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# Literary Stories: Cultural Memory

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**KEY WORDS:**

Culture of memory – literary narrative – trauma

**ABSTRACT:**

Historical and cultural memory is put into practice through narratives. As a narrative medium, literature plays an important role in the process of transformation of the past events in cultural memory. This transformation includes critical reflection or affirmation of various aspects of memory and its social context. Literary texts in this paper include short stories of Jan Drda, Josef Škvorecký and Zdeněk Rotrekl which deal with the final days of the World War Two.

*We never get closer to the truth than in a novel.*

Louis Begley. *Between Fact and Fiction*

(Zwischen Fakten und Fiktionen, Frankfurt am Main 2008)

## Memory in Cultural Studies

The words ‘memory’ and ‘trauma’ appear in semantic nuances and various contexts of everyday speech fairly often<sup>1</sup>. Serving their own purposes and agenda, politics and official power discourse tend to remember some historical events and forget others. But what do the notions of memory and trauma mean from

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1) Terms like *memory* (and remembrance) are now used in the social and historical context on every-day basis. For example, in the fall 2012, the award ‘Memory of the Nation’ (*Paměť národa*) was presented in the National Theatre in Prague. In a feature in the *Lidové noviny* on 16<sup>th</sup> November 2012, the Czech politician Alexander Vondra said: “Historical memory will always have its significance.” Such usage of these terms in the public debate is common practice.

the point of view of culture and cultural theory? When we talk about memory and culture, we must remember in what historical contexts the notion of memory appears, i.e. when and in what constellations it was brought to the society's attention. For the purposes of the sociocultural demarcations of modernism and the post-modern, I will not to discuss the Ancient Greece or the Middle Ages in this paper, but rather wish to focus on the period starting around 1890.

Turning points in politics, science and technology, as well as in the society and aesthetics had a strong impact on the individual and collective self-perception and self-reflection at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These turning points resulted in historic upheaval of all the valid ideological traditions, historical continuities and loosening up of traditions. The post-Great War years were noticeably marked by all the damaging fallout. Walter Benjamin<sup>2</sup> spoke of the end of human experience as we know it in relation to the destructive energies of the technologies of modern warfare, transport and media. People became increasingly aware of their social and basic existential needs being thrown into disarray and of the thin line separating civilization and savagery. It is hardly a coincidence that cultural studies (as the field is called nowadays) was established exactly during this time – along with the modern theory of memory and remembrance. All this was happening in the context of the crisis of modern era and after the breakdown of the newly constructed notion of the European cultural space (the so-called Western culture). Philosophers such as Henri Bergson, psychologists such as Sigmund Freud; sociologists such as Maurice Halbwachs or writers such as Marcel Proust initiated and (surprisingly quickly) established theoretical discourse of cultural roles of memory and remembrance. Viewed retrospectively, this discourse can now be seen as a “rescue operation” in the time of crisis (of the modern era/ modernism).

One of the things the experience of the breakdown of the historical continuities together with loosening up of traditions lead to was the systematic maintenance, reconstruction and re-evaluation of the bases of continuum of historical and cultural remembrance. This represents the first wave of theorizing memory in the cultural studies marked by various changes in the traditional modern era. The second wave comes several decades later, again after a devastating war, which is sometimes regarded as a continuation and culmination of the World War One. Charles de Gaulle saw the World War One and World War Two as the second Thirty Years' War; similar views can be found in the study of the French

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2) See Benjamin, W. *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Ed. by Jennings, M. W., Doherty, B., Levin, T. Y. Harvard University Press, 2008.

historian Enzo Traverso *A feu et à sang. La guerre civile européenne 1914–1945* (2007; in English *The European Civil War 1914–1945*, forthcoming in 2014).

