



## ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL MEMORY THEORY AND CULTURAL MEMORY LITERARY CRITICISM PARADIGMS

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### Abstract

Cultural memory theory is the crystallization of accumulated development and deepening of social memory theory. The advancement of social memory research has provided a theoretical foundation for the widespread application of cultural memory theory in literary studies. This article provides a detailed overview of the development of social memory theory since the 20th century, including the emergence of the theory and some literary studies from the perspective of cultural memory, aiming to construct a perspective and paradigms for cultural memory literary criticism. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning discussed three concepts of memory in literary research: memory of literature, memory in literature, and literature as a medium of cultural memory, which provides new insights for interdisciplinary studies in literature. However, it should be noted that cultural memory theory emphasizes the stabilizing and reproductive functions of culture. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the role of literary works in the dimension of stability and permanence to emphasize their maintenance and revision functions and to focus on their diachronic identity, their function of inheritance and dissemination as cultural texts, as well as their significance in preserving national cultural memory.

**Keywords:** Social Memory; Cultural Memory; Literary Criticism

### Introduction

From Plato to Aristotle, metaphysical-based views of memory have had a profound influence. It was not until the 17th century that a materialistic empiricist perspective was introduced into the discussion and study of memory. Empiricist philosophers established knowledge acquisition based on sensations and experiences, making memory a crucial element in achieving self-awareness. In the late 18th century, neurologists, psychologists, and anatomists began to study the physiological mechanisms and mental processes of human memory with sophisticated instruments and

experiments. In the mid-19th century, scientific methods started to be applied in memory research and expanded beyond the field of scientific psychology. In the 20th century, memory research has taken an important theoretical turn which can be divided into three stages: the first stage was the early 20th century, represented by Halbwachs, Warburg, Benjamin, and Bartlett; the second stage started with the publication of Nora's book *Les Lieux de Mémoire*; and the third stage was the emergence of new memory studies in the 1980s and 1990s, which can be seen as part of the revival of cultural studies. The development of social memory research

has provided a theoretical foundation for the widespread application of cultural memory theory in literary studies. Cultural memory theory is the crystallization of the development of social memory theory. Therefore, the application of cultural memory theory in sociological research is extensive and often used to interpret sociological issues. However, as an important form of cultural expression, literature naturally intersects with cultural memory, which provides a relatively new perspective in literary research. In the late 20th century, the study of memory experienced a rapid growth worldwide, giving rise to a remarkable "memory boom". This surge in memory studies greatly contributed to the rapid development of research in social and cultural memory, expanding the scope of disciplines within the field. This article will review the development of social memory theory, focus on the integration of cultural memory theory with literary studies, and propose the concepts and paradigms of cultural memory literary criticism.

### **The Development of Social Memory Studies**

Memory research has a long history. Since ancient times, memory phenomena have attracted the attention of philosophers, such as Plato's "Phaedo", "Meno" and "Phaedrus". In these passages, Plato records Socrates' important arguments that knowledge is the recollection and the preexistence of the soul. Aristotle, however, presented a different view on memory. In his work "On Memory", he regarded memory as an integral part of the human soul, whose object is neither "future" nor "present", but the "past": "memory is not perception or conception, but a state or affection connected with one of these, when time has elapsed" (Sorabji 48). He also pointed out that "when someone first learns or experiences something, he does not recover any memory, since none has preceded. Nor does he acquire memory from the start, for once the state or affection has been produced within a person, then there is memory" (Sorabji 53). Thus, Aristotle's theory suggests that memory of knowledge is not preexisting but requires inference and proof.

