

Abissology: Traumatic Memory in Esther Kinsky's Novel Rombo (2022)

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Abstract. In her book *Rombo* (2022) Esther Kinsky traces the devastating earthquakes in north-east Italy in 1976 on the basis of natural and cultural observations and the memories of those affected. Earthquakes suddenly open up chasms that shake our certainties. They are caused by underground displacements and collapses of so-called abissi, that is, abysses or cavities in the rock. In structuring her novel, Kinsky quotes writings from abissology, a branch of early geology, and subtly draws connections between nature and the human condition. The chapter explores this primarily through the representation and role of memory and emphasises how the text works with fragments, linking observations of nature, photographs, (partly) fictitious memory logs and reflection, science and folklore. How do people deal with the traumatic experience of the abyss? How does trauma shape our understanding of life and the world? How does memory serve to draw a parallel between the mountain interior and the human? The interplay between remembering and forgetting plays a decisive role in this process and gains clarity in the abissi. The abissi can also be found allegorically in people's memories, where they harbour important signs of life and experiences. The trauma locked away in these cavities continues to have an effect and can suddenly have a destructive impact. If we ignore it, it will destroy us when we are shaken. If we track it down, we can emerge anew from the collapse. Kinsky's *Rombo* is therefore a plea to pursue the abyss, the trauma, and to translate the traces of life it contains into a conscious form.

Keywords: Esther Kinsky; abyss; trauma; memory; forgetting; earthquake; cave; life traces

1. Earthquake and trauma

Rombo, the title of Esther Kinsky's prize-winning novel (2022), refers to the rumbling sound in Calabria that accompanies or shortly precedes an

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earthquake.¹ This sound, “humming, buzzing, rumbling, murmuring, thundering, clattering, rushing”,² as Kinsky approaches it in words, is caused by caves collapsing inside the mountain or the earth. The book is an earthquake novel – as we know, earthquakes play an important role in cultural history. They are also repeatedly thematised in literature. The massive earthquake in Lisbon in 1755 shook faith in a benevolent God as well as the optimism of the Enlightenment: “How can God allow such a thing to happen?” is one question. “How can we humans have our lives under control when nature proves to be so overwhelming and unpredictable?” is the other. In the words of the novel’s character Gigi at the end of the book, the revolutionary force of such an event, overwhelming human power and rationality becomes clear:

What is an earthquake? An earthquake is like something huge moving in a dream. Or as if a giant is not well in his sleep. And the awakening is a new order of things in the world. Man and his life become as small as the smallest stone in the river.³ (Kinsky 2022: 254.)

These devastating forces lie beneath the surface, indeed, they literally tear open the surface and open up all-devouring abysses. The abysses, abissi, will concern us here in connection with trauma. The word trauma refers to a wound inflicted from the outside; psychology uses the term to describe an experience that causes stress and its psychological consequences. These consequences can certainly be compared to an earthquake, as a traumatised person’s wound under the surface can break open at any time and lead to collapses or eruptions. The earthquake metaphor therefore points to the unstable psychological ground on which we humans stand and build. The phenomenon of trauma is always about something fundamentally human, about the human condition characterised by the abyss.

2. The book *Rombo* by Esther Kinsky

On 6 May 1976, an entire mountainous region in north-east Italy was devastated by an earthquake in a matter of seconds, killing almost ten thousand people and forcing around eighty thousand to rebuild their lives. In September of the same year, the reconstruction work that had been carried out in the

¹ This is stated on the very first page of the book, an excerpt from a geological textbook from 1838 (Kinsky 2022: 9).

² Nadine Kreuzahler (2022) compiles this list of Kinsky’s words for the rombo.

³ All translations are my own.

