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On Polish Memory Studies

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Foreword

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Ever since cultural memory studies experienced rapid growth in the 1990s they have become an unquestionable part of the humanities, broadly conceived, even though the twenty-year expansion of memory studies has lately receded, and questions are being raised concerning the limits, boundaries and inconsistencies of its discourse. Nevertheless, in my opinion, it is still a valid and interesting theoretical perspective. It is not implausible to assert that with time, and accumulation of doubts and new questions, it will become an even more intellectually fertile field of study, the more intriguing, the more aware it becomes of its own limitations and specificity.

The aforementioned process of growing sophistication of memory studies can be clearly seen also on Polish grounds, where the first years of the discipline's development were marked by references to the theories of classical researchers such as Jan Assmann or Pierre Nora, and only subsequently some of the more complex matters of European memory were introduced (especially that of German collective memory, investigated among others by Aleida Assmann) to finally allow for a complete opening of research onto deliberations concerning Polish cultural, social, and collective memory. Characteristic traits of this epoch are found on the one hand in articles and books concerning new possibilities of theoretical studies of memory, original concepts and interpretative cat-

Justyna Tabaszewska

– Assistant Professor at the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences. She is the author of *Jedna przyroda czy przyrody alternatywne? O pojmowaniu i obrazach przyrody w polskiej poezji* and *Poetics of Memory, Contemporary Poetry and the Question of Tradition and Memory* and articles published in, i.a. *Second Texts* and *Cultural Studies Review*. She is currently working on a project "Affective Poetics of Memory. Polish Literature and Culture After the 1989 Breakthrough." Contact: justyna.tabaszewska@uj.edu.pl

egories, and on the other, in a steadily growing library of texts concerning various forms of memory and commemoration, problems of traumatic memory of The Second World War, complex and often repressed memory of The Holocaust, and finally in the troublesome memory of the interwar period, the time of the Polish People's Republic (PRL) and the time of political transformation.¹

These two lines of development in memory studies, directed, roughly speaking, one towards theory, the other towards practice, strictly converge with one another with the result that the most interesting research proposals come from those projects where theory is extracted from practice or practice can be expanded through novel theoretical categories. Both strategies enable us to see in particular endeavors – texts, theories, or institutions – things that were previously either indiscernible or incomprehensible.

Such a significant expansion of memory research was without doubt assisted by their inter-, or rather trans-disciplinarity. Theories utilizing the notions of cultural and collective memory have quickly become a starting point for a lively discussion on the role and function of memory in the humanities as a whole. Particular disciplines of knowledge, by adapting and transforming observations derived from the study of issues raised by collective and cultural memory, managed to broaden not only the field of memory studies, but also the spectrum of their own inquiry. Therefore, ideas that can be traced to, among others, literary studies, cultural studies, visual studies, history, and the social sciences, have all contributed in a significant way to the study of memory.

The openness of memory studies to the influence of other disciplines of knowledge, essential to their expansion in the early 2000s, has nevertheless also contributed to their silent crisis that manifested – as in the earlier case of trauma studies – in an imperceptible incorporation into other discourses, and therefore to a subtle loss of their identity. The notion of “memory” became a kind of keyword, summoning various contexts: from the psychological and biological (with the question of the possibility of inheriting memory²), through social, cultural, artistic, to the political.

1 It is impossible to name each Polish scholar working in the area of memory studies in such a brief introduction. Nevertheless, I will at least attempt to mention some of those whose work is not published in the current volume: Agata Bielik-Robson, Michał Bilewicz, Katarzyna Bojarska, Przemysław Czapliński, Agnieszka Dauksza, Dorota Głowacka, Maria Kobielska, Joanna Kurczewska, Andrzej Leder, Jacek Leociak, Grzegorz Niziołek, Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska, Roma Sendyka, Bożena Shallcross, Joanna Tokirska-Bakir, Marek Zaleski, Marcin Zaremba.

