

# NOVEL CRIME, HUNTING AND INVESTIGATION OF THE TRACES IN SEBALD'S PROSE

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Abstract: Mindful of the criminality in memory, Sebald's prose itself leads an investigation. He uses the inquest process from the crime novel genre, and espouses the specific narrative regime of the crime novel. He also makes reference to the latter by punctuating the narrative with true crime stories. In *Vertigo*, for example, Sebald relates an unsolved crime taken from an article in an Italian newspaper. The story serves to reinforce an uneasiness felt by the narrator since his time in Vienna. Sebald's writing can be seen as an historical operation of searching for clues, which are not presented as documents producing a discourse of truth. Rather, they give rise to an experience of remembering which becomes entwined with that of reading. In his prose, the document appears as a fragment detached from its context, free to provoke a re-living of the past by invoking the imagination. Sebald's aim is to bring the past to life through prose and images. He uses documents from history, rejecting the positivistic historical method borrowed from the natural sciences. Wandering through time with the narrator in Sebald's works, the reader is thus drawn into a deep meditation on identity. This essay analyses the complex narrative techniques Sebald uses to develop his vision of the past, including his pathbreaking use of photographs.

*The text is a forest in which the reader is hunter. Rustling in the underbrush  
– the idea, the skittish prey, the citation – another piece “in the bad”.*

Walter Benjamin<sup>2</sup>

The characters in Sebald's work are all survivors who have entered into a time without beginning nor end, existing in the wanderings of memory. They are victims of “unresolved crimes”.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes fatal – as it can lead to suicide – this inability to appease the unravelling time of memories produces symptoms which are present in all of Sebald's narratives in various forms. We can often find in his prose the use of explicitly psychiatric terms to designate these symptoms. In *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks. Zur österreichischen Literatur von Stifter bis Handke*,<sup>4</sup> Sebald analyses the work of several Austrian authors from the end of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century, noting the influence on their work of this rapidly developing discipline at that time, as well as the role of these literary figures in the development of psychiatry and psychoanalysis. A vocabulary of pathology is present throughout this essay where he talks of “perversion”, “paranoia” and “schizophrenia”. It is

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<sup>2</sup> W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, eds., Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (New York: Belknap Press, 2002), m2a, 1.

<sup>3</sup> L.S. Schwartz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory. Conversations with W.G. Sebald* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 105.

<sup>4</sup> W.G. Sebald, *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks. Zur österreichischen Literatur von Stifter bis Handke* (Residenz-Verl.: Salzburg Wien, 1985).

through the prism of these notions that Sebald reads the works of Stifter, Schnitzler, Hofmannsthal, Thomas Bernhard and others.

In Sebald's prose, the symptom always appears within the first few pages as an *incipit*. It is with this that the story starts, and that the investigation begins: the investigation into memory, but also intertextuality and identity. Sebald is a detective and a hunter; he follows and reads traces as clues. Indeed, he discovers the past as a means to investigate memory, to explore libraries, and to decipher texts and images.