meantime was wiped out by further quakes. "The earthquake is everywhere", Kinsky writes right in the second short section of the book, entitled "Quakes" (Kinsky 2022: 13–14): collapsed houses, cracks in buildings, extinct villages, ugly new settlements. But the difficulty of talking about the event is also immediately taken up, with one sentence ending with an ellipsis omitting the earthquake, thus itself forming a hollow space, an abyss: "if again it ..." (Kinsky 2022: 13). Even decades later, "the writing with which it inscribed itself in everyone's memory ... has not faded, it is constantly being notched anew by recollection, by talking about all the wheres and hows" (Kinsky 2022: 13). Right at the beginning, Kinsky describes her own endeavour, specifically to "lay out the entire route to the mountain peak with all the conjured images", "everything spelt out in mountainous terms." (Kinsky 2022: 14) The book offers and describes various ways of dealing with the trauma; it consists of "earthquake memory images". The narrative voice wishes for a windless day for such a "Bilderauslegung" (exegesis of images) – the German term making it clear that not only is a route laid out here with images, but that these images must also be interpreted. This collection of memory images is about gaining an overview and recognising what such a traumatic event means for one's own being. However, we are immediately warned: "But the day is windy." (Kinsky 2022: 14) The work of interpretation is not a simple, leisurely one, but arduous and agitating. This is where the first witness comes into play, Anselmo, who reports by telephone to people who have moved away from their relatives' graves in the cemetery. At the end of the conversation, he says: "Memory is an animal that barks from many mouths." (Kinsky 2022: 14) Accordingly, the diversity of perspectives is the decisive structural element of the book.

The publisher, Suhrkamp, writes "novel" on the book cover, but the description is rather misleading as it is not a plot-driven narrative.⁴ The book consists of seven chapters, each preceded by a photo and a short extract from 18th and 19th century geology books. The photos, labelled "finds", show carvings by stonemasons and pilgrims who left traces of their existence or passage in the ruined church of Venzone. The geological quotations come from so-called abissology, an early branch of geology which, as the term suggests, was dedicated to the abysses in rocks and developed a theory of cavities. The text itself consists of hundreds of short sections, each of which relates a natural phenomenon from geology, flora and fauna, descriptions of the terrain, customs, stories and

⁴ Frei (2022) comments in his review in *Literaturblatt*: "Rombo is a book of memories, a book that is entirely its own, not a novel, not a narrative, not a report. Rombo is an album of memories, sometimes enriched with photos described in real life, with stories, memories."

myths of Friuli as well as the effects and history of the earthquakes, as well as fragments from the lives of seven people who experienced the earthquake and whose memories are recorded in this way or are later reproduced in the book in direct speech from the first-person perspective. These are partly about what they experienced, and are partly reflections on what they experienced and the effects on their own lives and being. Reflections on photography and memory itself also play an important role, and in some cases the photos are also described. Kinsky lives partly in Friuli and these witnesses and their reports could be at least partly fictitious, although they are certainly based on actual conversations.⁵

The book is itself fragmentary in this way and, like the destroyed houses, is broken up into fragments that do not provide an overall perspective but attempt to approach the incomprehensible from multiple perspectives. Nature becomes an allegory for the human condition.⁶ Despite the precise and poetic language, it is not always easy to read;⁷ there is no clear plot line that you want to follow, but rather individual observations and aspects that are mostly only very loosely connected. The book goes beyond any genre, it combines memory logs, presumably also fiction, cultural history, folklore and science. The precise descriptions of nature continue to situate it in so-called nature writing, although Kinsky is sceptical about the term and even avoids the concept of landscape in favour of terrain (*Gelände*),⁸ even though she was awarded the German Prize for Nature Writing for an excerpt of this book in 2020. Instead, she gave her 2018 novel *Hain* the subtitle *Geländeroman* (Terrain Novel). The awarded Kleist Prize naturally suggests a connection to Kleist's 1807 story "The Earthquake in Chile", while the W. G. Sebald Literature Prize, another prize already awarded in advance for an extract, brings Sebald's major themes of memory and trauma into play. Although the term trauma does not appear in

⁵ Kreuzahler (2022) claims in her review: "As if Kinsky had recorded interviews. Which wouldn't be so far-fetched, because the author actually lives in a village in Friuli since some years ago. The memory of the earthquake is omnipresent there. However, the characters in *Rombo* are fictional. She did not specifically conduct interviews, but she did have conversations when they arose."

⁶ Cf. Böttiger (2022): "The limestone, certain birds, certain colours of the landscape and the sky are combined in this text with big questions about humanity and community." Even Pöhlmann (2022), who is sceptical about the text, admits: "On a metaphorical level, the novel has a lot to offer".

⁷ Hayer (2022) points out that Kinsky is a poet and so he perceives her as "less the constructor of a plot and more the language composer who works with sound colours and synaesthesia."

⁸ Cf. the interview by Deutsch with Kinsky (2022).

Rombo,⁹ the theme certainly does. The question of memory and forgetting is central and runs through the entire book, as well as through this essay.