2 The notion of bio-hereditary memory – from the viewpoint of the humanities – traces to Marianne Hirsch's remarks on the workings of post-memory of the second (and subsequent) generation. Ernst van Alphen, among others, voiced criticism of these views. See Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), Ernst van Alphen, “Second-Generation Testimony, Transmission of Trauma, and Postmemory,” *Poetics Today* 27/2 (2006).

The unprecedented proliferation of research fostered diverse systematizations and definitions of memory. Alongside the well-known cultural memory and communicative memory, defined by Jan Assmann (also foundational and biographical memory, both much less recognized), social memory and collective memory, described by Maurice Halbwachs, and Pierre Nora's rather separate but no less important notion of places of memory; there have rapidly emerged notions of collected memory (Jeffrey Olick, Astrid Erll), functional memory and stored memory (Aleida Assmann), or finally memory working as *ars* and as *vis* (again A. Assmann). Particular definitions of memory were complicated even further by the modes, functions, and objectives of memory introduced by these authors, which it would be impossible to relate. At the end of the 1990s and the onset of the 2000s the issue of ways of functioning of various politics of memory – highly controversial, especially in Poland – that shape not only the manner in which we remember the past, but primarily define our present circumstances, came to the forefront of scholarly interest.

Concurrently, with a certain inflation of the memory discourse another, this time rather beneficial for the discipline, development was underway. It was a growing self-awareness of the research, which started to take on previously neglected issues with a growing confidence. Without doubt, one of the most important among these issues, was the question of research matter. At the start of the memory boom, the category of memory and remembering almost organically filled a certain niche, of which the historical disciplines seemed unaware; at least until the time of new historicism which questioned the previous view of history as an objective discipline of knowledge. Memory research enabled ways of seeing and analyzing various memory sources in ways previously impossible. Even though the methodology of studying the oral tradition, testimonials, memoirs, archives, material inheritance of memory and so forth, has been established quite quickly and painlessly, the methods of studying more complex media of memory have remained a subject of an ongoing debate.

Particular forms and types of memory media required different methodological tools, and their study was rather more complex than that of standard historical material; as media of memory encompass literature, broadly conceived art, cultural practices, landscapes, and places (though conceived somewhat differently from Pierre Nora's meaning). Each of these media – and there are others, unnamed here – is also the object of study for some other discipline of knowledge. This required memory studies to determine what kind of relationship would they have with other methodologies, to what extent would they become incorporated, and to what extent would they remain independent.

A most interesting example of such a relationship – from the point of view of the current volume – is found at the intersection of literature and memory studies. It turned out rather quickly that this issue is perceived differently by literary scholars, who utilize some of the basic ideas relating to memory in their study of literature,

and differently by those studying memory, for whom literature is just a basis of further work. The former oftentimes consider theories of memory to be a convenient tool that enables us to perform interesting interpretations focused on specific themes or problems.

Meanwhile for those scholars who are more focused on memory studies literature most often constitutes a medium, metaphor and model of memory³ (Aleida Assmann), means of storage⁴ (Aleida Assmann, Brigit Neumann⁵), it can be considered culture's memory (Renate Lachmann⁶), or at least a specific, paradoxical medium of memory – according to those researchers who underscore the equality of both disciplines (Astrid Erll⁷).

The last of these theories meaningfully discerns a specific class of texts, which in a more or less deliberate way address the forms of memory's functioning, whether collective, cultural, or individual. Even though, these are not books 'about' memory, but texts which address specific needs and expectations associated with remembering, storing, or recollecting memories. Erll points out that they are tasked with performing certain functions within cultural memory, as schemata for the coding of versions of the past, as frameworks of memory that enable and shape the remembering and interpreting of experience, as a circulation medium for images of history, negotiation of memory conflicts, as reflection on the problems and processes occurring within collective memory.⁸ Consequently – according to this viewpoint – literature works within the field of memory, performing various roles and functions, and the study of literature as a medium of cultural memory can be an effective source of knowledge about the current state of society, and a kind of gauge that facilitates tracking of ongoing societal change.⁹ The ability to discern from the rich

3 Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization. Functions, Media, Archives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 174.

4 *Ibid.*, 201.

