

Peter Matussek

## Literature as a Technique of Recollection

There is a caricature of Marcel Proust in which the despairing writer is consoled by a friend saying, 'Aber, aber, mon cher Marcel, nun versuchen Sie sich doch zu erinnern, wo Sie die Zeit verloren haben.'<sup>1</sup>

Literature in general, not only *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*, deals with a different form of memory than that of mnemonics, in which the hints of places lead to a retrieval of what has been stored there before. Nevertheless it is difficult to pinpoint the criteria that make this difference. How does literature transcend the technologically limited sense of memory in terms of a storage and retrieval system?

First of all, we have to realize that the poetics of memory is not an obscure quality soaring above the technical use of classical mnemonics. 'Story' and 'storage' have the same roots, as Thomas Wägenbauer pointed out.<sup>2</sup> And it was a poet, Simonides of Keos, who is said to have been the inventor of mnemotechniques. The written word—Plato later straightens out for once and for all—is caught up in the task of data storing per se. Paradoxically, however, Plato's criticism of the hypomnemata which cause the facility of anamnesis to wither away, is passed on to us in writing. Is this a case of a performative self-contradiction? Is the entire history of literary remembering perhaps such a contradiction?

Indeed, it is—in a specific way. Literature can be seen as a technique of deconstructing its own mnemonic function, and this is what I call the technique of recollection. What makes it separate from bare mnemonic devices is the opening of the textual spaces in which knowledge is stored, enabling the

<sup>1</sup> F.W. Bernstein.

<sup>2</sup> Wägenbauer, Thomas (see his ISSEI-paper 'Limited Recollection inc. the Romantic Element in Cognitive Science').

recipient to 'read between the lines'. As Renate Lachmann puts it, echoing Julia Kristeva, 'The memory of a text is its intertextuality.'<sup>3</sup> This can express itself in different ways whose underlying principle is the awakening of an association—a hint at something which is absent—in the mesh of literary texts. In the following I wish to demonstrate the exemplary role of intertextuality as a technique of recollection in Plato and then draw a line from the dawn of literary remembering techniques to their dusk—the loss of literary intertextuality, technically brought about by the hypertext.

### **Plato and the Origins of Intertextuality**

Our starting point was the question of how Plato could unfold his criticism of writing through writing, i.e. how he could use the medium itself to overcome its own limits. In *Phaedrus*, Plato clearly states that writing paralyses the activities of remembering by means of prothetic substitution. There is little point in asking psychologists if this is really the case. Their findings are ambiguous as can be seen, for example, in two famous cases of memory malfunction described by Alexander Lurija. These are the Ôvast memoryÕ of the mnemopath Schereschewski who suffered from the flood of remembered images, and the amnesia of the brain-damaged Sassezki, whose mental aphasia had lacerated the cosmos of his memories. One wrote to forget, the other wrote to remember. Both failed.<sup>4</sup> We therefore have to differentiate and address the question of how writing is used in order to find out under what circumstances it promotes or, as the case may be, hinders, remembering or forgetting.

In Schereschewski's preoccupation with freeing himself from the over-determination of his memory, we can see an attempt to verify the hypothesis of the *Phaedrus*-dialogue, namely that the process of writing enables us to forget. As Schereschewski says, 'Writing something down means I'll know I won't have to remember it.'<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Lachmann, Renate. *Gedächtnis und Literatur*. Frankfurt am Main, 1990, p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> Lurija, Alexander R. *Der Mann, dessen Welt in Scherben ging*. Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Lurija, Alexander R. *The Mind of a Mnemonist*. Cambridge, London, 1987, p. 69.