### Investigation and memory: symptoms, signs, coincidences

The first chapter of *Vertigo* begins with the rewriting of Stendhal's life, introducing the theme of self-writing. Through the telling of the author's recurrent collapses, this passage renders the bibliographic and the clinical as inseparable. After this introduction, we discover in Chapter II a narrator who is travelling to Vienna, then Northern Italy, "hoping that a change of place would help him get over a particularly difficult period of his life".<sup>5</sup> Tirelessly he takes the same way through the Austrian capital, tracing a crescent moon, walking without aim. Plagued with vertigo and hallucinations, the narrator is led to see "people I had not thought of for years, or who had long since departed".<sup>6</sup> This uneasiness also echoes that of the characters in *The Emigrants*, survivors, several of whom end up killing themselves. Each of these short stories is the tale of a "suicide at an advanced age, which is a syndrome of survivors";<sup>7</sup> the most famous cases of which are Jean Améry, Primo Levi, Paul Celan, Tadeuz Borowski. If the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* is not in this situation, it is clear that we discover him to be in a state of profound melancholy, which necessitates a stay in the hospital. Prey to paralysis that reminds him of the hero of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, the narrator crawls painfully to a window to watch the outside world "in the tortured posture of a creature that has raised itself erect for the first time".<sup>8</sup> Finally, *Austerlitz*, which has, according to Sebald, "the form of an elegy, a long prose elegy",<sup>9</sup> narrates the rediscovery of memory in a man who, throughout the novel, is prey to symptoms physically translating the indescribable return of something repressed. Here, we find several descriptions of anxiety attacks that take hold of the hero unexpectedly. Jacques Austerlitz knows the scattering of the self, the loss of identity. The view of the dislocated "I" is a constant throughout the novel, the hero being ignorant of his entire past. In Paris, Jacques has "The first of the several fainting fits I was to suffer, causing temporary but complete loss of memory, a condition described in psychiatric textbooks, as far as I'm aware, as hysterical epilepsy".<sup>10</sup> The hero wakes up in the Salpêtrière hospital, where Doctor Charcot had interned a large number of hysterics at the end of the 19th Century. Hysteria is the first symptom that appears in the prose because, according to Freud, reminiscences generally cause hysterics a great deal of suffering.<sup>11</sup> An investigation into memory is used to understand the illness. It is

<sup>5</sup> W.G. Sebald, *Vertigo*, trans. by Michael Hulse (London: Vintage books, 2001), 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Schwartz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory*, 38

<sup>8</sup> W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. by Michael Hulse (London: Vintage Books, 2002), 5.

<sup>9</sup> Schwartz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory*, 103.

<sup>10</sup> W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. by Michael Hulse, (London: Vintage Books, 2001), 268.

<sup>11</sup> S. Freud and J. Breuer, *Studien über Hysterie* (1875) (Frankfurt a. M: Fischer, 1991).

a condition of survival, and the prose has to resolve Jacques' condition as if solving a crime. Thus, Sebald affirms in *The Emergence of Memory* that his narratives are "crime fictions" faced with "unresolved crimes":<sup>12</sup> against people as memories, but also against humanity. In his prose, Sebald shows that the criminality can be the representation of the past.

Mindful of the criminality in memory, Sebald's prose conducts an investigation. If he uses the inquest process from the crime novel genre, and if his writing espouses the specific narrative regime of the crime novel, it also makes reference to the latter by punctuating the narrative with true crime stories. In *Vertigo*, for example, Sebald relates an unsolved crime taken from an article in an Italian newspaper. The story serves to reinforce an uneasiness felt by the narrator since he was in Vienna which has continued to grow throughout time spent in Venice, and then in Verona. In a particularly comical outburst of paranoid panic, the narrator imagines himself to be, in this autumn of 1980, the fourth and latest victim of the group called the Ludwig organisation, which has held strikes annually since 1977. The pizzeria where he is at the time suddenly appears to be a trap, where the waiter speaks the coded language of death, "L'verno è alle porte". On the bill, we are shown the patronym of ill omen appearing as "Cadavero Carlo". The entire narrative is built with a collection of coincidences that, though they are excessively interpreted in *Vertigo* as evil omens, turn out to be the symptoms of a state of paranoia. The symptom becomes a sign, and soon a clue, for it is in trying to comprehend this state that, seven years later, the narrator retraces his voyage from Vienna to Verona via Venice. This self-investigation leads him to Milan, where he arrives at the station only to read "an advertisement for Hertz entitled PROSSIMA COINCIDENZA", right before he is mugged. After this forewarned coincidence, the narrator procures himself two new identity papers dated 4th August 1987. Immediately after taking possession of this identification, he is seized by a "paralysis of memory" and by "incessant waves of vertigo".<sup>13</sup> Vertigo, the eponymous symptom of this work, translates the crisis by the implicit autobiographical question *who am I?*, intimately linked to the memory of self. To lose memory is to lose identity, to lose one's roots in the world, and to be condemned to either wandering or paralysis. To rediscover one's past is to lead a *self-investigation*. It is a process which is the foundation of any autobiographical project, and it always appears in Sebald's prose.

