while I was living abroad and gave back to me on my return.

When I first saw it, I admit I thought of throwing everything away without even opening it (more out of laziness than anything else), but my mother gave me a withering look and blackmailed me (it really was blackmail) saying something I simply could not counter: “Since I have kept it for you for a whole year, you will now be so kind as to at

Maria Ofelia Zuniga

least have a look at it. That's all I'm asking you".
She was right. [...]

Months went by and, a couple of weeks ago, [...] I sat in front of that half a square metre of stuff, [...] pushed it with all my strength, [...] nearly threw it down the stairs, then dragged it to an arm-chair and got ready to go through it. It won't take long, "I need this, I don't need that", I kidded myself. I started taking things out and, paradoxically, as it covered my hands, clothes, face and hair, dust was also shaken off my memory, until my memories became bright and vivid.

As the day went on, and after having sat there long hours [...], almost without realizing I found myself immersed in a maze of memories. I do not think an earthquake could have stopped me from taking things out, reading and recalling. The space all around me seemed to have changed; I was shrouded in a sort of positive aura, a nostalgic scent, a feeling of joy and even various flavours. [...]

The hours went by, but I felt as if suspended. Time seemed to be going backwards. Together with photos, postcards, Birthday, Christmas and Valentine Day greeting cards, post-its and letters—loooooots of letters—one by one my memories came back and my memory filled up with faces, voices, smiles, places, tears, secrets, confessions, shared dreams... all coming together as witnesses of other times which, now and then, seemed to me "other lives". It was as if, due to some strange magic spell, I had been given the power to conjure up the spirits of lots of people I had met or ones who had been close to me [...].

What really moved me were my notes, postcards and a few e-mails which, surely because of their importance or their length, I had wanted to print,

and then all the photos and books, but above all the letters. No! They were not letters from former or very old boyfriends, or better, not all of them were (though many were indeed...); there were letters from lots of other people, some of whom I am still in touch with luckily, and others whom, to be honest, I no longer know anything about, though I can say for sure that we loved each other. And how good it is to know that when life had made us meet we had grabbed that chance and become friends, almost as a family... And all that was mirrored there, evidenced in those written words.

At the end of the day I was reflecting on how wonderful it is to receive a letter. I have read somewhere about a teacher who makes her pupils write their homework on paper first and only later on a computer, in order for them to “*feel* their words”. Yes, although I appreciate technology and use it, and think the Internet is a great invention, I must admit that [...] the state of mind conjured up by a sealed envelope with a stamp on and the names of the sender and recipient written in the unmistakable handwriting of a loved one... is something which is hard to express, or do justice to in words. I believe that teacher is right: when you write on paper, you *feel* the letters and—but this may be a matter of energies—I believe that the other person feels them too. [...]

Of the half a square metre of various things contained in that crate, about fifteen centimetres were mementoes. Of them I have kept photos, postcards (for my collection), notes, books and a diary dating back to when I was fifteen—one I had written in an invented code so that my mother could not learn about who-knows-what and which I cannot decipher at all now. Then I kept a few e-mails I had

“...Memory, then, not so much as the past contained within us, but as proof of our life in the present. If a man is to be truly present among his surroundings, he must be thinking not of himself, but of what he sees. He must forget himself in order to be there. And from that forgetfulness arises the power of memory. It is a way of living one’s life so that nothing is ever lost.” (Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1988, p. 134)

printed and, of course, the letters. Lots of them, just for my joy! Letters about friendships that ended, stories I lived through, dreams—a few broken ones as well as some others which have come true—shared fights, a few farewells with no comeback and others followed by a new meeting, friends who have gone to heaven, some who departed because they decided to, and—why not say so—also some that I certainly did not manage to keep close to me. How incredible it is that those fifteen centimetres contained so many stories belonging to my thirty-four year long life which, besides another million events, have survived three earthquakes, one twelve-year-long civil war, a countless number of armed assaults, events from my childhood which have determined a little bit of myself today, a long search for God which will no doubt go on till the day I die, my militancy in various groups of different sorts and names, always led by a human desire to find my own place in the world ... [...]

