

Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney

LITERATURE AND THE PRODUCTION OF CULTURAL MEMORY: INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, 'cultural memory' has emerged as a useful umbrella term to describe the complex ways in which societies remember their past using a variety of media. Where earlier discussions of collective memory had a thematic focus and were concerned above all with identifying the 'sites of memory' that act as placeholders for the memories of particular groups, attention has been shifting in recent years to the cultural processes by which memories become shared in the first place. It has become increasingly apparent that the memories that are shared within generations and across different generations are the product of public acts of remembrance using a variety of media. Stories, both oral and written, images, museums, monuments: these all work together in creating and sustaining 'sites of memory'. Thus everyone reading this issue of EJES will have some 'recollection' of the First World War, but since most readers were not alive in 1914, these 'recollections' are vicarious ones, the product of accumulated exposure to a common reservoir of products, including photographs and documentaries, museums, personal accounts, histories and novels.

Keywords cultural memory studies; media of cultural memory; literature and cultural memory; literature's roles in the production of cultural memory; mimesis of cultural memory

With this issue devoted to 'Literature and the Production of Cultural Memory' we aim to throw light on the specific role of literature as a medium of cultural memory. While acknowledging that cultural memory involves the ongoing cooperation between different media and that this cooperation is particularly intense in the contemporary world, it nevertheless seems worthwhile to focus here on one medium in particular as a way of bringing the 'mediatised' aspect of cultural remembrance more sharply into focus. By opting for literature, moreover, we were motivated by the realisation that it would allow us to consider more long-term processes (after all, texts have been around for many generations) as well as by the hope that it would allow us to build a bridge between the field of English studies and the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of cultural memory studies where different national traditions of scholarship (Anglo-American, French, German, and so forth) are converging in the production of new theories. *EJES* seems to us to be an ideal forum for fostering an informed exchange between these fields and stimulating a scholarly dialogue that crosses the borders of European countries.

In titling our issue ‘Literature and the Production of Cultural Memory’ we want to emphasize the fact that collective memories are actively produced through repeated acts of remembrance using both a variety of media and a variety of genres. The idea of active production is particularly well exemplified by the case of institutionalised historiography, where scholarly inquiry is carried out with a view to producing an informed understanding of the past that, if need be, can react to the mythifying, aestheticising or contestatory versions of the collective past wrought by other modes of remembrance. But the idea of active production also applies *mutatis mutandis* to other fields where images of the past are shaped and brought into circulation in the form of stories and images. So in setting out here to examine the particular role of literature in the production of cultural memory, we are not concerned with its ‘merits’ relative to institutionalised historiography (such comparisons are often pointless, and are in any case beside the point here). Instead we want to consider various aspects of literature as a memorial medium in its own right as a way of contributing to the larger discussion of the ways in which societies recollect their past.

As will become apparent from the essays that follow, we see literature as having three roles to play in the production of cultural memory. These roles comprise 1) literature as a medium of remembrance; 2) literature as an object of remembrance; and 3) literature as a medium for observing the production of cultural memory.

Literature as a medium of remembrance

Works of literature help produce collective memories by recollecting the past in the form of narratives. This raises the question as to how the writing (genre conventions, points of view, metaphors, and so on) shapes our views of the past. The most obvious literary genres to spring to mind in this context are the historical novel, historical drama, and autobiography, but as with other forms of culture, the repertoire of available forms keeps changing. Thus a recent historical novel like W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* (2001) combines written narrative with photographs in a manner that exemplifies the intermediality typical of contemporary art.

In considering literature as a medium of cultural remembrance in this way, one is quickly brought to the realisation that ‘remembering the past’ is not just a matter of recollecting events and persons, but often also a matter of recollecting earlier texts and rewriting earlier stories.

Literature as an object of remembrance

Because literary works typically circulate at later points in time, they provide an important bridge between generations. In other words, recollecting texts composed or written in earlier periods is an integral part of cultural remembrance. Many of the traditional discussions about canon-formation within literary studies can indeed be revisited as exemplifying the ways in which societies squabble over which foundational texts deserve commemoration or not. Of more direct concern to us here, however,

is the way in which literature establishes a ‘memory of its own’ in the form of intertextual relations that give new cultural life to old texts. A significant part of literary production consists of the rewriting of canonical texts and, more generally, of earlier cultural narratives such as folk tales and myths. These rewritings may take the form of pious commemoration (of re-citation, as it were) or of critical contestation. But either way, such acts of literary remembrance contribute in a very specific manner to the ongoing production and reproduction of cultural memory, as well as to our reflection *on* that memory.

Literature as a medium for observing the production of cultural memory

By imaginatively representing acts of recollection, literature makes remembrance observable. As such it not only helps produce collective memory, in the ways we have been describing but also cultural knowledge about how memory works for individuals and groups. Seen in this light, literature might be called a ‘mimesis’ of memory. As a ‘mimesis of individual memory’ (the most obvious example being Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–27)), it stands in dialogue with other memory-observing discourses such as philosophy and psychology. As a ‘mimesis of cultural memory’ on the other hand, literature reflects upon the epistemology, ethics, and workings of collective memory and, as such, it engages in a dialogue with historians and sociologists regarding the interpretation of the past and the forms appropriate to it (the process is exemplified in Julian Barnes’ work of ‘meta-mnemonic fiction’ *England, England* (1998)).