What appeared to the mnemonist as salvation is exactly the effect Plato had anticipated in Phaedrus 275a. The passage is repeatedly cited by those who claim that Plato is a radical opponent of writing who privileged the oral medium to avoid the side effects of this deceptive pharmakon.<sup>6</sup> I do not think this claim can stand up to criticism. Contrary to the popular belief that Plato's dialogue plays oral speech out against writing in the interests of recollection, I interpret Plato as placing the line of argument crossways to the opposition of both media: Both can either promote or hinder the process of anamnesis depending on how they are used. In a double sense poor Phaedrus takes on the role of negative exemplary. He has just heard a lecture of the rhetorician Lysias and requested this in the written version so that he can learn it off by heart. Now he wishes to try it out on Socrates to see whether he can do as if it emerges as new from his recollection. But the declamation falls flat. The skeptical philosopher who becomes suspicious at the mention of the name Lysias glimpses the notes under Phaedrus's cloak and suggests the amateur mnemonist would be better-off reading the original.

What is problematized here is the purely mechanical reproduction of writing and speech. Plato had already introduced the alternative model in Meno: By clever questioning Socrates managed to decipher the slave's false, mechanical answers until he had reached the mental state of *aporia*, the precondition of true anamnesis (84a-b).

Thus, destroying the false belief that one can speak well is opening the mind for truly speaking well. This is also demonstrated in Phaedrus: Socrates gives a better speech than Lysias because he does not reproduce preconceived rhetorical knowledge. He leaves it up to the muses, the daughters of Mnemosyne, to decide whether he can deliver his theme convincingly or not (237a). That is to say, he faces up to his own *aporia*. The opening for that which is not already contained in memory sets an anamnestic process in

<sup>6</sup> See Assmann, Aleida and Assmann, Jan. 'Schrift,' in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, eds. Ritter, Joachim & Gründer, Karlfried, Vol. 8. Basel and Stuttgart 1992, pp. 1417-1431, here pp. 1424 f.

motion. This process is for Socrates a sort of 'madness that is heaven-sent' (244a): the soul's undistorted recollection of beauty once beheld (249a-250c).

Analagous to this example of good speech are the utterances that follow on from it about 'how to write well' (258d). The criteria remain the same: By means of the respective medium it is necessary to overcome its purely mnemonic usage in order to allow the creative process of recollection to arise.

It is not paradoxical that Plato should have written the Phaedrus-dialogue down. It is instead the logical implementation of the methods it elucidates for producing an aporetic situation. When Plato writes that people's 'trust in writing  $\acute{\epsilon}$  will discourage the use of their own memory within them', the discredited medium appears, due to the self-destructive manner of its use, as the means of its own transcendence.

In the course of the dialogue, this manner of use is subjected to considerable variation. I am indeed convinced that all three models of intertextuality mentioned by Renate Lachmann<sup>7</sup> are contained in Plato's dialogue:

The participatory repetition and continuational writing of previous texts is carried out in extraordinarily numerous allusions and reminiscences that are explicit and to an even greater extent, implicit.

The writing against forerunner texts in the sense of tropes shows itself in the socratic opposing models to Lysias. They undermine the existing text in two steps. Before Socrates can get around to the speech he sets out to achieve—namely the countering and surpassing of the older text—he delivers a lecture that picks up on Lysias' argumentation and exceeds it.

In doing so, it establishes the necessary distance for the intended transformation of the forerunner text. Socrates' second speech now rebuilds the pre-ordained line of argument in order to prove its opposite. However, this upturning of the argument exposes its own construct-character and relativizes itself: At the end Socrates excuses himself to Eros for his overly poetic use of language which had been in order 'to please Phaedrus' (257a). The subversive

<sup>7</sup> Lachmann, *ibid.*, p. 38 ff.

play with its own credibility affects the didactically blended-in myths, for instance of the Cicadas. Socrates reprimands his eager conversation partner for being unfamiliar with this educational heritage (259b). The accused, of course, has had no chance to redeem himself as knowledgeable since the story has just been invented.

