



"Different Ways of Telling a Story": Representations of Memory and Memory as Representations in Julian Barnes, Virginia Woolf and Leo Tolstoy

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine a creative dialogue between a nonspeaking, extralinguistic and unique memory of a self and its verbal representation in literature, as experienced in some of the texts written by Barnes, Woolf and Tolstoy. In view of many contemporary theories which connect language, literature and culture (Larsen, 2016), this article seeks to reflect upon the concept of cultural memory as a dialogically constructed transcultural reference to the European collective past. Considered as a source for cultural memory, literature may provide valuable critical insights into the processes responsible for the construction and circulation of memory cultures. As a key part of the overarching analysis, this paper will consider, first, A. Erll's methodology featuring memories as always textualized, recorded mediations or narrativizations of the experienced events. Second, the present research will also benefit from Lachmann's approach to the literary writing as a tendentiously intertextual endeavour, to the extent that the attempts to narrate memory necessarily imply a counter-productive transformation of the remembered past beyond the limits of any form of textuality. Third, the proposed theoretical rationale behind the overall research project will rely upon the detailed literary analysis of relevant narrative devices observed in the selected works written by Barnes, Woolf and Tolstoy. Sharing a common belief in art as one of the most valuable means of intercourse between man and man, the three novelists, working consciously on a literary task, seem also to be concerned with an attempt to read one's subjective memory, experiencing simultaneously a "completely new liberation from personality" (Paperno: 89). The aim is to demonstrate that the continuous, though non-linear sequel, thus established between three different literary texts and their cultural contexts, could become a productive dialogic counter-memory, a kind of an inter-generic displacement of cultures, providing a firm foundation for further academic debates in the fields of memory and literary studies.

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1. Introduction

The article claims that the narrative representations of memory in a literary text, metaphorically described by Astrid Erll as a continuous movement of different mnemonic archives not only across spatial, temporal, and social, but also linguistic and medial borders (Erll, 2011), may constitute a valuable starting point for a consideration of memory as representations within diverse academic discourses taking place in the field of contemporary memory studies. Considering “memory as fundamentally transcultural” (Erll, 2014), Erll emphasises “fluidity and fuzziness” of memories. In addition, she argues that this non-isomorphy of culture, tending towards movements, connections, and mixing of memories, constitutes the core nature of each individual culture. Erll’s meditations on transcultural circulation of memories within a particular memory culture invites readers to consider further not only a dialogically interconnected way of building relationships among peoples, societies and their literary canons, but also to develop an understanding of a semantically complex reflexive dimension constituted by the non-linear, ambivalent mediation involved in the narrative construction of memories. This sense of ambiguity depicted in the narrative circulation of memories within a diversity of temporal and societal borders is thoroughly outlined in Erll’s recent article, in which she affirms that

“*No* version of the past and *no* product in the archive will ever belong to just one community or place, but usually has its own history of travel and translation (original italics) (Erll, 2014).

R. Lachman’s theoretical approach to both the stylistic and thematic ambiguities observed in the narrative construction of a literary text primarily concerns with the above-stated Erll’s perspective on the self-reflexive mixings of memories in global contexts featuring elevated cultural complexity. This author’s insistence on intertextuality as one of the most effective analytical devices in the literary analysis of texts derives from her scrupulously developed thesis on how literary writing creates, permeates and nourishes cultural memory of a nation. As a consequence, Lachmann defends the idea of literature as a nation’s cultural memory, to some extent responsible for a multiplicity of transcultural dialogues established between different cultures and social communities.

Lachmann’s emphasis on literature as a memory culture arises from her awareness that the transmission and reception of mnemonic contents within and across culturally and temporally distant social contexts determines many of the ways in which a particular text can be interpreted, classified, consumed or (re)appropriated.

In line with both Erlls and Lachmanns arguments, framing a transcultural circulation of memory within and across literatures, cultures and communities, the present article aims at

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examining the extent to which the narrative representations of memory developed in the selected literary texts may criticize, revise, reflect upon and finally contribute to broaden the perception of transnational dimensions featuring memory as representations in a constantly changing global context of contemporaneity.