The second wave of reflection of the cultural and historical remembrance is associated with the transition from modernism to the post-modern, marked by pluralization of the so-called historical truths as well as the end of the European master narrative, or J.-F. Lyotard's 'the end of grand narratives' and the shift towards the 'mini-narratives' about individual people and cultural minorities. By way of the 'linguistic turn' philosophy and humanities turn away from the epistemological and towards the ontological aspects of human knowledge and constructivist historicism, evidenced by the works of Hayden White.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century these experiences of profound changes and upheaval lead to the realization of the loss of continuity in the established cultural communication and – towards the end of the century – of the breakdown of the shared interpretational framework of history and culture, i.e. of what Lyotard called the 'grand narratives' or 'meta-narratives' which transform the meaningless historical and cultural events by organizing them into a meaningful whole of the narrative form. Much like the first wave of memory theorizing, the second wave gave rise to the profoundly reconstruction activities involving history in the area of the cultural studies (i.e. the above-mentioned "rescue operation"), as evidenced by works of Pierre Nora in France, or Aleida and Jan Assmann in Germany.

This reconstruction activity also includes the reconstruction of the concepts allowing memory to be associated with individual cultural groups. This reconstruction happens through mapping and analysis of the historical development, i.e. the link between and mutual influence of development of theory and the changing sociocultural context. In other words – the ways and methods theories of memory use to describe cultural remembrance take historical contexts into consideration as well. This allows theories of memory to interact with their objects. This interaction in the form of 'theory' reveals certain facts about self-reflection of a given culture.

A crucial part in the theory of memory is played by the so-called places of memory (*les lieux de mémoire*), a term introduced by Pierre Nora. These 'places' do not have to be physical sites or places in the geographical sense of the word, but also non-material, cultural co-ordinates of a community, representing living bonds with the past, rather than fossilized historical rituals. Put in extreme terms – Nora constructs dichotomy of dead history and living memory. In the context of the French culture, the following can be regarded as the living places

of memory: significant dates (such as 14<sup>th</sup> July), objects (tricolour), or tunes (Marseillaise).

Nora's starting point is the perceived state of crisis associated with the gradual disappearance of the continuity of memory. This situation is conducive to communities' urgent need to collect documents and testimonies, which will one day become proof of their existence. According to Nora, even if we disregard the technological advancement of the present culture, no other historical period has intentionally produced so many archives as the current one. Nora's work is profoundly cultural-historical in its tone. He sees the collective memory as that which remains alive in the nation, which helps the nation to connect with the heroic ancestors and important events. Through this, the nation retains its unity and (to use Nora's key term) identity. Nora's approach was criticized by Aleida Assmann on account of its 'national' bias, and Homi K. Bhaba disapproves of his notion of the processes of collective remembrance being based solely on unity and identity, and suggests difference and variety as equally important elements.

We can, of course, find interconnection of theory of memory and self-reflection of a certain culture in other theoretical concepts of memory as well. Various contemporary concepts of memory and remembrance share a common denominator in interconnection of theory of memory and self-reflection as well as in the question of transformation of memory in the cultural contexts. At this point, I would like to briefly discuss various ways of mediation, i.e. media and techniques of memory and remembrance.

When considering the development of the data storage media, starting from the appearance of system of writing, to book printing, to the today's computer and networking devices, it becomes increasingly clear that various media have varying degrees of potential to evoke and defamiliarize the contents of memory. A data storage device is not a passive object which serves to store and call up never-changing data, but rather a device which through its mediality can use its formal aspects to access the stored data. This is evidenced by various metaphors for memory and its accessing, derived from the terminology of modern technology and media. For example the metaphors of writing, e.g. the wax board, book and palimpsest; spatial metaphors, e.g. archive or a library, or metaphors of computer technology and internet – in his novel *Nebe pod Berlínem* [The Sky below Berlin] Czech author Jaroslav Rudiš has the protagonist say that he will “scan [names and events] into the hard drive for a couple minutes” (RUDIŠ 2002: 28).

Data storage can also be associated with the above-mentioned places of memory, as well as immaterial techniques, such as holidays or rituals. Admittedly, categorization of media and techniques is more or less theoretical issue; however it can prove useful for a textual analysis. The various contents of memory, stored by means of various media invite another question which concerns activation of the said contents, its singling out from the data storage (Assmanns' *Speichergedächtnis*) and incorporation into the process of remembrance (*Funktionsgedächtnis*). The process of incorporation happens through the form of selection which is usually bound by strict collective interests. Therefore the process of selection and its link to a certain event in the past always carries a political implication with it, e.g. in relation to the creation of national identity or an ideology. The process of defamiliarization of cultural remembrance can also be facilitated by the means of the media associated with culture, e.g. visual arts, music, theatre etc. However, at this point I wish to focus on the representation and reflection of the cultural remembrance in literature.