In the Middle Ages, St. Augustine embraced Plato's concept of recollection from the perspective of Christian belief. In *Confessions*, Augustine argues that memory already exists and he compares the storage of memory to a hidden cave: "Behold the countless fields and caves and chasms of my memory, uncountably full of countless kinds of things: whether by means of images, as with all bodies, or through the presence of the things themselves, as with the liberal arts, or through some sort of notions or notings, as with the affections of the mind..." (Augustine 177)

In modern times, with the evolution of the concept of time, people began to recognize the differences between the past and the present. Memory research entered the realm of empirical science. John Locke, as a representative of empiricism, defined personal identity as a consciousness acquired through continuous self-awareness. As an empiricist, Locke rejected innate ideas and believed that all knowledge is based on sensation and experience, and "for what is not either actually in view or in the memory, is in the mind no way at all, and is all one as if it had never been there"(Locke 80).

Following Locke, David Hume continued the exploration of personal cognition through memory from a skeptical perspective. As a skeptic, Hume argued that without memory, individuality would not exist. He pointed out that when people begin to remember, the idea of that event is engraved in a very lively manner in the mind.

In the late 18th century, scientific experimental techniques began to be introduced into memory studies, marking the advent of scientific psychology. Neurologists, psychologists, and anatomists conducted experiments and analyses to study the physiological and psychological mechanisms of memory and human cognition. Hermann Ebbinghaus was one of the earliest memory researchers to undertake such studies. He attempted to discover the laws of memory and forgetting through recitation and devised the "Ebbinghaus curve" which continues to have a significant impact on memory research.

Following Ebbinghaus, Frederic Bartlett employed materials from everyday life conducting a comprehensive investigation of the human memory process. He demonstrated that the customs, traditions, beliefs, and institutions of a group influence individual memory. Furthermore, memory is not passive; guided by “schemas”, “the past is being continually re-made, reconstructed in the interests of the present, and in both cases certain outstanding events or details may play a leading part in setting the course of reaction” (Bartlett 309). It is due to his emphasis on the social context of memory that Bartlett is regarded as the first modern psychologist to incorporate the social dimension into memory research (Olick & Robbins 106).

However, it was Maurice Halbwachs who pioneered the sociological interpretation of memory. Since the publication of Halbwachs’ relevant theories, memory research took a significant theoretical shift from physiology, psychology, and psychopathology to cultural and humanistic approaches, ultimately entering the social and cultural studies.

Halbwachs initially expressed his dissent with the individual psychology research foundation of memory, arguing that such studies isolated people and confined memory to the individual level, thereby cutting off the relationship between individuals and society. In his view, memory possesses both social and cultural attributes, and it is within society that people can identify and define them. Thus, Halbwachs believed that “there exists a collective memory and a social frameworks for memory; it is to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection”(Halbwachs 38). This is known as the “social framework theory” or “collective memory” which represents the core viewpoint in Halbwachs’ theoretical system. Within this framework, to understand individual memory, it must be put within the collective thought, as the various patterns in which memory is combined according to the ways people associate themselves.

The constraints of yesterday are different from those of today. When there is conflict, only one

framework consists of our present society matters. In this sense, the past is not preserved but rather reconstructed based on the present. The framework of collective memory becomes a tool for reconstructing past memories, and as the framework of collective memory changes, corresponding memories also undergo alterations, aligning with the dominant social ideologies.

Aby Warburg, like Halbwachs, was also a rediscovered memory researcher. He believed that the conscious creation of a distance between the individual and the external world can be regarded as an act of establishing human civilization (Warburg 276-277). He focused his research on artworks from the Renaissance, attempting to find the power between the past and the present through the details conveyed by ancient images. He discovered a return to classical forms in these artworks. Artists borrowed emotional expressions from classical artworks through “pathos formulas” to acquire the power transmitted from the classical era. Thus, Warburg introduced the concept of visual culture memory, referring to it as “social memory”. Since Warburg considered the medium of cultural memory as more transmissible artworks in terms of time and space, his concept of memory gained a broader scope.

In the field of social memory, another important figure is the Pierre Nora. Faced with the diminishing presence of national and state history in French historiography, Nora gathered over a hundred scholars in the 1980s and spent nearly a decade compiling a three-volume masterpiece of social and cultural studies called *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (Sites of Memory). This work aimed to revive public recognition of collective memory. The book is divided into three parts: *The Republic* (1984), *The Nation* (1986) and *The Frances* (1992).