To achieve this, the study intends to readdress Erl's and Lochmann's theoretical findings with the critical perspective on transcultural reception developed by B. Tornquist-Plewa, T. Andersen and A. Erl in their Introduction to *The Twentieth Century in European Memory*. They argue that "collective memory ... is produced by the continuous internalization and externalization of memory contents and memory forms within social groups. Whatever narratives or images about the past are *externalized* (via 'media' as diverse as facial expressions, orality, performance, sculpture, texts, television or the internet), they can only become a meaningful part of collective memory once they are also *internalized*, i.e. received by audiences, readers, listeners, users or consumers" (Tornquist-Plewa, 2017).

Applying the above stated argument, the article will examine, first, the intertextual connections established between the selected literary texts, exploring their literary potential beyond the established temporary and historical boundaries. Pursuing Lochmann's distinction between metonymical and metaphorical intertextuality, it will concentrate on exploring many different ways in which the selected texts communicate, revise, reinterpret and externalize and internalize the narrated cultural experiences. Second, by critically addressing those findings, the article will inquire how the narratively constructed representations of memory and the ambiguity of memory as a literary representation may provide a firm foundation for the forthcoming academic debates on literature as a vehicle to (trans)cultural memory.

2. Body of paper

Methods

As Goethe's "the fragment of fragments", literature reveals the coexistence of presence and absence in the process of memory. It may be argued that the unfinished dialogue between silence and expression comes to represent the interchangeable dynamics of remembering and forgetting, closely connected to the stylistic representation of the ambiguity of memory and of the ambiguous representation of memory in a literary text.

As mentioned in the Introduction, literary texts might be simultaneously considered as both a medium and reviser of collectively constructed memories, once they possess an ability to reflect critically not only on the externally available images about the past, but also to reconsider that past from a transcultural perspective located beyond commonly recognized national, linguistic and cultural boundaries. For instance, it would be interesting to sketch, in a sufficiently extensive way, the transnational architecture of memory constructed throughout

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Barnes's, Woolf's and Tolstoy's texts, depicted by means of several intertextual connections established among their characters, figures of speech, and the ambiguous narrative processes revealing national memory constructs.

For instance, examining the process of writing of *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), in which the most important narrative instruments are memory, observation and ambiguity, Julian Barnes confesses:

"I published *The Sense of an Ending* in 2011, when I was 65. My previous novel had come out six years before, and was the longest I had written. This was to be my shortest. Various things change you as a person and a writer as you age. You think more about time and memory; about what time does to memory, and memory does to time. You also mistrust memory more than when you were younger: you realise that it resembles an act of the imagination rather than a matter of simple mental recuperation" (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/jun/14/julian-barnes-on-the-sense-of-an-ending-i-learned-to-do-more-by-saying-less>).

In similar lines, Leo Tolstoy reflects on the possible shortcomings of literature to represent memory. His ideas arise from the acute perception of several discursive limitations to fully express the connection between life and literature. Metonymically recovering the idea of ambiguous memory depicted in Barnes argument, the impossibility to express accurately in words the basis of the connection between words and human experiences becomes a central argument in the narrative construction of Tolstoy's short story "The Cossacks" (1863). The very intensity of the main character's life is transmitted through the complex interplay of memory and his 'silenced' identity:

"Olenin felt warm in his heavy fur, even hot, and he leaned back in the sleigh and unfastened his coat. The three shaggy post-horses trudged from one dark street to the next, past houses he had never seen before. He felt that only travellers leaving the city drove through these streets. All around was darkness, silence, and dreariness, but his soul was filled with memories, love, regrets, and pleasant, smothering tears" (Tolstoy: 255).