## Memory and Literature

Interconnection of literature and cultural remembrance, or literature and cultural memory respectively, can be characterized by the following three crucial aspects:

1. Memory of literature which centres on themes, motifs, topoi, literary genres, partly intertextuality. This metaphoric *memory of literature* is also related to the question of canonization and the history of literature.
2. Memory in literature which refers to the wide spectrum of literary representations of memory and processes of remembrance by means of literary texts.
3. Literature as "memory", i.e. mediality of memory and remembrance in literature: this metaphor refers to the sum of narrative and discursive techniques of construction of remembrance in literature; it also includes trauma narratives.

Literary and film representations of collective and individual (in other words historical) memory seem to be the most common and – most importantly – the most dynamic forms of cultural remembrance.

Regarding the first aspect (i.e. memory in literature) – the above-mentioned theory of intertextuality, especially as understood by Renate Lachmann (LACHMANN



1990), regards intertextuality – put simply – as autonomous intertextual memory of literature, i.e. the inner literary memory of literature based on themes, topics, techniques, motifs etc. In thus conceived intertextuality the texts remember each other even without the author’s intention. This type of intertextuality appears as an autonomous space for memory in texts and it actually represents a theoretical counterpart of examining mediality of cultural memory. Regarding the second aspect (i.e. memory in literature) – the basic concept of cultural memory, which deals with interactions between literature and remembrance, has been put forward by Aleida and Jan Assmann. Their theory gave rise to a great number of other studies. My reflections, too, are based on their analytical categories of communicative and cultural memories: Communicative memory is passed on through speech; the transferred message is related to the horizon of immediate experience of 3 to 4 subsequent generations (see parallels in the research of oral history). Cultural memory is an umbrella term for “repeating texts, images and rituals, which are a part of every society [...], which in turn takes care of them, because they provide and at the same time stabilize its image. These [texts, images, etc.] represent the shared knowledge which is mostly (but not exclusively) related to the past, serving to a certain community as an awareness of its identity and uniqueness” (ASSMANN 1988: 15).

Until recently, theory of memory (including that propounded by the Assmanns) only focused on literature as a part of cultural practice, i.e. memory as “awareness of its own unity and uniqueness”. According to this approach, the individual texts create connections within a memory corpus, e.g. literary canon, which then serves as a medium of sociocultural knowledge. Here the aspect of reception of canonical texts is becoming most important. But it is also at this point that we, in my opinion, find ourselves facing a certain limiting moment of the Assmanns’ model: i.e. its focus on the high-brow, canonical literature and its stabilizing functions, in other words on the aspect of stationary character of the “high-brow culture” of memory. Regarding the third aspect (i.e. literature as memory) – literariness as it was conceived by the Russian formalists, i.e. aesthetic organization of texts, or – put simply – what transforms a speech utterance into a work of literature, has not so far been looked into very often by theories of memory. Interestingly, a great number of the theories emphasize the role of narration for reflection and awareness of particular memories in general.

Narratives provide interpretations of the past events by means of meaningful organization. This represents the great potential of literature in culture of memory as well as in theoretical reflections. In practice this means reflection

of the not-so-often explored interaction between literary contents and forms in the relation to the contexts of remembrance. In this context it is possible to connect basic competencies of literary studies with the international theory of cultural memory.

Given the semantization of forms in the symbolic system of literature, the formal and aesthetic aspects of literature (e.g. metafictional techniques, narrative situations, chronotopes, tropes) become more and more important. Literary texts offer various interpretational and identificational readings and understanding of society and history which can feed back to the collective (historical) memory.