As with Jacques in *Austerlitz*, Max Ferber, in *The Emigrants*, will also be led towards conducting an investigation of his past, eventually replaced in his task by the narrator, in order to recall a trace, buried for a very long time, that he did not want to find.<sup>14</sup> The investigation, conducted by the narrator into Ferber's past, leads him to the intimate diary of Ferber's mother, Lusía Lanzberg. Sebald claims that this diary is, in part, authentic, forming a collection of "disjointed notes"<sup>15</sup> from which he creates a biographical montage that allows Vladimir Nabokov to appear in Luisa's life. The family of the young woman lived in Steinach, a village in Northern Bavaria, not far from the seaside resort of Bad Kissingen, where, according to his autobiography *Speak, Memory*, Vladimir Nabokov stayed. There, according to Sebald's fantasy, Luisa meets Nabokov as a child already hunting butterflies.

<sup>12</sup> L.S. Schwartz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory*, 103.

<sup>13</sup> Sebald, *Vertigo*, 79.

<sup>14</sup> Sebald, *The Emigrants*.

<sup>15</sup> Schwartz, ed., *The Emergence of Memory*, 213.

But I do remember that the fields on either side of the path were full of flowers and that I was happy, and oddly enough I also recall that, not that far out of town, just where the sign to Bodenlaube is, we overtook two very refined Russian gentlemen, one of whom (who looked particularly majestic) was speaking seriously to a boy of about ten who had been chasing butterflies and had lagged so far behind that they had had to wait for him. This warning can't have had much effect, though, because whenever we happened to look back we saw the boy running about the meadows with upraised net, exactly as before. Hansen later claimed that he had recognized the elder of the two distinguished Russian gentleman as Muromzev the president of the first Russian parliament, who was then staying in Kissingen.<sup>16</sup>

Nabokov indeed describes this episode in his autobiography *Speak, Memory*<sup>17</sup> and Sebald superimposes the remembering of *reading* and that of *living*. The investigation about meaning becomes a way to *read*: an exercise of reading the book of the past as the baroque period was reading the book of nature.

### Investigation and knowledge: intertextual clues

To discover the meaning of a work of literature is to conduct an investigation from the clues gleaned while reading. As a writer of narratives, Sebald knows well that investigating is a way of interpreting. In reading, the investigation determines meaning. An obsession with books and studies is the symptom of another illness that Sebald knows very well, and that is cultivated in his country of adoption, namely melancholy, which Robert Burton has definitively inscribed in the humanities field.<sup>18</sup>

In *The Rings of Saturn*, the narrative opens with an account of the symptom, and then turns to the recollection of someone who has died, a colleague of the narrator who taught literature at the University of East Anglia, Michael Parkinson: "The inquest concluded that he had died of unknown causes, a verdict to which I added the words, in the dark and deep part of the night".<sup>19</sup> The shock of this death deeply affects Janine Dakyns, a colleague of the narrator, who succumbs, a few weeks later, to a disease that swiftly consumes her body. After the brief narrative of this double death, Sebald tells us that the victims had in common, over and above reciprocal affection, some biographical points, such as both having studied at Oxford. An investigation seems to begin into the enigmatic death of these colleagues. However, it will not be taken very far. The causes of death are to remain unknown, as the narrative instead begins to explain the causes of the narrator's unease and his need, after these encounters with death, to undertake a long walk along the coast of the North Sea. Another investigation then begins, occupying the entire first chapter and producing a thread to the whole narrative. This is the research being done by the author on Sir Thomas Browne and, more exactly, in the first few pages, on the place where one of his relics, a skull, is to be found. It becomes a meditation on death, discovered through an investigation, led by Browne in his book about burial urns:

<sup>16</sup> Sebald, *The Emigrants*, 214.

<sup>17</sup> V. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 130.

<sup>18</sup> R. Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 1621.

<sup>19</sup> Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 6.