3. Abysses and mountains

The great importance of mining and mineralogy for the Romantics has often been noted (cf. Böhme 1989). Novalis, for example, was himself a mining engineer, Goethe carried out intensive mineralogical research, the story of the Falun mines was recorded by three German writers of the time¹⁰ – this is certainly connected to the role of the underground and the abyss in Romanticism as the Romantics wanted to investigate the inner being of the human. At that time, an interest in ‘nature’ as a counter-space to culture was developing (cf. Elias 1976); the onset of industrialisation and urbanisation contributed to the idealisation of pristine natural space. With its rugged and mighty aspects, the mountain world also offered a prime example of the sublime, an interest that was certainly linked to the questioning of God and Christianity; sublime nature could still inspire awe in people, even if belief in God was fading. In any case, the dimension of infinity shifted from the divine to the human at the time. Humans themselves now became the centre of creative power: they no longer created through divine inspiration, but from within themselves. Instead, the abyss of the infinite now lay within themselves, with all the proud self-empowerment as well as the despair and restlessness of the ego left to its own devices.

The Enlightenment had undermined belief in God; Nietzsche’s “death of God” was already on the horizon and with it the abyss of the lack of ultimate justification for human existence; nothingness and nihilism formed the new horizon. Accordingly, the thinkers of German idealism endeavoured to find a new solid foundation for thought. *Grundlegung*, *Grundsatz* and *Anfangsgründe* were ubiquitous terms that contained the word *Grund*, that is, here, foundation (cf. Mohnkern 2019). The Enlightenment did not feel responsible for the “dark imaginations/ideas/notions” (*dunkle Vorstellungen*) and “the deep abyss of human knowledge”; of this latter, Kant believed that “we cannot reach it”.¹¹

⁹ Lehmann (2022) also refers to this in his review: “Bohrkern des Lebens – Esther Kinsky: Rombo”. He adds that the term ‘dream’ would otherwise have to be translated as ‘life’. However, the traumatic nature of the earthquake becomes comprehensible in the stories, for example when the character Toni says “I was just running, and I was afraid that an abyss would suddenly open up” (Kinsky 2022: 246).

¹⁰ By Johann Peter Hebel, E. T. A. Hoffmann and Friedrich Rückert. Cf. for the role of mining and the subterranean Dorn/Wagner (2011: 22–28).

¹¹ Immanuel Kant: *Lectures on Psychology*. Leipzig 1889, cited in Jung (1983: 127–250, here 177). Remarkably, Kant sternly rejected Wilhelm von Humboldt’s theory of gender

Superelevated nature thus assumed the role of the divine. Cultural history created a new dimension of infinity with the new concept of nature. Edmund Burke's influential aesthetics of the sublime ascribed to sublime nature the role of showing human powers their limits and developing creative powers through the "delightful horror" evoked in this way (Burke 2008 [1757]).

The mountains with their caves and depths thus became a great allegory for the human. Even if Kinsky does not romanticise beautiful or sublime nature in the sense of an idyllisation, there are still certain romantic elements of an attribution of autonomy, if not personification of nature in *Rombo*. Time and again, nature is described as having agency.¹² Above all, however, one can recognise a comparison of the self and the human interior with the mountain interior. And this comparison is primarily drawn via the question of memory and forgetting. Just as in Romanticism the abyss of existence was shifted into the human realm, in *Rombo* memory and forgetting also appear as an abyss opening up within the human being. Paul Jandl remarks: "Philosophy is the enigmatic part of *Rombo*, the characters' stories are full of abysses." (Jandl 2022)

4. Memory and forgetting

Jandl also recognises the prominent position of memory: "Like perhaps all great literature, *Rombo* is also an essay about remembering." And he draws the connection to the general social mood of a turning point in time, in which a dull subterranean rumbling, the *Rombo*, points to impending ecological and social catastrophes. He also adds a psychological, even traumatological, dimension to this: "Some people can already hear the *Rombo* within themselves."¹³

After impressions of the earthquake events and the effects on the "terrain" were given in many sections in the first part, the seven witnesses are introduced and have their say at the end of this part in unmarked direct speech, expressing their attitude towards remembrance, each followed by a paragraph on the

difference and his sexualisation of thought as a dialogue between male and female as an "abyss of thought", see Trabant (1986: 23). It seems as if Kant refused to think about certain abysses of the human being.