Plato's self-relativization does not spare the representation of his own fundamental principles. Thus Socrates' first speech initially reads as a didactic demonstration of the journey through *aporia* to *anamnesis*: Not knowing what to say, 'under compulsion' (237a), he starts to speak, to suddenly admit that he is 'divinely inspired' (238c). The 'Aha-effect' of the learned Socrates transpires however to be a misconstrual. The impressively demonstrated act of remembering was a parodistic simulation.

I see the specific mark of platonic intertextuality to be such distancing from the mediality of representation via this very means of representation. The point of the dialogue is that Lysias, the very master of oral speech, demands of his students the slave-like reproduction of his words while the vitality of the socratic counter-speech lies in the fact that it is constructed according to rules of written composition. The crucial difference is not the choice of the particular medium, but the transparency of the intermedial support-functions: Phaedrus carries his written notes of Lysias' speech 'under (his) cloak' (228d), while Plato openly shows Socrates' lecture to be a literary product.

Writing, according to Plato, does therefore not necessarily harbor all the danger of forgetting recollection in the act of storing. Properly used, it can bring about remembering by subverting what is stored in it. Schereschewski's futile efforts at forgetting do not refute this theory. The *mnemopath's* notes are anti-hypomnemata—as is the Phaedrus-dialogue. Much to Schereschewski's chagrin, they bring themselves to memory by the energy of their will to bypass the automations of mnemonic aids.

With its non-topographical and non-linear structure therefore, we can say that literature is a critical alternative to any data storage system that stays within the limits of a mnemonic device. Ironically, however, one of the most advanced data storage systems of our days, the hypertext, is based on this very

structure. One would be justified, therefore, in asking whether it is not, in fact, superior even to traditional literature by virtue of its ability to stimulate the process of recollection.

### **Hypertext: The Termina(liza)tion of Intertextuality**

Phaedrus- is enjoying a huge wave of popularity among the theorists of new textuality. They praise Plato's dialogue-direction as the transcendence of linear textuality, at the same time criticizing the conversational form which they ascribe to this transcendence for being only pseudo-interactive. In this vein we can approach the following remark of David Bolter, 'The form invites the reader to participate in a conversation and then denies him or her full participation.'<sup>8</sup>

Like David Bolter, many theorists of the new medium see the hypertext as the solution to this problem in the auspices of intertextuality. The same applies to David Kolb's Story Space with the title Socrates in the Labyrinth,<sup>9</sup> that circles around the notion of 'intermediate structure' and interprets this as the heightened continuation of platonic motifs. He constructs a threefold structure in the history of the media, the crowning synthesis of which is almost automatically the hypertext. At the beginning is the oral dialogue in which Socrates confronts his conversational partners with alternatives that they have to decide on their own. The written text prevents this form of interaction from taking place, providing a release, however, from the situative context of the conversation, increasing the variability of the perspectives of reception. The hypertext heightens the advantages of both of its forerunner media while rendering their disadvantages inactive. Through the linking up of texts that are scattered into single isolated passages, the multiplicity of perspectives is exponentially enlarged. At the same time the reader can influence the course of the idea interactively as in an oral conversation.

<sup>8</sup> Writing Space, Hillsdale (NJ) 1991, p. 111.

<sup>9</sup> Watertown, 1995.

So much for the theory. What does the practice look like, the reading-situation? Inexperienced readers clicking through hypertexts see themselves initially confronted with a freedom they are unable to deal with. They are put in the position of a theatre director who is totally unfamiliar with the drama he is about to direct. This leads to a situation in which the transition from aporia to anamnesis is pre-determined: After a certain amount of clicking around, the reader will have the *déjà-vu* experience of a text-passage previously beheld.

What I had to condense here is the problem with drawing a parallel between hypertextual interactivity and literary intertextuality. The omnipotence of the author—which did not have to wait for modern and postmodern texts to be challenged—is not further discredited by the hypertext, but restored. This omnipotence has merely become hard to identify as it has externalized itself in the algorithms of the textual mesh. In doing so, it has mercilessly reduced the free space for imaginative recollecting processes. Every action of the mouse-clicking reader pins his sense for virtuality down to factual contents. Therefore it is a misleading use of language to talk about the new objective medium in terms of virtual reality. The so-called hyperspace reduces precisely those spaces to pre-ordained text-variations in which intertextual structures can develop their dynamic. Every click contributes to turning a potential abundance of association into a desert of dissociation. Polyperspectivity degenerates into patchwork.