And since the heaviest stone that melancholy can throw at a man is to tell him he is at the end of his nature, Browne scrutinizes that which escaped annihilation for any sign of the mysterious capacity for transmigration he has so often observed in caterpillars and moths. That purple of silk he refers to, then, in the urn of Patroclus, what does it mean?<sup>20</sup>

With this question, placed under the sign of the moth's mysterious capacity for transmigration, which ends the first chapter, the investigation begins: the thread of the narrative that will take us to unexpected places and periods will be made of silk. Departing from the path linking Norwich and Lowestoft, the narrator takes the road to China at the time when the empress Cixi had assumed power as a result of a series of political crimes. Fascinated by moths and by silk, Cixi on her deathbed looks back and realizes "that history consists of nothing but misfortune".<sup>21</sup> This point of view on human destiny reminds the narrator of a description of "the denial of time"<sup>22</sup> as presented in the short story by Jorge Luis Borges *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*. Sebald also refers to this narrative slightly earlier in his work, having previously made reference to *The book of imaginary beings*, in order to remind us that "life is no more than the fading reflection of an event beyond recall". With *The Rings of Saturn*, the reader is in the night of time, discovering the non-sense of life in the descriptions of destruction. The silk thread that the reader follows is that of the intertext: the text of Thomas Browne's *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, at the origin of Borges' short story *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*. The labyrinth, whose image appears several times in the narratives, becomes a library. The investigation about meaning is an *intertextual investigation* that leads the reader on the trail of a reading memory – a centre of gravity around which different actors move, or a narrative composed of different particles like the rings of the planet Saturn, planet of melancholy, under whose influence the author was born.<sup>23</sup> To discover this fragmented composition of the rings, astronomical equipment is required, just as the intertextual clues have to be examined closely to follow the investigation in *The Rings of Saturn*. Amongst the leftovers of the past, a tiny piece of silk symbolises the fine and precious thread of memory.

As we have seen, the investigation of meaning concerns memory as text, and is placed within the context of the crime novel. But, if the investigation in Sebald's prose refers to this well-known genre in England, it also refers to the psychotherapy process as Freud describes it, a journey through memory in order to understand the symptom, as well as a hermeneutics in reading a book. In this way, the investigation in Sebald's prose can be measured by the "presumptive paradigm"<sup>24</sup> that, according to Carlo Ginzburg, makes its appearance in the human and social sciences at the end of the 19th Century. In his analysis, Ginzburg suggests a parallel between the method of authentication of a painting by the Italian art historian Giovanni Morelli, and that of the investigation of the crime novel by Arthur Conan Doyle: "The art connoisseur resembles the detective who discovers the perpetrator of a crime (or the artist behind a painting) on the basis of evidence that is imperceptible to most people". The same is true of the psychoanalyst, who is interested in the "little gestures that escape us unawares" in this "epistemological model":

<sup>20</sup> Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 26.

<sup>21</sup> Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 153.

<sup>22</sup> Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 153.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. W.G. Sebald, *After Nature*, trans. by Michael Hamburger (New York: Random House, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> C. Ginzburg, "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm" in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, trans. by J. Tedeschi, and A.C. Tedeschi (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 102.

In each of these cases [Morelli, Doyle, Freud] the model of medical semiotics is evident: that discipline which permits the diagnosis of diseases inaccessible to direct observation based on superficial symptoms, sometimes thought to be irrelevant in the eyes of the layman – Dr. Watson, for example. [...] But these are not simply biographical coincidences. Towards the end of the nineteenth century – more precisely in the decade 1870–80 – a presumptive paradigm began to assert itself in the humane science that was based specifically on semiotics.<sup>25</sup>

Infinitesimal traces allow for access to a deeper reality that would be impossible to capture by other means – traces, or more precisely symptoms in Freud’s case, clues in the case of Sherlock Holmes, pictorial signs in that of Morelli. But, as Ginzburg explains it, the roots of this paradigm were much older than the late nineteenth century:

Man has been a hunter for thousands of years. In the course of countless chases he learned to reconstruct the shapes and movements of his invisible prey from tracks on the ground, broken branches, excrement, tufts of hair, entangled feathers, stagnating odours. He learned to sniff out, record, interpret, and classify such infinitesimal traces as trails of spittle. He learned how to execute complex mental operations with lightning speed, in the depth of a forest or in a prairie with its hidden dangers.<sup>26</sup>

So as this “cognitive heritage” is handed down and enriched by generations of hunters, the figure of the hunter occupies a privileged position in Sebald’s narratives. In *Vertigo*, it is the corpse of Gracchus the hunter from Kafka’s short story and the hunter Schlag, a character from childhood in W. In *The Emigrants*, we come across Nabokov the butterfly hunter, and in *Austerlitz* the narrator presents the hunter as a figure specific to the Bavarian region. Finally, in *The Rings of Saturn*, there is the fisherman of herrings, who read the sea as the sky, and in *Campo Santo*, the hunter is Julien l’Hospitalier, the hero of Flaubert who belongs to Christian history. The hunter is the figure of the writer. He “would have been the first to tell a story because he alone was able to read, in the silent, nearly imperceptible tracks left by his prey, a coherent sequence of events”.<sup>27</sup> He is the one who, like the writer, deciphers the world in the Book of Nature. For Sebald, the aim is to decipher the past, to read and write the experience that is at the centre of any autobiographical project, for example Stendhal’s *Vie de Henri Brulard*, which is at the heart of the first chapter of *Vertigo*.

### Investigation and empathy: a reading method

If the hunter is a double of the writer in his method of deciphering traces and telling stories, he is also a figure of empathy, for to decipher a destiny or to read a book is in Sebald’s prose to engage in empathy. As well as being a symbol of the author, the hunter is also a figure of empathy (*Einfühlung*). According to “the ancient law of hunting” (illustrated for example by the adventure of Acteon), he becomes the prey just as the investigator must put himself in the shoes of the assassin in order to retrace the unfolding of events and the motive of the crime. Empathy is a recurring experience for the narrator in Sebald’s work, and there is an exemplary scene in *The Rings of Saturn*: the encounter with a hare during a visit to the deserted military centre of Orfordness built on an extraterritorial slip of land, on the English

<sup>25</sup> Ginzburg, “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm”, 102.

<sup>26</sup> Ginzburg, “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm”, 102.

<sup>27</sup> Ginzburg, “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm”, 103.

coast near the mouth of the Aalde river. In the profound silence of the place, the narrator is “frightened almost to death when a hare that had been hiding in the tufts of grass by the wayside starts up, right at [his] feet”:

In that very fraction of a second when its paralysed state turned into panic and flight, its fear cut right through me. [...] I see the edge of the grey tarmac and every individual blade of grass, I see the hare leaping out of its hiding-place, with its ears laid back and curiously human expression on its face that was rigid with terror and strangely divided; and in its eyes, turning to look back as it fled and almost popping out of its head with fright, I see myself, become one with it.<sup>28</sup>

The empathy between the hare and the narrator, which is traditionally that of the empathy of the hunter, can be associated with the becoming-other that is played out in Sebald's prose between the one who recites the story, and those who are narrated. The narrator's search for identity is made through this constant metamorphosis from the autobiographical to the biographical. This is how the prose in Austerlitz is orchestrated. More than in any of the other works, the narrator accompanies his character.