¹² Various reviewers point to this autonomy of nature in Kinsky's work, such as Honig (2022). Likewise Kreuzahler (2022) or Baranyi (2022), who describes nature as the "actual protagonist of the novel" and not as a "landscape" shaped by human hands. Pöhlmann (2022) speaks of "memory photography", in which, however, nature is overexposed and people are underexposed.

¹³ See above. In his review, Steffen Richter (2022) takes the same line on the social and ecological problems of our time and describes *Rombo* as a "novel about the repressed precariousness of life".

terrain (in order to follow Kinsky's term further and avoid the concept of landscape).

Olga begins with fundamental reflections on memory:

What is memory? It comes and goes as it pleases. It disappears and imposes itself without us being able to do anything about it. I see the wall, I remember a carbon. I remember a carbon, the memory of the earthquake comes back. So everything is connected and interwoven. I hear chickens and think of my childhood years in Venezuela. The sweet-smelling tree in the courtyard and the sunspots on the floor. Everything has changed, but that is still there. Memory is something that is constantly being woven. So everything you see and hear and think and smell is like a thread in this woven memory cloth. The cloth gets longer and longer; as you get older, it practically becomes as long as from the top of the valley to its exit, only it's all folded up tightly in your head. And the blood in your veins flows past it, incessantly, and then tiny fibres come loose and float to another place, and then you've forgotten something. But somewhere in your head it's still there. Yes, what is memory? Memory, that is ourselves. (Kinsky 2022: 51)

Olga's description of memory is reminiscent of Freud's theory of memory in his beautiful short sketch *Notiz über den Wunderblock* (A Note Upon the Mystic Writing Pad) (Freud 1989). There he uses the example of the *Wunderblock* to explain the functioning of our memory apparatus, which is able constantly to absorb new impressions despite the limited ability to have them all present at all times. On this special writing tablet, you write with a stylus on a film the traces of which can be repeatedly erased by lifting it from the underlying matrix and which can therefore always absorb new impressions, while the previous impressions disappear from the surface but remain in the invisible underlying matrix. However, these impressions intersect in the matrix and, on the level of human experience, the deeper an impression, the more strongly it will influence other experiences. The earthquake was such a deep impression, which is recalled by accompanying or intersecting impressions, in Olga's case the snake, the carbon, which she saw before the earthquake, so that now every carbon evokes the memory of the earthquake. As Olga explains, memory is constantly changing in this way: new impressions are threaded into it, the fabric of memory is spun further. Everything remains there, but things sometimes reappear in other contexts or disappear for a while. Olga claims that this game of memory and the associated shifts in our identity are what make us who we are. The human being would therefore be an abyss of countless intersecting impressions, so to speak.

Anselmo also emphasises the importance of memory for human existence. He draws a connection to the story of the man who sells his shadow, which

was told in German literature by Adalbert von Chamisso as *Peter Schlemihl's Micaculous Story*.

Memory, that is like a shadow. It follows you everywhere. And if it wasn't there, you might look just as strange as you would without a shadow. Like in the story of the man who sold his shadow. When you've sold your shadow, it's like walking through the world without a trace. And if you don't remember anything, it's as if you have no trace of the world left in you. (Kinsky 2022: 52)

Memory connects humans and the world, it is the trace of the world in humans. Without it, the human is inconceivable. Gigi, on the other hand, claims not to remember much and not to think much about the past, although he also says: "Nevertheless, you need memory. Who would you be if you forgot everything? But remembering can also be hard and hurt. Then forgetting is better." (Kinsky 2022: 53) He also notes the lack of control over which memories come, and when they come: "But then other memories also come uncalled and intervene. You have no power over the type of memory. And not over forgetting either." (Kinsky 2022: 53) For him, everyone is therefore "condemned to their memory. To that which is remembered and that which is forgotten." (Kinsky 2022: 53)

Silvia, on the other hand, has "many memories. But they are not organised." (Kinsky 2022: 54) She also refers to the arbitrary connections of memory and describes memory as a pile of broken glass that is constantly being swept and new connections created. When the shards rub against each other, dust forms and is deposited. You are aware of what is on top when constantly sweeping back and forth, but not the rest, but the crunching and clinking of these fragments of memory is always present. This memory allegory can also be easily reconciled with Freud's theory.