In response to the decline of national collective memory, Nora sought to seek a new expression of nationalism in contemporary times by rewriting of French national history. The expression takes the form of collective memory “sites” (“lieux de mémoire”). This experience comes from the most symbolically significant objects in people’s memory, such as archives, libraries, museums, as well as

various commemorative rituals and festivals. These public recollections or memory activities have the capacity to construct collectivity because memory has always been a collective act. Collective memory is a dynamic process and activities such as testimonies, rituals, celebrations, narratives, or artwork all point to the past (Arias & Compo 11).

### **The Emergence of Cultural Memory Theory**

Following Nora, cultural memory theory gained prominence. German cultural scholars Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann are core representatives in this field. They conducted a scientific study at the Berlin Academy of Sciences in 1984-1985. Contrary to the prevailing view that treated “writing culture” and “memory culture” as distinct entities, Assmann’s research group argued that they are not opposed but closely related. Accordingly, the term “cultural memory” was used to encompass both oral and written traditions, leading to a reexamination of culture and memory from a new perspective.

Jan Assmann believes that while most scholars focus on the synchronic function of culture, cultural memory theory addresses the diachronic aspects of culture—how culture maintains stability and reproduces itself over time. It explores how culture maintains consistency after historical changes, and believes that the diachronic identity is the function of memory that enables us to preserve ourselves. It is necessary to discuss the issues that how culture maintains its essence at the level of cultural memory, specifically by viewing culture as memory.

In the book *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, Assmann discusses two forms of collective memory, namely communicative memory and cultural memory. The former refers to the “recent past” (Assmann 36), the memories shared by people of the same era that may fade away with the carriers. On the other hand, the latter refers to the “remembered history” (Assmann 38), focusing on certain focal points of the past that are recorded by specialized carriers and hold sacred meaning, for example, festivals or ceremonies. The fundamental difference between the two lies in the difference

between “everyday memory and festival memory” (Assmann 38).

The cultural memory theory proposed by Assmann couple is based on the foundation of Halbwachs’ collective memory theory, serving as an extension and improvement of that theory. Specifically, cultural memory theory inherits collective memory as the following aspects:

Firstly, the social framework of memory. Assmann acknowledged the collective as the subject of memory and reminiscence, stating that “while the group itself does not ‘have’ a memory, it determines the memory of its members. Even the most personal recollections only come about through communication and social interaction” (Assmann 22). While he considered the collective as the subject of memory and remembrance, Assmann still believes that the subject of memory and remembrance is the individual. However, individual memory is shaped by the framework of collective memory. Thus, memory and forgetting are explained as follows: “If persons-and societies-are only able to remember what can be reconstructed as a past within the referential framework of their own present, then they will forget things that no longer have such a referential framework” (Assmann 22-23).

Secondly, the figures of memory. Assmann expands upon Halbwachs’ concept of memory figures and highlights their uniqueness: “these are characterized by three special features: a concrete relationship to time and place, a concrete relationship to a group, and an independent capacity for reconstruction” (Assmann 24). In terms of temporal associations, memory forms exhibit continuity over time, while in spatial associations, they possess persistence and stability. The reconstructability of memory is another important characteristic of collective memory and its relationship to the group. Assmann states that cultural memory operates through reconstruction and is closely related to present and current circumstances. The reconstructability refers to the changes in memory content as the social framework of memory changes: “Society does not adopt new ideas and replace the past with them; instead it assumes the past of groups other than those that

have hitherto between dominant" (Assmann 27-28). In this sense, memory is constantly being reconstructed.