Addirittura

Here

notes from the present

I have a terrible memory for many things. I'm helpless with birthdays, numbers, day-to-day life—couldn't possibly tell you what I did yesterday without thinking for at least five minutes—plot lines of films and books, even beloved ones, and most embarrassingly, people, both faces and names.

Johanna Bishop

What I do remember are words. Especially when spoken. My brain seems to be an avid stockpiler of even the most useless phrases, constantly dredging up random snatches of conversation from five, ten, twenty years ago, unsolicited, shorn of most logical context, yet in the precise tone I first heard them, and drenched in emotions, smells, slants of light.

And thank God, because it gives me some way of tracing my life. Especially because I live in a language that is not my native one, so most words that I use on a daily basis are linked to the first time I heard them; it would be impossible to remember when I learned “crochet”, “sleazy”, or “nonetheless” in English, but given that I started studying Italian in my late teens and moved to Italy in my early twenties, most of my everyday vocabulary is a recent acquisition. And for some reason, I tend to be able to remember—much more clearly than for the clothes hanging in my wardrobe—just how and when words came into my possession.

Many, maybe most, I picked up on my own. And yet there was a time when they were either incomprehensible or unutterably foreign: even the *shape* of the language. In the house where I grew up, my parents’ bookshelf boasted a multi-volume *Dizionario dello Spettacolo* (don’t ask me why, no one in my family spoke Italian at the time), and I remember paging through it, amused by the incessant i’s, the impossible combination of s and g, the Noah’s Ark of double consonants; it looked more like the product of some deranged toymith than a language in which anyone could express grief or love, or even talk about the stock market. It was gibberish. Oddly attractive gibberish. And even when I came here with two years of classroom Italian under my belt, amazed that what I’d studied

had some actual basis in fact—walk into a tobacconist's and ask for *francobolli* and money somehow ends up changing hands!—much of the world around me remained gibberish. On the bus, every day, the street signs of Florence: *Mesticheria. Carni bovini suini ovini equini pollame. Vendesi. Passo carrabile. Schiacciata con l'uva*. I would come home exhausted, dragging behind me the day's burden of undeciphered and undigested words, spend twenty minutes before bed thumbing my dictionary, unable to find half of them in the little paperback Garzanti that has long since gone to feed the worms.

Those words, and all the words I later acquired as a translator, were conquests. But then there were the gifts. And the first one has remained, perhaps, my favorite word in the Italian language, to the extent that I would gladly bestow it as a name on a kitten, or have it carved on my tombstone, or both: *addirittura*. I was standing in the kitchen doorway of a house on Via Vittorio Emanuele II, at just about the time of year and time of day I'm writing this now, hungry the way only a twenty-year-old can be hungry and tormented by the smell of sauce on the stove, stammering my way in baby talk through an account of the day's events. And something I said, who knows what, elicited surprise: *addirittura*? I must have looked baffled, because it was repeated to me, drawn out into syllables—*ad-di-rit-tu-ra*—explained and commented upon: *it's a beautiful word*. And a beautiful word it has remained, beautiful because the person who gave it to me knew she was giving it to me. She gave me other things, I suppose—a sweater, a handbag, a book—which have long since vanished in the course of years and moves; we had a silly falling-out at some point and

I don't think I even have a photo of her left. *Ad-dirittura*, however, can only go when my frontal lobe does, and every time it happens to come out of my mouth or into my ear, probably a couple of times a month, it feels like a private exchange of glances with an old friend and with my twenty-year-old self.