Grounded on the principle of a dialogical ambiguity, this short story deliberately fails to connect form and content, portraying verbal expressions of experience as almost meaningless, "meaningless simply by virtue of the fact that they are expressed by the word... As expression, as form, they are meaningless" (Paperno: 399). Focusing on the limits of verbal representation, Tolstoy's characters nevertheless struggle to grasp a meaning of the relationship between language and "silence", memory and oblivion, discourse and thought. Searching for an appropriate aesthetic method by which he could keep alive an interaction between the authenticity of a lived experience and its verbal representation in literature, the author hesitates between two contradictory impulses: while the thematic argument aims to find an effective

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way to describe the intricacies of the human heart, the narrative construction longs for a desire to remain silent. In Tolstoy's words,

“If this were not a contradiction, to write about the necessity to be silent, I would have written: I can be silent. I cannot be silent” (Tolstoy 57: 6).

Rethinking metaphorically several ways of how to put one's thoughts into words, either in a literary text or in any other form, Virginia Woolf probes into the constructive ambiguity of forgetting and memory framed by the literary discourse. In order to produce alternative methods to express the inexpressible, her fiction endeavours to translate the gradual fading of life into memory. The connection between a moment lived and its ultimate expression as an act of memory in art is embodied into the complex writing process, located somewhere in-between an inexhaustible silence and a discursively performed representation of the human condition:

"Nothing is solved, we feel; nothing is rightly held together; (...) This may not be the way to catch the ear of the public; after all, they are used to louder music, fiercer measures... In consequence, as we read these little stories about nothing at all, the horizon widens; the soul gains an astonishing sense of freedom." (EVW 4: 185).

In addition, in her diary note dating March 1940, Woolf describes one of Tolstoy's writing techniques as a revelation to her, as she was working on a translation of the Talks with Tolstoy, in 1923:

"I read Tolstoy at Breakfast - Goldenweiser, that I translated with Kot in 1923 & have almost forgotten. Always the same reality - like touching an exposed electric wire. Even so imperfectly conveyed - his rugged short cut mind - to me the most, not sympathetic, but inspiring, rousing; genius in the raw. Thus more disturbing, more "shocking", more of a thunderclap, even on art, even on literature, than any other writer. I remember that was my feeling about W. & Peace, read in bed in Twickenham. Old Savage picked it up. "Splendid stuff!" & Jean tied to admire what was a revelation to me. Its directness, its reality. Yet he is against photographic realism." (DVW 5: 273)

In a similar way, Barnes's apology for a profoundly ambiguous articulation of the human condition, afflicted with the unreliability of memory, and a consequent non-belief find their detailed expression in this writer's exploration of the unsaid, or rather 'forgotten' territory of a self:

"I think I learned when not to put in those unnecessary sentences. It's not a loss of physical energy (though that is also unignorable), more a recognition that you can often do more by saying less. While at the same time inviting the reader to fill in the gaps"(<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/jun/14/julian-barnes-on-the-sense-of-an-ending-i-learned-to-do-more-by-saying-less>).

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The idea of "doing more by saying less" displays a set of Barnes's aesthetically consistent purposes, revealed in this author's belief in literature's ability to "tell the most truth about life". This statement appears quoted in several of his works, being thoroughly examined at the end of *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (2008). In this text, the reader is certainly invited to readdress the narrative representation of memories evolving around time. Its narrative construction consistently undermines the taken for granted systems of knowledge, life statements and moral claims, emphasizing a "usefully vivid [...] the contradiction, and making the silence eloquent" (NF: 240). At the same time, it subtly introduces the theme of the "interstices of ignorance", which are both the novelist's task and the essence of any competing memories.

This double-faced ambiguity, dialogically displayed in the above analysed texts, might be remarkable for many reasons. One of them is that it addresses the interaction between 'memory in literature', related to R. Lachmann's conceptualization of literature as a cultural memory and 'memory of literature', theorized in A. Assmann's study of how collective and individual memories are represented in a literary work. Moreover, it sheds light on several contradictory ways in which 'memory in literature' may support or subvert social and political memory constructs depicted in fiction. The main point, however, is that the narrative representation of the process of memory in a literary text has recently become a central analytical tool to reflect upon the cultural economy of the process of writing memories over time, responsible for the shaping of both collective and individual identities. In A. Assmann's point of view, displayed in *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization* (2011), function and storage are perceived as two complementary modes to narrate memory. She argues, for instance, that

"The fundamental step that will take us beyond the confines of either polarization or equation of memory and history is the idea that inhabited memory and uninhabited memory are complementary and not contradictory. We can call the former 'functional', and we can identify its main features as being group related, selective, normative, and future-oriented. By comparison, historical scholarship is, as it were, second-hand; it feeds on past memories and in new ways reconstructs that which has lost its living relevance to the present" (Assmann: 124).

