

Stones: Matter and Witnessing

Abstract

This research attempts to offer a new approach to literary studies, one that deals with the *matter* of writing in the works of Franz Kafka, W. G. Sebald and Paul Celan. The project re-examines major questions concerning the act of writing, historical representation, and the poetics of memory and witnessing – named and signed in stones. In their work these authors re-present the dialectic of modern being, the history of destruction and the misfortunes of everyday life, revealing the distortions and the falling-apart of Western civilization. Their writings also give voice to the antinomies of being Jewish in the 20th century. These experiences are named by stones: the stone refers to the matter of being: heavy, solid and still, concealed and silent, yet awaiting an opening – to speak, to tell, to bear witness.

This research is based on a radicalization of a "material reading", exploring the heavy matter that remains: rocks and stones, fossils, sediments and deposits, traces and remnants of the substance that is transformed and converted into signs, producing new textual values such as "weight", "heaviness", "solidness", "rigidity", "friction", "concealment", "stillness", "reflection" and "echo". The major implication of this reading is the concreteness of the sign, engraved and sealed, bearing witness. In this project we thus ask: how do stones speak and tell? How does the stone provide substance for a witness? The stone is the matter of a language that speaks, yet with "blocks" – interruptions and inhibitions, heavy, silent, foreign words. This is the *matter* of witnessing. By learning the double implication of the stone as a "cornerstone" and a "grave", as a "monument" and a "ruin", as a "fossil", as a "fragment" and an "opening", as "silence" and as an "echo", we come closer to understanding the matterness of the witness, its concrete signification, its methods and paths, its detours – *Umwege*.

This method of reading will be explicated in a double circle of interpretation: first, phenomenological, based on the writings of Martin Heidegger and his stone-commentary; and second, cultural-critical, based on the writings of Walter Benjamin and his interpretation of sad stones.

This project thus suggests a new theoretical framework in comparative literary studies, based on a method of material reading. The research will provide a new view of the dialectic of tradition in the works of Kafka, Benjamin and Celan, as reflected also in the novels and essays of W.G. Sebald in which biblical and Talmudic stones reappear, providing another dimension, a weight to and concealment of their act of writing. This view, however, should reflect also the unfamiliarities of the German and the Jewish experiences of history and being, a drama engraved in stones.