Other words, not inherently beautiful or even beautiful in context, have acquired beauty by dint of stratification. I'd been living in Tuscany for two years before I heard anyone use the extremely formal second-person plural *loro* in real life, and that simple pronoun is now linked fast to a triple memory: the artificial plants of a boarding house in Chianciano Terme whose middle-aged landlady thus awkwardly addressed a group of very young, hippyish women; my own flashback to puzzling over a first-year Italian textbook, open to a cartoon of a waiter (*loro gradiscono vino o birra?*); and, several years later, a double flashback upon hearing it used for the second time ever by a flesh-and-blood waiter at the restaurant where I was stumbling through my first night on the job. Or then there's *boia*, an insult or exclamation that means "torturer, executioner". Again, three separate points in time: 1999, a demonstration in front of the US consulate on the day the NATO bombings started, where you could pick out the Americans in the crowd because they were the only ones skipping the t and chanting *Clinton boia* with a hilariously unchantable schwa (CLIN-N BOIA, and the hilarity of it somehow eased the feeling of shame about my nationality that had been weighing on me all day). Years after that, my then-sweetheart, with whom I was already on shaky ground, coming home from class in Pisa and managing to eke a

laugh out of me over dinner with an atrociously faked Pisan accent, sprinkled with exclamatory *boias* (*boia deh, bimba, passami il sale*). Years after that, being addressed as *boia* by someone else in a context where, as far as I know, it was partially meant in jest and partially meant to sting. In both cases, the words have taken on patinas: the patina of utter bewilderment; the patina of a grudging smile. Not what one would normally consider ingredients of beauty, but then again, corrosion, oxidation, and dirt seem to do a pretty good job on other kinds of coin.

There are thousands of these mementos. And not only are they near-impossible to lose, they can't even be packed away in a closet somewhere, not so long as I'm living in a place where Italian is spoken. It's as if half the damn language were a *lessico familiare*; it's like seeing your personal snapshots go by plastered on the side of a city bus, or coming across your mislaid engagement ring in the tomato bin at the supermarket. It never ceases to be unsettling. Still, I'm grateful. And they never stop piling up. Just the other day—in other ways forgotten—a shiny new *tapino*.

But with my camera...

Here

notes from the present

At 8 pm, the traffic jam at Besarabka was still huge, and everyone was driving on Khreshchatyk **Veronica Khokhlova**

sidewalk, too, and suddenly I got nostalgic for the time when Kyiv was different. In 2003, I was just beginning to take pictures, and this is what I wrote about Kyiv then: “I find it difficult to photograph Kyiv. When I don’t have my camera with me, I can see everything partly as it is and partly as I imagine it. Everything has a memory—and often more than just one—attached to it. Every building, every backyard. But with my camera, I’m forced to see it all as it really is—and all of a sudden, I realize that way too many things would be missing from the photos... and quite a lot of what I’d normally ignore would show up... The tacky plastic windows or air conditioners, for example.”

Plastic windows and air conditioners? How about the high-rise apartment blocks and skyscrapers that have mushroomed all over the city in the past few years, in violation of urban development principles and common sense? And how about all the cars parked on sidewalks and flower beds? My 2003 rant seems almost sacrilegious now—everything was perfect then, no?—and I try not to think of what this post will read like five years on.

My mother has just accused me of having a very negative outlook on life, and she is right, unfortunately. I took trolleybus #8 today from Ploshcha Peremohy to Shevchenko Park, and I felt like burning my clothes after I got out of the old stinking thing that seemed filled with a perfectly material memory of years and years of human backs and behinds rubbing their poverty into the vehicle’s hard seats—and of liters of alcohol fumes evaporating from the mouths of those who were trying to keep merry and warm on their dull and miserable commutes through Kyiv’s downtown, jam-packed with luxury cars.