The intertextually sketched dialogue thus established between different cultural environments and distinct ideological realities becomes an essential analytical instrument not only for providing new theoretical findings in the field of transcultural memory research, it also stays responsible for the broadening of the scope of memory reception as a whole.

Results and Discussion

The narrative texture of representations of memory and the ambiguity of memory as a literary representation, depicted in Tolstoy, Woolf and Barnes, has provided a firm foundation for further academic debates on the role of literature in the construction of a symbiosis between cultural and communicative memory. Following A. Assmann's perspective, both dimensions

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of memory go hand in hand. In this author's view, "human [communicative] memory selects only the amount [of available knowledge] that is necessary to help steer a clear course through daily contingencies, radical changes, and a bewildering abundance of information. In this sense, [...], the functioning of cultural memory ... is constructed through acts of (more or less) rigid selection that involve modes of evaluation, social inclusion and exclusion, and technical means of preservation" (Assmann:119).

For instance, in *Arts of Memory* (2011), A. Assmann displays an interesting distinction between memory as *ars* and memory as *vis*, discursively expressed in the theoretical construction of the above quoted concepts. Memory as *ars* aims to articulate safe storage and identical reproduction of the relevant historical information in the archival form, whereas memory as *vis* focuses on a reconstructive process of remembering, emphasizing shifting, distortion, revaluation and reshaping of the past. Instead of concentrating on the neutral, identity-abstract relationship between recording and retrieving, memory as *vis* reflects upon a complex process of transformation of memories, disclosing remembering and forgetting as inextricably connected activities. Occurring within a specific historical time, the act of remembering inevitably selects certain social experiences and excludes others, doing justice to Erll's argument that "historical consciousness and remembering in a social context are two of the central components of cultural memory" (Erll, 39). In parallel with remembering, forgetting constitutes a constructive, narrative process, acute to the problem of time, change and transformation, being directly related to the psychological process of identity and frequently extinguished from the collective memory. The tension between 'objective-scholarly' and 'subjective-memorial' forms of dealing with the past can effectively be approached through the collaborative research undertaken by the interplay of memory and forgetting, and of memory and counter-memory. In socio-cultural contexts, the symbiosis between memory as *ars* and memory as *vis* is carried out by the detailed analysis of ruptures and continuities in the reflexive reception of memories, celebrating the historical and cultural exchanges of many contemporary memory narratives. For instance, Barnes conveys one of the main purposes behind his character's fascination with the process of memory, as follows:

"It was not the death itself but that long [...] unknowingness that played into a central strand of the novel. I also knew that I wanted the novel to be at the same time meditative and a psychological drama. Two modes, just as it would have two speeds: in the first section, the pace, or anti-pace, of memory, while the longer second section would move in "real" time" (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/jun/14/julian-barnes-on-the-sense-of-an-ending-i-learned-to-do-more-by-saying-less>).

The self-conscious acknowledgement of the narrative interplay between two complementary modes of narration - the metaphorical recall of memories allied to the

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imaginative reinterpretation of the dynamics of remembering and forgetting displayed in the present - might be considered as Erll's reflexive approach towards literature. In *Memory in Culture*, it is referred to as a medium which simultaneously "builds and observes memory" (Erll: 159). The narrative construction of cultural memory in literature manifests textual characteristics which are ontologically distinctive from other mnemonic processes of rendering memories. In accordance with Barnes, Erll reflects upon the paramount significance of a boundary-crossing position of a literary representation, enabling the fictional discourse on memory to become a trigger for other discourse(s) on remembering and forgetting. To be more precise, in a history of cultural memory studies, Erll distinguishes literature as a semantically complex symbolic medium capable of reconnecting the otherwise disperse and seemingly unrelated experiences of the past.