Toni, on the other hand, is bothered by not being able to find the words for the memories; image and language do not coincide, and the others do not see his memory image. This is why recounting memories almost leads to forgetting (Kinsky 2022: 55–56). Mara talks about her mother with dementia, whose forgetting she considers necessary in order to cope with life. She describes it as "a way of keeping order. In pain. And in life in general. Without forgetting, our heads would burst. And the heart too." (Kinsky 2022: 57) Lina, on the other hand, "likes to talk about the past" (Kinsky 2022: 57), but there are discrepancies with the memories of others. That is why she does not share some memories, but writes them down and keeps them to herself so that "the beautiful memory" does not break in the memory dispute with others (Kinsky 2022: 58).

All seven thus bring other aspects of remembering – or forgetting – into the limelight. However, they all recognise the subjectivity of their memories

and the fact that people are defined by their memories, and that these contain elusive or oppressive dimensions over which they have no control.

5. Caves and the forgotten

The abissi, i.e. the caves of abissology, play a decisive role here. These abissi are the reason for the Rombo, the sound of the rock movements inside the mountain, in which the abysses collapse or new ones are created. These subterranean movements also manifest themselves on the surface in the form of earthquakes and chasms opening up. The quotations from old geological textbooks that precede the seven parts mentioned above come in three cases from a book entitled *Das Antlitz der Erde* (The Face of the Earth). For part III of *Rombo*, the following formulations are cited: “traces of a series of great abyssal processes” and “the passive sinking of large floes and extensive plates into enormous depths” (Kinsky 2022: 107). Both the title of the book and the geological activities described in connection with earthquakes can be perfectly reconciled with the aforementioned memory processes; a parallel is drawn between the interior of man and the earth, as the title already suggests. The quotation for section V also shows such a parallel between rock and memory or trauma, when it is explained that a fresh fracture in limestone is black, but gradually burns white as the stones “gradually fade on the surface” (Kinsky 2022: 193). The citation to section VI states that “seismic movement” rarely occurs as a single blow:

Far more frequently, a whole series of earth tremors appears, with or without the accompaniment of subterranean roaring, of varying intensity, often even shifting the maximum intensity from place to place along a certain line ... (Kinsky 2022: 223)

This formulation also applies well to traumatic symptoms in humans.

In any case, here we are dealing more with caves than with infinite depths, although there are close connections. The cave plays a fundamental role in cultural history. “The cave attracts as a metaphor, as a mental image”, write the editors of a volume on *Höhlen. Obsession der Vorgeschichte* (Caves: Obsession of Prehistory) (Messling/Lepper/Georget (2019: 7–29, here 28), which deals with this cultural-historical significance of caves and is largely concerned with the origins of art and thus of humanity, which can be found in caves. They are “spaces of self-understanding” (Caves 2019: 12) for humans. Franck Hofmann (2019: 41–79, here 47) refers to the boom in cave research in times of upheaval:

After the loss of transcendence and a genealogical order, the cave explorer who feels abandoned aims to transcend his historicity retrogradely. The hope is that something can be found in this retrograde turn, something that constitutes humanity as humanity: beyond all time and beyond the symbolic orders in which alone humans can visualise and express themselves as humans.

Hans Blumenberg has already stated that “We all came out of caves, and everyone comes out of one” (1989, inner jacket, written by Blumenberg himself), referring not only to Stone Age people, but also to every individual coming out of the womb. Blumenberg has emphasised the cave as a place of security and consequently of culture: in caves, people used stories, myths and religions to familiarise themselves with the reality out there and to make it compliant. Dorothee Kimmich (2020) has demonstrated the cultural-historical significance of caves as an ambivalent no-man’s land and space of possibility.

This anthropological dimension of the cave as the origin of the human¹⁴ must be taken into account when talking about caves here. It is said of these abyssal caves, the abissi:

Monte Canin is home to the deepest caves on earth. Gorges, chasms, abysses, abissi, from which nothing that has once entered can ever be seen again. Abysses of forgetting. What characterises the cave – the absence of rock, earth, light or the presence of the walls that surround it? The darkness inside or the light outside? When does not-remembering become forgetting-in-spite-of? At the beginning of geology there was a science of abissology. A science of fissures, abysses, cavities in which forgotten things lie trapped like in an almond stone. Things that have been lost. (Kinsky 2022: 56)

By emphasising the depth of these caves, which are explicitly called abysses, Kinsky brings them closer to the infinity of the abyss: according to this passage, the abyss devours permanently and irretrievably. This is in contrast to the witness reports in the textual environment, which repeatedly refer to the unexpected reappearance of the forgotten. Here Kinsky speaks of “abysses of forgetting” – forgetting is infinite. Or they are abysses in the sense of abissi, hollow spaces that then collapse through displacement and create new orders on the surface, along with the accompanying destruction.