Old memories

Here

notes from the present

To show off my urbane sophistication, I took my parents and my ten-year-old niece to 798, a post-modern (or modern?) art district transformed from a decommissioned military factory compound. The three diligently studied the art work in gallery after gallery—a true miracle for my mother who spends all her time cleaning. She points at a huge oil portrait, hanging on the wall, of a steely and desperate looking girl. “This looks so realistic,” she says, her finger following the flow of her neck. “This vein here looks like about to burst open.” In the next gallery, my niece moves from one huge charcoal painting of a horse to another huge charcoal painting of another horse. “Like it?” I ask her. “Yeah,” she proclaims with her usual ten-year-old enthusiasm. “But why the artist paints the same thing over and over?” Because the painter uncle has to make money, the easier way?

After an overdose of galleries, we stroll among the pipes and boilers of the factory compound. “Now this is nice,” comments my father who has quietly studied the arts. “It reminds a little of our old *danwei*, work unit. . . Remember, the neighborhood you grew up in? It was a power plant so it also had pipes and boilers like this. . . Except the pipes would be hissing with steam. . .” We walk some more, taking in the silence around us. Indeed it looks just

like the neighborhood I grew up in, except it was... silent. Too many signs and posters for galleries. Too many young travelers with their eager heads stuck out in all directions. No workers, or children, or freight trains—filled with coal—whistling in the distance, or loud speakers blaring propaganda songs, or pipes hissing with steam. Now it's no longer alive, life, once simple and vibrant, has become sophisticated art. "I like this best," continues my father who walks a few steps behind us. "It brings back some memories... Old memories..."

The memory of contemporaneity

Here

notes from the present

1. Our self is made of memory. Memory is our way of moving around in that intimate sphere we commonly call heart. But the heart, which senses the end of things, fearing and feeling compassion for them, harbours inside of itself an awareness of the time shared with others.

Time is perceived and felt in the same way that others are perceived and felt, fully and generously, or with insularity and avarice. The others and time come to us from the same area in which the known and the unknown, hope and despair, indifference or simply fear live together, intermingling.

The time that we have and that we think we are counting down, the time that instead we lack and

Roberto Bordiga

that gets away from us irretrievably, is never ours alone, it always belongs to others, too. The time is already immediately the others', not only through that extremely profound thing that is biology, but through love, or that date of all dates without a venue, which are the generations of the world to come.

What in history has been called each time "contemporary", what each time is perceived as "now", has already found in events of the past or of the present the memory that gives eras their shape, and the collective awareness that allows us to be the "us" that each time we can claim to be when we introduce ourselves to ourselves and to others.

This time that we ourselves are experiencing, is in fact, however one might feel about it, an excessive amount of time, in excess in terms of history and its logic, and historical memory cannot tell us anything about this "historic" moment. In such a distancing from history, the "us" that we feel a part of cannot coincide with any accomplished fact in recollection, it cannot have any past to uphold and no future to conquer, and may instead be considered as stemming from the feeling of contemporaneity. The distance from history manifests itself in the impossible identity of that "us" who wishes to speak out in favour of contemporaneity. We do not have enough time to say who we are, because if we wish to stay in contemporaneity, our words are no longer just our own, but already belong to others different from us.

In contemporaneity, the others, with whom we can share the same idea of time, are all men who are our contemporaries, and they are even if they do not want to be, either for too much wealth or too much fear, or for too much attachment to traditions,

or simply because they lack any means for having an open-minded approach to the world, immediately taken as they are from the outset by the grip of hunger and of the war.

Contemporaneity is a question of encounter between mental openness and human numerousness, and cannot be either Malthusian or a matter of emergency. The more men there are about whom we must learn, even simply have news—the news of the world that comes to us from every direction—the more time we should have to share, and the greater the contemporary memory, the memory of that extreme sharing that already habitual living together in a common dwelling (the world) should be. But all this does not happen, and the memory of the others, of all the others who are all the humanity that lives in every part of the world, is just a fact to learn with annoyance, a burden, or a thought reduced to a small kindness, a minor residue of a humanism buried forever under the rubble of a reality constantly under construction.