As an example I would like to present a couple of literary texts. The first is taken from a short story 'Panzerfaust' from the collection of short stories *The Silent Barricade (Němá barikáda)* by Jan Drda and the second comes from Josef Škvorecký's novel *The Cowards (Zbabělci)*.<sup>3</sup>

Pepik is shaking in horror. He is only seventeen. 'I am going to break your legs if you leave home,' his father had said. If he were here now, he would shout: 'I am going to break your legs if you don't shoot'. And Pepik knows: even without his father, without a command, I would never run away. Many of the Red Army soldiers fighting outside Berlin are no more that seventeen. And anyway, seventeen years, that means one is a grown man. He is taking aim. Taking aim. And his teeth won't stop chattering. Are there any other shooters left? Is there anybody left here? He feels so alone. So very responsible for this moment. He pulls the trigger. In that very second his senses leave him. (DRDA 1978: 80)

In this excerpt the narrative situation is viewed from an instructive point of view; we hear the narrator, who provides us with the official version of reminiscing about the events happening in Prague during the final days of World War Two. Themes like heroic fight for freedom, overcoming of one's fear and risking one's life for 'a higher principle' (which is also a title of another short story in the collection) and self-sacrifice in the name of liberation from the German occupation are tied in with the Red Army campaign and its mission to disseminate Communist ideology across the Central Europe. Drda's hero finds himself in the official coordinates of the system. With its theme of the active resistance against the Fascistic occupation, the whole collection of stories becomes an integral part of the official historical memory of the socialistic Czechoslovakia.

3) I was inspired to make the comparison of these two texts by the papers of Alice Jedličková and Jiří Holý which appeared in *Interpretace vybraných děl české literatury z let 1945 až 1970* ("Interpretation of Selected Czech Literary Works 1945–1970," Praha 1992).

This official remembrance can be contrasted with a different set of memories of the Prague uprising and Czech resistance, as evidenced by Jiří Kovtun's short story [Nahybal's spring campaign]. In many ways, this text can be regarded as a counter-narrative to Drda's *The Silent Barricade*. Kovtun's anti-delusional narrative represents an opposite of Drda's naively heroic book: The protagonist of Kovtun's story, Nahybal, is a self-proclaimed commander who unleashes a useless and absurd semi-military operation and his group of insurgents ends up being annihilated by the more experienced German soldiers. Looking back to the proposed three-aspect scheme laid out at the start of this part of my paper, we can notice a significant intertextual connection between the two texts in how the image of the Prague spring uprising is represented and reconstructed.

Josef Škvorecký's novel *The Cowards* represents another well-known 'book of memories'. Similar to Drda's short story, the following excerpt from *The Cowards* shows an instructive view of the narrative situation in the form of a younger, self-reflecting narrator in the first person singular, who presents himself as an ironical spectator:

And there [...] were [the pictures]. I shoved my way up close to the window and saw that Berty, that fool, had put me at the top of his display and underneath my picture was the caption: 'Defender of Our Fatherland.' Jesus Christ! I hadn't wanted anything like *that*! I'd wanted the picture to show off with but not have myself out on display in his show window like the village idiot. I could already hear the other guys razzing me about it. Hell. I looked at my picture. Well, it wasn't a bad snapshot. But that awful caption underneath – 'Defender of Our Fatherland.' I could have socked Berty; it would be a pleasure. And then I almost burst out laughing. What had I been defending anyway? If any of these people, with all their noses pressed up to the window, knew what I'd been fighting for. And how much I cared about 'the Fatherland'. [...] I started looking at the other pictures. There were captions underneath all of them, just like I knew there would be. One group was composed of Mr Frinta, Mr Jungwirth, and Mr Wolf, all sporting armbands and standing in the brewery yard, grinning into Berty's Leica. Underneath was the caption 'Everybody volunteered', and under a portrait of Dr Bohadlo, striding across the bridge in his knickers and with his hunting rifles, Berty had written, 'Into the Fray!' Most of the other captions were like that. A fuzzy picture of German tanks creeping away from the customs house bore the inscription, 'Enemy on the Horizon' [...]. (ŠKVORECKÝ 1980: 389)

Škvorecký's protagonist is not aware of the importance of the historical moment; he even refuses the heroization of his own actions and all the missionary and socialistic roles that come with it. The discrepancy between reminiscing about the everyday occupation reality and production of the heroic memory

becomes quite clear in the representation of the uprising and creation of the official discourse of identification. This representation enables everyone to identify with the model of the heroic resistance regardless of the actual individual actions during occupation. However, at the same time the literary techniques of this text emphasize the construction of this representation and identification; the novel's title is only one of the elements that give this away.