5 Brigit Neumann, "What Makes Literature Valuable: Fictions of Meta-Memory and the Ethics of Remembering," in *Ethics in Culture. The Dissemination of Values Through Literature and Other Media*, ed. Astrid Erll, Herbert Grabes, et al. (Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 131.

6 Renate Lachmann, "Mnemonic and Intertextual Aspects of Literature," in *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning et al. (Berlin - New York: de Gruyter, 2008), 301.

Also see Renate Lachmann, *Memory and Literature: Intertextuality in Russian Modernism (Theory and History of Literature)*, trans. Roy Sellars, Anthony Wall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

7 See Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture*, trans. Sara B. Young (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

8 Erll, *Memory*, 229.

9 *Ibid.*, 229.

literary trope of what “re-presents” cultural memory is a precondition of studying the rhetoric of memory expressed in literature. Literature’s special status as a medium of memory is therefore founded on equipoise between the fictional and that which relates to extra-textual reality. The inability to strictly discern the relationship between those two elements is not a hindrance to the study of the interrelations of literature and cultural memory, but it does determine the distinct influence of memory created through literature.

Erll identifies three general mechanisms which enable literary re-presentations of memory to organize and synthesize certain forms of cultural memory. These mechanisms are condensation, narration, and the use of genres as culturally available formats to represent past events and experience. Each of these mechanisms facilitates the reconciliation of two seemingly opposed approaches to memory. The first involves re-creating, or molding, within the literary text of certain forms of memory, the second involves creating forms and structures of collective memory. As Erll points out the working of literature as a specific medium of memory depends directly on its ability to be read simultaneously as both fictional and real.¹⁰

I have dedicated so much attention to Erll’s theory because it describes, in a condensed manner, the starting point of most analyses of literary works conducted in the articles published in the current volume. In many of them, literature is perceived as a paradoxical medium, one that simultaneously creates and recreates certain iterations of the past, influencing both individual memory as well as collective and cultural memory.

A work of literature, as a space of representation of memory, is not just solely a medium of memory, it is also not mere space that permits a credible fictionalization of memories. It is rather an autonomous, multidimensional entity, which, to be able to tell us something of interest not just about memory, but about any subject, must be considered in all its complexity. This means that – from the viewpoint of memory studies – literature must be considered with regard to its rhetorical and poetical dimension. This need, lately perceived much more clearly, necessitates the introduction, alongside the already well-established category of politics of memory, of notions such as rhetoric of memory and poetics of memory that make it easier – as in the case of the roughly reiterated argument of Astrid Erll – to combine the discourse of cultural and social memory with that of literature or, in general, art.

Nevertheless, the discourse of memory combines not only with the methodologies of traditional and well-established disciplines within the humanities; it also develops interesting ties with other, relatively young disciplines. Three of them are worthy of special attention in the current context: the study of trauma, affect, and geopoetics; although links between memory research and other areas, such as eco-

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 165.

criticism, posthumanism, animal studies, to name just those currently experiencing rapid growth, are becoming stronger. These bonds are strengthened when researchers take on particular subjects which require a transdisciplinary approach. In the case of Polish memory studies a joining of the first three of the aforementioned discourses is of great significance. Only in conjunction do they allow us to analyze phenomena which were previously faintly perceived and scantily interpreted, as for example various forms of traumatic memory associated with particular places. To recall examples from the current volume: the specific memory of the Recovered Territories (that is relating to territories previously belonging to Germany, and adjoined to Poland after the end of The Second World War as a certain form of compensation for the loss of Eastern Borderlands to The Soviet Union), as well as borderland memory (that is relating to the lands lost after the war), requires the application of both affective and geopoetic contexts.

This explains why the notion of "place" constitutes an equally important point of reference in this volume as memory does. The category of place is understood by authors published in this volume in many different ways: besides references to the classical category of places of memory (*lieux de mémoire*, P. Norra), we also come across references to the notion of non-places (*non-lieux*, M. Augé), interplaces, and finally to ideas traceable straight back to discussions in the geopoetic field. Space, place, and point are therefore – akin to literature – considered as media of memory, the reading of which requires not only knowledge of the workings of memory, but also certain familiarity with the geopoetic and geopolitical discourse.