Historical variations

Although we have identified these distinct roles for literature in the production of cultural memory, we are not claiming that these roles are always distinct in practice. On the contrary, the contributions which follow often show them to be mixed up in interesting ways. Moreover, these particular roles are not in themselves unique to literature, though arguably their long-term convergence is. In any case, the study of these roles as exemplified by the case of literature promises more general insight into the ways in which forms of artistic expression work as media of cultural memory.

It would be impossible to cover the broad field indicated above within the framework of one special issue. Fortunately, we were able to find contributors willing to address a wide-ranging set of historical examples, from ancient Rome and Egypt to the Middle Ages; from the Elizabethan Age to the imperial nineteenth century and finally to contexts of contemporary post-colonial memory, in Britain as well as in South Africa. Moreover, the individual essays while giving insight into a particular case or period also cut different swathes across the central field. By criss-crossing back and forth between literature as a medium of remembrance, as an object of remembrance, and as a mimesis of memory, together the various contributions build up a picture of the complex interaction between these aspects of cultural memory.

In the opening essay, Paola Bono shows how the stories of two oriental queens, Dido and Cleopatra, as written down by Virgil are reinterpreted in the literature of Tudor England to become figures of Elizabeth. Bono shows how the act of literary rewriting takes place at the intersection of gender and power: the earlier narratives are recollected, at the same time as their meaning is actualized to meet present political and cultural challenges.

Marianne Børch examines the work of Chaucer as a meta-mnemonic reflection on the differences between the oral and the written as technologies of memory. She shows how Chaucer's written narrative reworks earlier medieval narratives in such a way as simultaneously to 'observe' the workings of the written medium at a crucial transitional period between a predominantly oral and a predominantly written culture.

Stephen Knight traces the persistence of the figure of Robin Hood across various oral and written accounts from the fifteenth century to the present. His analysis shows the recurring appeal of the story, but also the ways in which the myth of Robin Hood – as a site of memory – has been repeatedly reinterpreted in the light of changing political contexts and hence used as a reference point for establishing new positions in the present.

Astrid Erll looks at mutations in the representations of the same event. She examines the relationship between the different *modes* of remembering and the shaping of memory over a period of a century and a half. Drawing on literary re-writings of the British imperial myth of the 'Indian Mutiny' she distinguishes between various literary modes of representation ranging from the experiential and the implicit, to the nostalgic and the reflexive. She demonstrates that each rewriting involves both a re-visioning of the original event and a comment on the tradition of remembrance itself.

Finally, Rosemarie Buikema examines a more recent novel relating to the more recent past. She shows that Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* (1999) engages with South African post-Apartheid discourses about truth and reconciliation. In this sense it provides a 'mimesis of cultural memory' in the form of a fictional story about a man who refuses to 'confess and be forgiven' for things done in the past. By offering a parallel fictional story focused on an individual and his private life, Coetzee's novel reflects critically on the construction of cultural memory in society at large.

The essays presented in this issue are meant to promote our understanding of literature as an integral part of cultural remembrance. Some of them highlight the role of literature in shaping collective memories by providing a common language and common points of reference against which new positions are established, others also indicate the potential of literature to 'de-stabilise' memories by provocatively opening up cracks in the consensus. We hope that this issue of *EJES* will enrich the dialogue between literary studies and cultural memory studies – a dialogue which will carry the problem of 'literature and the production of cultural memory' into departments of literature as well as to interdisciplinary contexts of theorising about memory.

Astrid Erll is research assistant at the Collaborative Research Centre 'Memory Cultures' at the University of Giessen. Recent publications include *Gedächtnisromane* (WVT, 2003) and *Kollektives Gedächtnis und Erinnerungskulturen* (Metzler, 2005). Together with Ansgar Nünning, she is general editor of the series *Media and Cultural Memory/Medien und kulturelle Erinnerung* (de Gruyter, since 2004), and co-editor of *Medien des kollektiven Gedächtnisses* (2004) and *Gedächtniskonzepte der Literaturwissenschaft* (2005). Address: Justus-Liebig-University, Department of English, Otto-Behagel-Str. 10B, 35394 Giessen, Germany. [email: Astrid.Erll@anglistik.uni-giessen.de]

Ann Rigney is Professor of Comparative Literature at Utrecht University. She is author of *The Rhetoric of Historical Representation: Three Narrative Histories of the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 1990) and *Imperfect Histories: The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism* (Cornell University Press, 2001). She is currently writing a book on the cultural afterlife of Walter Scott. Address: Literary Studies, Utrecht University, Trans 10, 3512 JK Utrecht, Netherlands. [email: Ann.Rigney@let.uu.nl]