Linking the key competencies of the literary studies with methodology of cultural remembrance opens the door of the theories of historical and cultural remembrance to the texts standing outside cultural memory (i.e. outside the cultural canon), such as the so far marginalized genres of trivial literature, popular and trash literature, hip hop and other texts that appear as ideologically opposed to mainstream, as well as the new media, such as docutainment (i.e. wrapping documentation in an attractive and entertaining form), computer games etc. For example, popular literature can be understood as part of the communicative memory of the 1990s and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Popular literature is also worth noting for its medial, often even transmedial techniques, e.g. evidenced by the graphic novel made into film *Alois Nebel* created by Jaroslav Rudiš and Jaromír Švejdlík. Popular literature clearly falls under all the three categories of the scheme presented above.

## Literature and Trauma<sup>4</sup>

Another aspect of the interconnection of literary narrative and cultural memory is the reflection of trauma. Literary narratives deal with cultural knowledge and provide us with identification templates that always represent a component part of cultural memory. Remembrance and reflection of pre- or anti-narrative experience – including the traumatic experience – must be possible through narration as well. However, because of its intensity traumatic experience defies adaptation in traditional patterns, and as a result this experience becomes dissociated from any standard type of remembrance. This dissociation in turn results in what is commonly perceived as amnesia or a so-called blank spot. The blank spot appears as a hostile element in the process of remembrance, refus-

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4) The term *trauma* and its usage in the cultural studies is based on the works of Cathy Caruth (1996) and Stef Craps and Gert Buelens (2008).

ing to be integrated through speech into the memory and to be represented through coherent narrative.

In art we often see only the visible remnant of the damaging process of various traumatic experiences, such as war, grave injury, car accident, rape and general feelings of helplessness of one's own self or a close person.<sup>5</sup> In this context, all that art and literature can do is to re-code, re-write an empty sign, this empty spot, which was created in memory and in self-affirmation. Due to insufficient integration of the traumatic experience into memory (and its narratives), trauma destabilizes continuity of the individual and collective self-determination and creation of identification. It is no coincidence that we can often find dissociated and fragmented chronological constructions in the literary texts which deal with traumatic experience (e.g. in the novel *Money from Hitler* (*Peníze od Hitlera*) by Czech novelist Radka Denemarková, the already-mentioned graphic novel *Alois Nebel*, or Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*). This enables trauma to refer to the limits of sharing of certain forms of human experience. In these texts, narration facilitates gradual realization of the traumatic experience, offering organization and interpretation at the same time. Thanks to narrative techniques and their possibilities, these pre-narrative or anti-narrative elements of trauma become part of cultural memory (e.g. on the level of a narrative situation with (semi-) direct and indirect speech, inner monologue, stream of consciousness, or – as a way of contrast – auctorial narrative form). These pre-narrative or anti-narrative traumatic moments usually have no way of being expressed within the standard cultural practice; they are even often tabooed. One example of such a narrative is provided by Zdeněk Rotrekl's short story 'Zpráva o zkáze města' [A Report of The City's Fall]. Like the previous texts, the story is set in the final days of the World War Two:

Some units [of the Red Army] reached the first houses. People who had gathered outside started chanting – hail – . The tailor went to fetch the flag and started tying it to the gutter hanging from the roof. A sound of shot came from the basement of a house standing alone out in the fields and the tailor fell from the first floor down on the pram that carried his child. Some soldiers gathered around, discussing what to do. Eventually, one of them dragged a petrol can and went around the house. The others looked around, took their guns off their shoulders and entered a structure, probably a woodshed where a wife of a miller who had escaped from the South of the country was hiding. The soldiers grabbed her and started tearing her clothes. The woman was screaming, but she was