2. Memory is not only recollection of the past, but already a way to feel every possible time. Thus, memory can coincide with what Augustine called *distensio animi*, thus defining time. Our idea of time has always been tied up with the choice of words we use to discuss it. In his *Confessions*, Augustine chose to speak of it through the example of a song learned by heart that allows him to show how time works inside of us, or, better, in that intimacy that for him was sweetened by the ever-present memory of God's promise.

For us, who still have to learn the sought-for way back to contemporaneity and who thus cannot want to return to God to gain eternity, the breadth of this

"All memory is the present. In the purer element all memory would appear to us like the necessary preliminary to poetry."
(Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. Margaret Mahony Stoljar, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1997, p. 65)

distension of our mind becomes so big as to no longer be able to coincide with the individual heart or even with a community heart, and can even lack a heart of its own, because without a memory of its own. This dimension, so enormous compared to our bodies, does not stop our heart's anxiety, but it can open it to the generosity of reason, made up of patience and, at the same time, imagination. In the memory of contemporaneity, the memory no longer is of the heart, but becomes memory of reason. Reason no longer belongs to a civilization, to a culture, to all the possible operative devices of science and technology, of administration and geographic ubiquity in possession at first only of Europe and American and today of the entire world. The reason is time's tendency to remove tragic meaning from the end of all things, finding the way for them to be relayed in language. Reason, which invents memory of contemporaneity, draws on language's undying tendency to start over again, both inside of itself and with the new speakers.

3. Memory is repetition of our life, which is always life as it is everyday, the days that come back similar, in that resemblance to itself that makes up our life, known by heart.

Memory, awareness, and self-awareness, infancy and language, personal identity, knowledge and skill, all is gathered up in self-mastery. And yet, we are always moved to where each time we prepare ourselves to introduce ourselves to ourselves, in front of the others, taking ourselves where we already know we are expected. There is a memory of the past, but also a memory of waiting. If time is made up of waiting, those who are waiting can only be the others. It is this wait that lends the feeling

of time its curve. There is a curve of our life that always tends to complete itself and close itself up by returning to where it had already been and where the others awaiting us are already known, whether friend or foe. But there can be a curve of time that, instead, is not closure but paternal protection, pedagogy, love of what is coming up and what already pushes us into the relationship of the promise. It is what takes place when we can enter into a relationship of willing listening, when we can immediately recall the words of others whom we already listen to readily. To listen is already to remember. We only listen to what we can remember. To want to listen means already to want to remember what is said to us. What is said everyday becomes so big that it ends up coinciding with the whole world. It is the whole world that we *must* listen to, to give the contemporary world the ability to speak and to listen to itself, and not only to act or to speak solely in order to lead each word to a bigger and bigger action, a compulsion to repeat whatever it already knows. This listening to the world is the desired memory that contemporaneity needs, in order to enter inside itself, to have that inner life it is lacking, because all the inner life is already taken up by all the past traditions. All memory needs time. It is that additional time that helps us to understand things or ourselves better. We always and only understand just a little later. With respect to the experience that we have of the world, we can only expect a postponement of any final outcome, if we do not wish to resign ourselves to what we must still recognize as reality. It is the ever punctual, ever repeated arrival of reality to prevent us from having any other expectation, and for this we must invent an intermediary zone for ourselves, in which to have time

to anticipate or shift a little bit further along the pile-up of other real adversities.

This is our condition as contemporary men forced to see in the present time the breakdown of all hope. The *moral duty*, if something of the kind still exists, is to shift memory to the future, when we will already want to go back in our thoughts, without having to remember the everyday adversities and sorrows as insuperable obstacles to any hope. It is precisely this anticipation of the past that seems impossible, indeed, unimaginable. We cannot imagine and remember this shared time as a positive time.

And yet, the *simple fact* of being a part of this planetary survival, already thoroughly expressed, already completely set to words, with successful speaking and listening relationships, could already make up a happy memory, the possibility of a rational memory already accustomed to reciprocal comprehension. And instead, the same similar days that pass close on between infinite other people lead above all to a feeling of malaise. The world's reality provokes malaise, despite—indeed because of—its universal public expression.