Thirdly, memory and history. Halbwachs juxtaposed collective memory and history, highlighting their distinct modes of operation. Collective memory emphasizes the similarity and continuity within the collective, obscuring the changes that occur within the collective over time. On the other hand, history focuses on processes or events that reflect change, emphasizing differences and disruptions while overlooking periods of stasis. Additionally, the emphasis on internal consistency within collective memory leads to an emphasis on external differences and uniqueness. Each collective has its own collective memory, which differs from the memories of any other collective (Russell 796). In historical space, there is no specificity, only similarity, and all historical events are interconnected and share equal significance.

Some scholars have provided insightful views on the combination of cultural memory theory and literary research and applied them to critical practices. For example, Aleida Assmann, as a literary professor, used literary works such as Shakespeare's historical plays, Wordsworth's poetry, and E.M. Forster's novels to demonstrate the forms and transformations of cultural memory, thus elucidating the relationship between memory, identity, and the formation of nations.

The proposal of a new concept represents an attempt to conduct research from a new perspective, and the motivation for such attempts is often the result of various forces, such as current academic hot topics, future academic trends, prevailing academic trends, and so on. For the term "cultural memory", the increasing enthusiasm for memory research worldwide, the passing of survivors of suffering, the dramatic changes in the world, the development of media technology, and other factors have provided fertile ground for its germination. However, these are all external academic environments and socio-cultural factors. The more profound academic demand may still come from dissatisfaction with the current theoretical situation.

In this regard, it is necessary to discuss the process through Assmann's development of cultural memory. In his book, it can be found that the initial conception of the term "cultural memory" aimed to challenge two binary oppositions in the academic field. Firstly, it addressed the binary opposition between "writing" and "memory" by encompassing both the traditions of written culture and the realms of memory and oral culture, thereby emphasizing the inseparability of culture/writing and memory. Secondly, previous studies primarily focused on the synchronicity of culture, whereas cultural memory emphasizes the stable role and reproductive function of culture in the temporal dimension. To apply this theory to literary criticism, it is important to emphasize the enduring and lasting role of literary works in terms of stability, as well as their function in maintaining and revising the temporal dimension. In conclusion, greater attention should be given to the "diachronic identity" of literary works, their role in the dissemination of cultural texts, and their significance in preserving national cultural memory.

#### **Paradigms of Cultural Memory Literary Criticism**

Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, memory researchers specializing in English and American literature, have systematically discussed three representative concepts of memory in literary studies in a series of papers. The first concept is "the memory of literature", which refers to the memory inherent within literature itself. The second concept is "memory in literature" or "the mimises of memory", which explores the connection between literature and contemporary discourses on memory, and how memory can be represented through aesthetic forms. The third concept focuses on literature as a medium of collective memory, offering a new interdisciplinary approach to literary research ("Where Literature and Memory Meet" 264-265).

Erll and her colleagues perceive the memory of literature as an inner literary memory and argue that this concept is closely connected to the traditions of ancient mnemonic techniques and rhetoric. The tradition of mnemonic techniques can be traced back to a story recorded by Marcus Tullius Cicero in his work *De Oratore*. When discussing the



influence of memory on orators, Cicero recounts the story of Simonides of Ceos. Reflecting on this story, Nünning and his colleagues believed that the imagined pictures arranged in a spatial order can serve as aids to memory, and this discovery inspired poets to create the art of memory. Later, people can mentally traverse these places, picking up these images and recalling what needs to be remembered ("Where Literature and Memory Meet" 265-266). This demonstrates that literature is closely connected to spatial memory, where spatial locations aid in recalling memories through images. In the theory of cultural memory, Erll and her colleagues mention Aby Warburg's social memory, E.R. Curtinus' historical themes, and Harold Bloom and Renate Lachmann's theory of intertextuality.

For example, Warburg sought to establish connections between past and present images and examine issues of modernity through this interplay of perspectives. Curtinus focused on idiomatic expressions that have been passed down from classical times to the present, using historical themes in his studies to analyze the transmission of literary forms.