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5) Cf. American Psychiatric Association (1994). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-IV*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.

old and soon her voice became a mere rasping. When one of them was finished with her, he went on inspecting the building [...]. (ROTREKL 1985: 181–2)

The following events perspiring during the arrival of the Red Army in the Southern Moravia are described in a similar way; the story ends with a family committing mass suicide. The story does not have a traditional plotline, i.e. there is no development, and no intrinsic connection between beginning, middle and end. Compared to the texts by Drda or Škvorecký, Rotrekl's story offers neither a causality of the plot's events nor any attempt at their explanation. The narration is dissolved in the non-causal storyline which portrays a disintegrating world and ends in absolute nothingness, represented by the suicide.

In a way of conclusion, I would like to summarize several important aspects. Theory and practice of collective and national remembrance and production of particular representations of memory appears to be a reaction to the awareness of the state of crisis, a state related to modernism (and the modern society in general) and the post-modern. Literature represents one of the above mentioned representations of memory and remembrance, as Louis Begley's quotation suggests: "We never get closer to the truth than in a novel". In other words, literature represents one of many ways of getting closer to the truth. As far as the non-fiction holocaust literature is concerned, James E. Young (YOUNG 1988) criticizes fictional literature because of its tendency to claims *authenticity*. This also means that the fictional literature claims *authority* for its own fictional narratives. This danger is at its most tangible in the context of the totalitarian constellations. Leaving the issues of authority and authenticity aside, it can be said that literature does not only represent cultural memory, but also and most importantly – especially in the contemporary context – a medium for constructing memory. This suggests a certain degree of authority for and during reflection of cultural and historical memory at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

A very instructive proof of the above claim is Jáchym Topol's 2009 novel *The Devil's Workshop* (*Chladnou zemi*, 2009). This novel draws attention to the reflection of the collective and individual crisis of remembrance and trauma narratives. The fictional stories of people who have been through traumatic experience are blended with discussions of trauma narrative and these two elements are further united on the level of the narrative reconstruction of the traumatic past. Thus, it can attribute to the theory of memory as well as – ideally – to the public debate (not surprisingly there has been none so far with relation to Topol's novel). On



the one hand, texts such as *The Devil's Workshop* draw attention to the individual stories, communities, and events ignored by the canon of cultural memory. On the other hand, however, and this should be emphasized, this attention is not based on authentic memories or real-life experience which ranks it among thought experiments. This very method is represented by two problematic aspects of theory of memory in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The first aspect can be expressed by the following questions: how can be the catastrophes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century written into the collective memory if those with the authentic individual experience are no longer among the living or they are “voiceless”, i.e. as if deprived of the ability to remember? In other words – can cultural memory be constructed without the basis of communicative memory? The second aspect is the question of what ways, narratives and fictional techniques can be used to compensate for the missing basis of memory. In other words: will not this literature’s attempt at processing memories of somebody else’s (traumatic) life stories be always false, or even presumptuous? How can the unfamiliarity of the other be constructed without occupying his or her blank spot in the history? How can we reminisce about a stranger, someone who is dead, killed without finding ourselves trapped in the process of self-identification with the victims? At this point I can only offer provisional answer which will also serve as a closing of this paper. Literary texts play a central role in the process of construction of cultural meaning. Fictional narratives (as a way of schematization), and symbolical processing of data in literature both have a great potential for the uses of cultural memory: traumatic and socially tabooed experience can be communicatively re-formulated and offered at the disposal of cultural memory. This represents the process of transformation of traumas into cultural memory and, also, reflection of the process of construction and manipulation of historical and cultural memory. This process can take two distinct forms: 1) Fiction-making, which – in the form of the thought experiment – allows space for discussing and demarcating certain issues or problems, and 2) meaning-creating through organization of narrative arrangement (e.g. the structure of the plotline) which leads to active participation of the recipient, his or her social mobilization on the one hand, and to self-reflection on the other hand, as well as to multiplicity of meaning, which allows interconnection of various, often controversial, models, and, finally, to the reception of our environment and the world.

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