The subsequent questions about the character of the cave give food for thought: what perspective do we adopt? Are we looking at the open space or at the surrounding walls? Are the abissi what is there, the protective walls, or

¹⁴ Cf. also Jürgen Trabant’s depiction of Vico’s speleology, in which the human also emerges from the cave situation (2019).

the missing matter within these walls? Are we looking at the inside or the outside? Is the cave passive or active? Although all these questions are based on a finite cave, something delimited, they point to the perspective that significantly influences the attitude towards it. The quoted passage follows on from Toni's reflection, which brings the narration of his memory closer to forgetting, and it lends itself to being read as a commentary. Kinsky's allusions here cannot be fully brought into a comprehensible logic.

Perhaps the cave must be understood here as Blumenberg's place of storytelling, as an endeavour to make the dangerous world outside legible and understandable. The abyss here does not seem to be the memory, but the forgotten, "things that have been lost". Kinsky mentions the almond stone (Mandelkern), which she compares to the abyss in which the forgotten lies. Almond stones are a structural form of volcanic stones whose original hollows fill up with minerals that build later. These 'stones' in the shape of an almond often contain crystals. But here a reference to the amygdala (Mandelkern or almond kernel) would also suit. The amygdala has a close relationship to memory. It is a paired core area of the brain and part of the limbic system. Experiences are linked to emotions and stored in the amygdala. This plays a particularly important role in traumatic experiences, and the memory of the trauma. Even if the situations are not objectively comparable but are subjectively linked via the memory mechanisms described above they can trigger psychological and physical symptoms such as panic, apathy, nausea and fainting. This is why this is also referred to as body memory. What has been engulfed by the abyss continues to make itself felt.

6. Traces of life in the abyss

At the end of these reflections on memory and the associated descriptions of nature, the narrative voice asks whether the mountain has a memory, whether there are traces of the fleeing people and animals and their sounds. Interestingly, Freud's metaphor of scribing is also taken up here for memory work, as Kinsky formulates "a pattern, furrowed into the surfaces by sounds, tiny furrow veins, scribed by sounds" and then speaks of "furrow nets" over which the wind strokes and thus forms a whirring, an "undaunted sound of memory". (Kinsky 2022: 58)

A river is then described in this landscape, which, it is claimed, was named in everything by the inhabitants:

Every patch of earth and every arm's length of water here has a name and with the name a story or the story of a story. The water dictates the terrain and determines the paths, carries away, carries towards and leaves behind depressions,

crevices, fissures, ravines in the soft stone of stripped shells, husks, bones, vortices, life, the abissi, to which initiated limestone explorers lay their ears and listen for the most distant echo of signs of life. (Kinsky 2022: 59)

Water also characterises the landscape, scribes it and leaves traces. Like people's memories, the land is a matrix in which a variety of scribings have been left. And just as you can listen into people, there are also the "limestone explorers" who listen into the terrain for "signs of life". This realisation of scribed life can be heard in the abissi, the abysses. There are still the sound traces of distant life.

The very last short section of this first part is unusually long, three and a half pages, and is entitled "Abgrund" (Abyss). It describes a mountain path that funeral processions used to follow to the cemetery, which was partly "close to the abyss" (Kinsky 2022: 61), where a sign also recalls the "legend" of the goatherd Gigi, who supposedly fell into the depths there along with his animals during a rockfall. The picture on the plaque is "already somewhat faded, covered with a fine network of small cracks. A craquelure." (Kinsky 2022: 62) Here, too, a network of traces is drawn over the memory. It is also a "signpost: Gigis abisso. It continues to the mountain pastures where the path turns away from the abyss." (Kinsky 2022: 62) This end to the chapter suggests that the preoccupation with the abyss stands in the way of grazing on the mountain pastures, i.e. quiet survival.