Articles included in the current volume touch upon all of the aforementioned matters. Their selection and arrangement, from a vast trove of texts on Polish memory, was determined by two fundamental objectives: to present the discipline's development on Polish soil, and to introduce articles that tackle issues specific to this, and not some other, part of Europe and deal with the traumatic, affective memory of Poland's past. Therefore, there are no articles among their number that merely graft foreign theories onto the Polish context, or simply apply well-known ideas to the analysis of Polish matters. Each article is an attempt at creating a distinct and individual language that can be used to talk about events quite distant as well as quite recent, which constitute a significant point of reference for Polish memory. Their author's search for particularly tender spots, vulnerable and uncomfortable moments for Polish memory, or at last instances of a certain looping of memory, which influence the contemporary process of constructing the identity of Polish society.

Articles presented in the current volume come eye to eye with several intricate issues related to the Polish study of cultural and social memory. The first of these concerns the relationship between memory, history and its interpretation, and identity. This issue is discussed in articles of the first section of the volume, which explore aspects of the aforementioned questions of identity, highly important in the Polish

context. Wojciech Kalaga presents in his – primarily theoretical – article the status of interpretation in the relationship between memory and identity. This theme is also present in Robert Traba's text, though in this case it receives a slightly different formulation: the author describes controversies surrounding the new historical policy, and scrutinizes the answers to the question of what history and memory do Poles require. The third article devoted to this subject is concerned with the creation of self-identity through the confrontation with the problem of Otherness. In it Ryszard Nycz advances the thesis that our image in the eyes of others constitutes an inherent part of our self-knowledge. Confrontation with that image indicates a capacity to adopt an externalized point of view, and therefore enables us to confront our own internal image of ourselves.

The second part of the volume is dedicated to a particular, disputed matter in Polish memory. This is the matter of the PRL period that provokes both historians and sociologists to posit extreme, oftentimes contradictory judgements. This section consists of four articles relating to previously scarcely debated problems of PRL memory. Anna Artwińska considers negative memory that is the form of memory dealing with the role of perpetrators of the PRL period, and Katarzyna Chmielewska explores the topic of how contemporary historical discourse of Polish communism functions from the perspective of narratology. The other two articles in this section confront issues associated with the creation and functioning of biography: Agnieszka Mroziak interprets the persona of Wanda Wasilewska as an actor of social life, deeply embedded in the historical context; Grzegorz Wołowicz, in turn, analyses the representations of PRL in biographies.

The third section of the volume consists of articles on geopoetics, and the politics and poetics of place. The first article of this section by Elżbieta Rybicka explores the topographical turn in literary studies, with a focus on the transition from poetics of space to a politics of place. Another – also theoretical – text by Elżbieta Konończuk deals with the development of ideas and research on geopoetics in the Polish perspective. The subsequent three articles in this largest part of the volume delve into more detailed matters: memory discourse of the Western Borderlands after 1989 (Kinga Siewior), discourse of the borderlands centered on the Chełm Land (Jan P. Hudzik), or finally the question of memory set against the background of urban space (Sylvia Chutnik).

In the final section of the volume we will find three articles on the categories of places, non-places, and interplaces of memory. This part begins with a somewhat theoretical text by Andrzej Szpociński, who explores Pierre Nora's category of places of memory – *lieux de mémoire*. Two subsequent texts display a purely interpretative character; Agnieszka Karpowicz analyses the functioning of interplaces in the context of the anthropology of the city, and Aleksandra Szczepan performs an interesting interpretation of the modes of functioning of landscapes of postmemory.

The current volume starts with the analysis of categories of memory and identity and finishes with an examination of particular types of places of memory, which unites the issues of memory and geopoetics, previously introduced in the middle section of the volume. This way of structuring does not attempt to exhaust all trends in the prolific area of memory studies in Poland, but to recount its main currents and directions of development.

Translation: Rafał Pawluk