In line with Erll's theoretical argumentation, Ed Simon argues in "On Memory and Literature" (2021), that the processes of ambiguous memorization constitute one of the groundbreaking abilities of literature in dealing critically with the collectively constructed past. The author outlines several ways in which literature contributes productively to contemporary cultural debates and practices, bringing into evidence the fact that there is simultaneously room for potential agreement, as well as persistent disagreement about the received versions of the past, under what social, political and cultural contexts. Throughout his research, the author emphasises the self-reflexive dimension of literature acting within a critical and historical reevaluation of remembering and forgetting, voice and silence. He states, consequently, that

"Writing exists so that we don't have to memorize, and yet there is something tremendously moving about recalling words decades after you first encountered them. Memorizations consequence, writes Catherine Robson in *Heart Beats: Everyday Life and Memorized Poem*, was that these verses carried the potential to touch and alter the words of the huge numbers of people who took them to heart" (Simon, 2021).

Thus, for instance, the reading process of *The Sense of an Ending* exemplifies Simon's above-stated assumption about the ability of a literary text to render the past with a metaphorical complexity foreign to other mediums of memory. Indeed, Tony's 'refigured' reading of his past symbolically portrays the potential of a fictional narrative in conceiving a dynamic transformational process of memory, self-reflexively oscillating between extra textual references to life experiences, the textual (un)reliable configuration of a fragment of Adrian's diary and Tony's the reader ambiguous refiguration of his personal relationship with the past. The theoretical dimension related to literature's specific role in simultaneously addressing the production of memory and the reflection on memory processes constitutes, according to Erll, its distinctive feature. In line with Simon's argument, Erll refers, for instance, that "on the one hand, literary works construct versions of the past: affirmative and subversive, traditional and

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new ones. On the other hand, they make exactly this process of construction observable, and thus also criticisable. Literary works are memory-productive and memory-reflexive, and often, like a reversible figure, simultaneously” (Erll: 151).

In addition, in “Literature as a Medium of Cultural Memory”, Erll discusses the possible theoretical dimensions related to the question of a narratology of cultural memory. Her approach to a narratology of cultural memory is thematically connected with the notion of the ‘rhetoric of collective memory’, which she defines as an ensemble of narrative forms which provokes the naturalization of a literary text as a medium of memory” (Erll: 159).

3. Conclusion

To conclude, it would be interesting to mention that these three literary texts and their authors tend to (re)address the processes of cultural and communicative memories simultaneously in the productive and the reflexive modes, exploring to the fullest the narrative potential of a literary text. Since their discursive representation of remembering and forgetting motivates the readers' capacity to examine the text's (trans)cultural configuration of meaning, it stimulates further critical reflection on the constructive refiguration of the semantic horizons within which the particular text on memory reveals its distinctive functions in both source and reception culture(s). Such a reflexive feature is referred to as the “narrative potential” of a literary text, “which can provide clues to the pre- and refiguration of the text in memory culture” (Erll: 157).

The above quoted argument focuses on the role of memory in a globalised multicultural society, focusing on the sheer richness and variety as well as semantic complexity and multi-layered contentiousness of transcultural processes of memory. This introduces the awareness of the complex legacy of the existing shifts from specifically national views of the issue of identity to conceptions which are at once more and more global. At this point, and in order to conclude, we also need to ask how transcultural memory studies can help frame transcultural literary studies, doing justice to Larsen's transnational perspective on collective remembering in literature:

“recent theories have moved the focus to the process of memory which, in any present moment, allows the past, collective or individual, to emerge as a construction that works as a strong driving force of identity formation. In this perspective the memory process selects features of the past and turns them into more or less coherent structures, which then will have to be checked out with others in order for them to exercise their role as valid interpretations of the past and building blocks of present and future identity. Memories are therefore dialogical phenomena shaped by discussion, or more broadly by exchanges in various media, concerning the selected features, their configuration and the identities they promote. Today, the globalized

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flows of migration open up a new set of problems for the understanding of memories and their functions. When migration becomes a dominant experience across the globe, the concepts of locality and of local experiences changes and raise a new question: can we imagine and attach any meaning to globalized memories? (Larsen, 2016).

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