This idea is taken up again towards the end of the book. The narrative voice reports that if the narrow valley should one day close off completely due to geological shifts, a laborious mountain path would offer a way out, but "one will need hands and feet on the path with its dubious pathways, keep one's eyes averted from the abyss, not listen to the constant growling of scree". (Kinsky 2022: 259) Here, too, the overarching message could be read: in order to escape the trauma of the earthquake, the abyss of experience must be ignored, one must not listen to the rombo, or the quiet clinking and crunching of the pile of broken glass of memory, as Silvia described it. Which would be exactly the opposite of Kinsky's endeavour with this book. Is it about striking the right balance between being aware of the abyss and facing life?

Gigi describes the days of the earthquake, during which he retreated to the mountains with his goats and stayed there for "maybe a week, maybe more". There he heard the muffled thunder of the "deep chasm[s] in the mountain that collapsed". The knowledge of the terrible events down in the village, from which he had fled, weighed on him and he practically pretended to be dead: "I hardly moved." (Kinsky 2022: 173) He describes this experience as a "hole": "Those days have always remained like a hole in my life. Like a hole through which I could look into something else, into an unknown world. But

that was a good thing.” (Kinsky 2022: 173) A hole is itself such an abyss, and here apparently allows insight into another sphere. Even if Gigi cannot find a language for this experience, he recognises a good extension of his world here. In this respect, the abysses would be part of life in which one must not lose oneself, but which should certainly be included as a perspective.

7. Photography and the preservation of the past

Photography plays an important role in the book, the links to memory are obvious and relate to the limestone by looking back at the development of photography. The theme appears above all in Part V (Kinsky 2022: 191–230), which also contains a whole series of “find[s]”, short sections in which a photograph is described. Toni’s father’s Russian camera also introduces the topic (Kinsky 2022: 188–89). On a metaphorical level, however, the first photographic experiments of the French chemist Joseph Nicéphore Niépce in the early nineteenth century are primarily significant for memory. In a section entitled “Nature” (Kinsky 2022: 199), the first experiment is described, which Niépce called heliography: he coated a tin plate with asphalt and had it exposed in a camera, the light hardened the asphalt so that after a long exposure, the exposed parts could no longer be removed, while the unexposed parts could be washed away. In this way, the photographed outlines emerged with a coarse grain. This is followed somewhat later by another section on Niépce’s experiments to “etch images onto a plate using light” (Kinsky 2022: 215). This section is entitled “Decomposition”, which could also allude to the idea described by Toni that recounting memories destroys them. He searched for acids that would decompose when exposed to light, so that the acids would etch differently into the limestone coated with the acids depending on the intensity of the light – to no avail: “He learnt from this process, however, that even a process that was invisible in itself could produce the appearance of an image as a chemical reaction under the influence of light.” (Kinsky 2022: 215) With this concluding sentence, the allegorical dimension comes out strongly again: the invisible processes inside people will also produce images when they are brought into the light. And such images, images of memory, lead to the *grande finale* of the book.

The last section of the book, just under two pages long, is entitled “Memorial” (Kinsky 2022: 263–65) and tells of the cathedral of Venzona, which was destroyed by the earthquakes. It begins by telling how two rivers carried the stones, so once again it starts with nature. Then the markings left on the blocks by the stonemasons are mentioned, which were invisible in the building but made it possible to reassemble the original cathedral during reconstruction:

Invisible as a whole because they disappeared into the joints, and certainly not made with the thought of breaking the building, and yet present as inscriptions, preserved and guarded from erasure, secret testimonies of authorship. (Kinsky 2022: 264)

We have an invisible memory here, hidden for centuries, which comes to light at the right moment and helps.

During reconstruction, the traces of destruction were to remain visible as a reminder of the earthquake: "Fractures, displacements, disfigurements remained visible, gaps not covered up." (Kinsky 2022: 264) This visualisation of the trauma is an inscription of the event in history, whereas previously people did not want to look the trauma in the eye. It was previously said that after the largest earthquake in the history of the region over 600 years ago, and despite constant minor tremors, "warning jolts beneath the surface" (Kinsky 2022: 158), there was no open way of dealing with it: "Despite hundreds of small earth tremors and tremors over the centuries, earthquake was not inscribed in memory, at best an event to be kept away with magic." (Kinsky 2022: 158) The architecture remained completely unsuitable: "Nothing in the buildings could withstand an earthquake." (Kinsky 2022: 158) The lack of engagement with the subterranean, both with the geological processes beneath the earth's surface and with the traumata of human experience and memory, therefore represents a danger for the future.