4. If there is a memory of attention and of knowledge, there is also a memory of fantasy. The fantasy of memory is hope. Hope already knows what to be able to recall in the future. Hope, as we know it in its historical tradition, has always had in mind a particular event to be able to recall afterwards as a positive memory. Contemporary memory is the liberation from the particular and concrete memory of the event. We must get used to keeping in mind, remembering the abstract event, the anti-event that is the life of all contemporary men. It is this abstraction that is the task of reason. Abstract reason-

ing no longer has to construct the world of contemporaneity, as the reasoning of the Enlightenment had to, despite Kant's putting in a perfectly good word of reason, independently of the events. Reason must engage the world before its daily descent into another evil, the habit of resigning oneself to the word of despair.

5. Only a happy memory can make us desire the future: it is nice memories that open the heart to the comfort of the life to come. And only bad memories can make us simmer in rancour or in the desire for revenge.

But the simple fact of living also means memorizing other wicked deeds and tragedies, or even our ordinary inadequacy as individuals and as humankind. Contemporary memory confirms year after year, decade after decade, that it is just like the historical memory that makes us assert how senseless it is to think of having only good memories.

But good memories do not just concern the past, and, instead, they welcome what is to come, and what is to come does not concern the future, but the extent of the shared time, its sought-after return to our everyday life. Contemporary memory gathers up the desire to recall, to hold in one's heart the lively voice that now speaks all over the world. The voice that remembers itself speaks in favour of its fluency and does not become an insuperable obstacle to its return to ordinary life. Memory can become contemporary not because it wants to forget history, to recall only what happens day by day, as newspapers and the television stations do, to repeat eternally the fashions and the languages of the past decades. The memory of contemporaneity

knows evil and knows that there is never a present free from suffering, our own and others'. But it does not wait for another, better occasion, since this is already the best occasion, the occasion for the idea of not wishing to attach meaning to other future evil, of not wanting to lend one's name to another occurrence of futile death.

The memory of contemporaneity is thus the awareness of the futility of evil. This memory prevents future evil wanting to recall *this time*, which is ample enough, as each time it should be in order to hold the ripening opportunity for good inside itself. The good that becomes opportunity is to be able to speak of a goodness that becomes a universally public discussion of reason, of a reason that quits being beyond good and evil to assert itself as a universal voice that everybody will have to listen to and obey. The reason of contemporary memory already thinks of the return, but it already thinks of the return and listening again to all the other voices already far away and irretrievably different.

The awareness of imaginarily wishing everyone well cannot come from the words heard from tradition, but from the voices of future speakers, who are not only newborns and their first utterances, even though the raw material of every knowing sweetness of future. The future speakers announce with their voice the return of ordinary life and they safeguard it from reality's dominion, already imposed on it by putting the word and the voice at the service of all possible operative aims. This is what already takes place the world over wherever one already speaks for love of the word that flows without accumulating past and adversities.

To think of a memory of life shared by all men we should perhaps get used to words made of waiting, that elude their immediate and obliging use in reality. Words without intent and only the slaves of reality fall under the system of the public language even if they are used “privately”. Public speech, the one that we hear every day and that makes up the sum of all the possible words heard to be uttered by ourselves and by others, is the system of the closed discussion. Every discussion in coming to its conclusion is forced to return to the strong symbolism of economy and religion, which stands in contrast to the weak symbolism of communication. It is here that everything comes to completion before there is time to think beyond every tragic fate of adversity and separation. Beyond the adversity of every separate fate, all of us can think of many ideas of sharing. One could be that of a pedagogy of listening to the world, which holds inside of itself all the words of goodness and poetry that come from our intention of contemporaneity and from our secular memory, such as the parable that starts like this: “A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves...”.