With regard to the dissociative reading associated with hypertexts we can go on in this context to discuss its consequences for memory: These are similar to the symptoms suffered by Sassezki whose amnesia resulted from a fragmented linguistic understanding, i.e. from the loss of the ability to understand 'complex links and relationships.'<sup>10</sup> He had difficulties, for example, understanding phrases like 'my father's brother'. He jumped from one word to the next although both words appeared perfectly clearly to him. He couldn't grasp that the genitive case created a new meaning. Hypertext documents have exactly the same effect. Generally they are constructed in

<sup>10</sup> Lurija, 1992, *ibid.*, p. 48.

such a way that single expressions are annotated. This becomes a problem when it prevents new meanings from emerging from the combination of annotated expressions within the mind of the reader. Remaining with our present example, while the reader is caused to focus onto the father or the brother as clickable objects, his or her imagination is cut off from the creation of the uncle.

Inversions are as difficult to grasp for the electrified reader as they are for Sassezki. A sentence like 'I had breakfast after I had read the newspaper' requires that the first part is still present while the second part is being read. Sassezki always had the feeling that he had walked into a trap<sup>11</sup>—the same trap of linearity with which hyperspace awaits us behind the non-linear disguise of the screen it greets us from. The literature of the Gutenberg Galaxy owes a considerable portion of its artistic quality to the turning of succession into simultaneity. The opposite is the case in the hypertext: Here the simultaneous structure is pre-ordained—what remains for the reader is its dissolution into monotonous chains of succession.

While normal linguistic understanding is made possible by the ability to 'direct the synthesis and organisation of complex associations in one mesh of relations,'<sup>12</sup> readers of the hypertext and people with brain-damage in the manner of Sassezki's have lost this ability as a result of war technologies. The result, as in the case of Lurija's tragic client, is mental aphasia.

Precisely this would have been the solution for Schereschewski's problem. The neutralization of the emphasis necessary to create meaning—an emphasis retained by the memory of a text much to his disillusionment—makes the hypertext an ideal instrument of forgetting—a forgetting in the sense of Eco's *Ars Oblivionalis*<sup>13</sup> which functions due to the latent evacuation of achieved recollection that slips away beyond the subject's control.

Conclusion: Towards a New Poetics of Hypermedia

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 121.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>13</sup> PMLA 103 (1988), pp. 254-61.



Firstly by way of a brief summary: Techniques of storage cause recollection to degenerate due to the externalization of the act of remembering. The text is also a storage technique. It becomes a medium of recollection by becoming literary, i.e. by the opening of intertextual spaces that can be filled-in according to the reader's imagination. Hypertexts are structured in such a way that they upturn this literary function: The empty spaces of the intertexts become filled by the positivity of a new textual building-block. With each step through the 'web of trails', the hypertext reader flattens out the virtually inspiring dynamics that arise from the experience of the contradiction between a given static texture and its gaps.

If, however, as we can observe in the phenomenon of literary intertextuality, the text is in a position to overcome the inclusions of storage techniques by transcending itself, we may ask whether the hypertext is capable of doing the same. I am convinced that a technique of recollection can be developed in the hyperspace, too. Its precondition is a new theory of intermediality. This should not, however, be confused with multimediality. Intermediality is the deconstruction of multimediality just as intertextuality is the deconstruction of textuality. The hypertext in its current form reverses this deconstruction by technically positivizing its virtuality by making it a real object. A new form of using it in the sense of a poetics of remembering has as yet not been attempted. The task is again to transform virtual reality into real virtuality