Other signs have been preserved. A strip of a destroyed fresco was saved, on the lower edge of which pilgrims had left inscriptions over the centuries: "The image to which the pilgrimage itself or part of the path was dedicated has disappeared, what remains is the marginalia." (Kinsky 2022: 264) We are therefore dealing with displacements in which the boulders moved by the rivers were hewn and joined together to form a church. They were marked, painted and decorated with evidence of the migrating people. After being destroyed by underground rock movements, the building was rebuilt with the help of such traces, the reason for the pilgrimage disappeared, but a testimony to it remained. "Marginalia" refers to the emptiness, the "hole", and thus allows us to look into the depths of history. We have testimonies of an abyss, of something which is no longer present, these testimonies, as it is said, "wanted to make a mark against oblivion." (Kinsky 2022: 265)

The narrative voice considers this "appeal to memory and remembrance" (Kinsky 2022: 265) to be mainly unconscious, i.e. again something hidden beneath the surface, in the depths of existence. On the one hand, she sees this as "a multiple 'Here I am' as an answer to the biblical call for presence" (Kinsky 2022: 265). In the Bible, people respond to the divine call with this "Here I am" and make themselves available to God, even for difficult tasks; it is a declaration

of commitment and the assumption of responsibility. On the other hand, this “Here I am” is itself described as a call, “an invocation to the memory of the place. An indecipherable string of signs, a fragile narrative of implied images encoded by time, which deal with remembering as a task.” (Kinsky 2022: 265)

The novel ends with this sentence and thought. It is about “remembering as a task”, which here contains almost sacred elements. This remembering is inscribed in a place, both through the conditions of nature, the terrain, as well as through culture, the inscriptions in the terrain and the people and the way people have worked this terrain. The signs are “indecipherable” as a strip, as linearity, they form “a fragile narrative” – like the interior of the mountain, the narrative of the world is fragmentary, with abysses, abissi, and constant shifts. And Kinsky’s ‘novel’ also takes this form, it is fragile, it consists of chunks,¹⁵ short sections that relate flora, fauna, geology and people to each other. However, it is up to the reader to read the world from them. The world itself is only fragmentary, Kinsky does not offer a whole, an interpreted world, but she does offer elements “of implied images encoded by time” (Kinsky 2022: 265), which enable a *Lesbarkeit der Welt* (Legibility of the World), to refer to another book title by Hans Blumenberg. Kinsky’s book requires the reader to read the world. But every reading consists of signs and their interstices, which every reader must fill.¹⁶ As in the Jewish reading tradition of the Talmud, the readers inscribe themselves into the strip of originless and infinite writing and thus continue the world.

Photos, as briefly mentioned at the beginning, also appear in strips, like a ribbon, before each of the seven parts. These are photos of the scribing in or under the vanished fresco of the church, each of which runs as a very narrow strip from left to right across an entire page, thus suggesting a continuity through the book. In this way, *Rombo* itself continues the strip or thread of history and preserves the invisible, that which lies beneath the surface or has

¹⁵ In his book review, Müller (2022) takes up the term “quarry stylistics” coined by Stephanie von Oppen in her assessment of the book for the German Book Prize, explaining: “And this is doubly true, as the quarrying of stones is the actual focus of the book. But the narrative style of the book itself is also such a quarry, as it has no narrative arc worth mentioning, but instead revolves around the earthquake, the picture of which is slowly pieced together from the various eyewitness accounts.” Jandl (2022) comments in this respect: “The novel *Rombo* is itself like an earthquake. An artfully crafted chaos of spheres and words.”

¹⁶ Behrendt (2022) recognises this demand on the reader: “In the following, too, the reading demands a high level of concentration and, yes, a desire to work, because here no one is taken by the hand and guided through the text along a plot; you have to find your own orientation.”

disappeared elsewhere, in images and words. The abissi of geology, history and human memory and psyche, the trauma thus finds a form, even if it might be a form for absence, but the abyss of being, the traumatic experience is included in the understanding of the human condition. The abissi, the hollows inside the mountain, can also be found allegorically in people's memories, where they harbour essential signs of life and experiences. If we ignore them, they will destroy us when we are shaken. If we trace them, we can emerge anew from the collapse. In this respect, this form of literature sees itself as a monument against the "abysses of forgetting" (Kinsky 2022: 56) and in favour of the abysses of remembering as well as of remembering the abysses.

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