Contributors and translators

Here

notes from the present

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p. 61

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Subscription

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The cost of a **subscription** to 3 issues, either the Italian or English edition, is 25 Euros in Italy, 30 in Europe and the Mediterranean area, 35 in the rest of the world. However, since these prices are too high for many countries, you may ask for a **reduced-price subscription**. You can subscribe by **credit card** providing us via fax or phone (0039-02-57406574), or email (massimoparizzi@alice.it), with its number, expiry date, and security code (or CVV2: the three-digit number printed in the signature space on the *back* of the card; or, in the case of American Express, the four-digit number printed, not embossed, on the front of the card); or you can send the money through a **postal money order** to “Qui-appunti dal presente”, via Bastia 11, 20139 Milano, Italy; or pay by **bank transfer** on the following bank account registered in the name of “Qui-appunti dal presente”: international bank code (IBAN) IT03V0558401624000000025101. Please, remember to indicate your name, address, the object of payment and which edition you wish to receive.

Last issues

Number 17 (October 2007), “family, work”, diaries January-August 2007 - back cover: This issue of “Here” is dedicated to Igor Sergeevich Khokhlov - **contents:** *We’re having problems*; diary pages from Italy, Russia, Gaza, El Salvador, the United States, Morocco, Iraq, Saudi Arabia; *traces 205-256*, by Gherardo Bor-tolotti; *Notes on family and work*, by Massimo Parizzi; *My father’s disappeared*, by Veronica Khokhlova; *Two brief items*, by Franco Buffoni

Number 18 (February 2008), “Hao Wu’s diary” - back cover: Once we got used to the opposite of the true, it took no effort at all to adjust to the opposites of the good and the beautiful (a young Chinese man, from the generation born in the Eighties, to Hao Wu) - **contents:** Hao Wu’s diary, June 22, 2005-July 29, 2007; *A different visit*, by Saverio Caruso; *Are there fireflies in China?*, by Marco La Rosa; *Somewhere close by, asphalt*, by Andrea Inglese; *Between ideology and consumer culture*, by Giorgio Mascitelli - **Hao Wu**, born in 1974 in Chengdu, Sichuan, is a documentary film maker. He got back to Beijing after living in the USA from 1992 to 2004. On the afternoon of 22 February 2006, he was arrested by State Security agents. No one has ever said what he was accused of. He was freed nearly five months later, on 11 July 2006.

Number 19 (June 2008), “borders” - back cover: The Ortigara frontier; Cuba’s boundaries; the border between Iraq and Syria; the frontier between Serbs and Albanians in Goraždevac, Kosovo; the frontier between Sunnites and Shiites at Al-Hassa, Saudi Arabia; the boundary of SOS Central Station, in Milan; the Rafah border between the Gaza Strip and Egypt; borders in the Schengen Area; the border between Bethlehem and Jerusalem. - “Our homeland is the whole world / our law is freedom / and a thought...” (Italian anarchist song, 1904) - “Crossing frontiers; loving them, too, since they define a reality, thus rescuing it from vagueness” (Claudio Magris) - “On the map - a place’s exposed / ... / The land is split - a pole ax / Is the border pole.” (Marina Tsvetaeva) - **contents:** diary pages from Cuba, El Salvador, Syria, Gaza, Ukraine, Kosovo, Saudi Arabia, the United States, Italy, France, China, Russia, Palestine; *Borders*, by Laura Zanetti; *Departures I*, and *Departures II*, by Yannis Ritsos; *The stranger*, by Marco Saya; *Always on the other side as well*, by Claudio Magris; *If the air was free...*, by Mario Rigoni Stern; *False directions*, by Giorgio Caproni; *Rafah*, by Laila El-Haddad; *On the map - a place’s exposed*, by Marina Tsvetaeva; *The world of yesterday*, by Stefan Zweig; *To cross the border*, by Ryszard Kapuscinski.

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