This mechanism of empathy is directed at any reader; first and foremost at Sebald himself, as well as all who read his works. The reader of these narratives must also become, if not a hunter, at least an investigator. To capture the breadth of the narrative work, he or she must place and identify quotations and documents, as reading follows a cognitive process that repeats that of the author. Empathy can only work if it is possible to read, or more exactly to decipher, another's past, for example that of Stendhal. In 1826, as Sebald reminds us, Stendhal is near the lake of Albano in Italy and, in a melancholic state, is tracing the initials of all the women he loved in the dust on the ground. While relating this episode, Stendhal makes reference to Voltaire's *Zadig*, when the narrator is writing initials in the dust “like Zadig”.<sup>29</sup> But, here, he makes a mistake; for it is not Zadig who writes the letters of his name, but his beloved Astartée who yearns after him in chapter 15. With this “reading lapsus”,<sup>30</sup> Stendhal makes an inversion between the writer and the writing. This inversion shows that the function of the initials traced out in the dust is to be opened as a text, to be read. Writing his autobiography, Stendhal is to be read as Zadig, to be deciphered through the initials of women's names, initials in which all his life can be summed up. This first act of writing, of making a trace, creates self-reading at the same moment as the process of self-writing begins. Reading becomes an event of memory, with its accidents – here, the confusion between writing and writer; there, that of dates. It is an investigation of meaning, in this case the meaning of autobiography, which allows the passage in Stendhal to be read in the light of another episode of *Zadig*, chapter 3:

Since you have condescended so far, as to admit of my Address to this August Assembly, I swear to you by Orosmales, that I never saw the Queen's illustrious Bitch, nor the sacred Palfrey of the King of Kings. I'll be ingenuous, however, and declare the Truth, and nothing but the Truth. As I was walking by the Thicket's Side, where I met with her Majesty's most venerable chief Eunuch, and the King's most illustrious chief Huntsman, I perceived upon the Sand, the Footsteps of an Animal, and I easily inferred that it must be a little one. The several small Ridges of Land between the Footsteps of the Creature, gave me just Grounds to imagine it was a Bitch whose Teats hung down; and for that Reason, I concluded she had but lately pupped. As I observed likewise some

<sup>28</sup> Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 234.

<sup>29</sup> Stendhal, *Vie de Henri Brulard* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 36. Cf. Voltaire, *Zadig* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 108.

<sup>30</sup> L. Marin, *L'écriture de soi* (Paris: Éditions du Collège international de philosophie, 1999), 26.

other Traces, in some Degree different, which seemed to have grazed all the Way upon the Surface of the Sand, on the Side of the fore-feet, I knew well enough she must have had long Ears. And forasmuch as I discerned; with some Degree of Curiosity, that the Sand was everywhere less hollowed by one Foot in particular, than by the other three, I conceived that the Bitch of our most august Queen was somewhat lamish, if I may presume to say so.<sup>31</sup>

As Ginzburg notes in “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm”, it is this episode that leads to Zadig becoming the symbolic name for a reading method: “The name “Zadig” had taken on such symbolic value that in 1880 Thomas Huxley, on a lecture tour to publicize Darwin’s discoveries, defined as “Zadig’s method” that procedure which combined history, archaeology, geology, physical astronomy, and palaeontology: namely, the ability to forecast retrospectively.”<sup>32</sup> These are indeed retrospective forecasts that allow the discovery of a destiny already written, but only to be realised on being read. It remains for the reader to follow the clues, and decipher the coincidences out of which destiny is written.

If Sebald’s writing can be considered a historical operation of searching for clues, these clues are not held up as documents producing a discourse of truth, but rather give rise to an experience of remembering which is confounded with that of reading. In Sebald’s prose, the document is re-written in a becoming-trace, a fragment exiled from its context, free to provoke a re-living of the past by invoking the imagination. To give life back to the past through prose and images is Sebald’s aim. He uses documents from history, as he emancipates himself from an historical method whose positivism is borrowed from the natural sciences. In this manner, preserving the fragility of the trace is to keep it alive, at each instant on the edge of nothingness, as Jacques Derrida notes a trace has “the vulnerability of cinders”.<sup>33</sup> Between conservation and obliteration, the montage of traces in prose makes the reader face the reality of a past constantly at the mercy of destruction and waiting for an investigation he can lead to the reliving of all that was.

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<sup>31</sup> Marin, *L'Écriture de soi*, 38 <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/18972/18972-h/18972-h.htm>.

<sup>32</sup> Ginzburg, “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm”, 117.

<sup>33</sup> J. Derrida, *L'écriture et la différance* (Paris: Seuil, 1979), 339.