As for intertextuality, the term originated from structuralist and post-structuralist theories. In literary criticism, intertextuality is defined as the interactive relationship between texts: "any one literary text is in fact made up of other texts, by means of its open or covert citations and allusions, its repetitions and transformations of the formal and substantive features of earlier texts, or simply its unavoidable participation in the common stock of linguistic and literary conventions and procedures" (Abrams & Harpham 401).

This relationship, as described by Bloom, encompasses the struggle between precursor and successor, and the clash between the classic and the reimagined: "For just as a poet must be found by the opening in a precursor poet, so must the critic" (Bloom 95). Therefore, a poem's intertextual relationship with earlier works constitutes its fabric, and no poem exists entirely new and independent—it intersects with numerous texts and is influenced by preceding works.

The study of literary memory within this framework emphasizes both the continuity and development of literary traditions over time, as well as the constraints and influences of this temporal tradition on literary creation. Based on this, we can summarize the specific research directions of cultural memory criticism in terms of "the memory of literature". First, there is research on the memory of genres. Genres are a typical manifestation of the relationship between literature and memory, containing the constraints of the temporal tradition of literary creation. The repetition of these constraints in literary creation is, in fact, a process of memory.

The second aspect is the study of canon and literary history. Literary canons and literary history are the core mechanisms and media that sustain social literary memory ("Where Literature and Memory Meet" 277). Assmann defines "Canon" as "the kind of tradition in which the content and form are as fixed and binding as they can possibly be" (Assmann 87). The transmission of canons has had legal and contractual effects, to the extent that not only the text itself cannot be altered, but even reading and interpretation cannot be changed. Moreover, canons establish a connection between personal and collective identities because they are inherently social and collective, representing the value systems of the society.

"Memory of literature" focuses on the internal processes of change within literature, while "memory in literature" itself emphasizes the dialogue between literature and external discourses. The premise of studying this dialogue is that literature is associated with the reality and can be represented through fictional media ("Where Literature and Memory Meet" 280-281). Thus, this dialogue can be understood as literature's imitation of memory. When discussing the relationship between literary art and reality, we must mention an ancient literary theory known as "mimesis".

In his renowned book *The Mirror and the Lamp*, M.H. Abrams mentioned four elements that artistic works need to involve: the work itself, the artist, the world, and the audience (listener, viewer, reader). Abrams' categorization of the four elements

brings up the four important factors in the process of literary creation. Based on this, Erll summarizes the relationship between literature and memory into three levels: first, literary works are closely related to external memory; second, literary works showcase the content and functions of memory through fictional media; third, literary works can aid in individual memory and the formation of cultural memory ("Concepts and Methods" 21). For example, in some "memory novels" at the beginning of the 20th century, such as Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), prevalent concepts of personal memory were presented through specific literary forms (Erll 2). Therefore, memory, whether individual or collective, plays an important role in the themes and structures of literature in different periods.

In terms of cultural memory, literature serves as an important medium of communication. Essentially, literature shares many similarities with memory, such as shaping condensed memory figures and generating meaning through narrative and genre. Erll categorizes the uniqueness of literature as a symbol of memory culture into four aspects: fictional privileges and restrictions, interdiscursivity, polyvalence, and production/reflection of memory. Firstly, drawing from Wolfgang Iser's literary phenomenology and anthropological theory, every fictional representation involves two forms of boundary crossing: the repeated appearance of external reality in literary texts, which becomes a symbol imbued with unique meaning, and imagination finding expression through fictional media, thus achieving unprecedented determinacy. Thus, in literary works, external reality and imagination blend together, and through this fusion, literary texts can reconstruct (cultural) memory.

Secondly, as Bakhtin pointed out, the characteristic of literary works is their heteroglossia. Literature incorporates diverse discourses about the past and memory, providing opportunities for the display of different thoughts and presenting conflicting or controversial memories side by side. Therefore, compared to other specialized or independent discourses such as history, theology, economics, law, etc., literature can express the diversity of discourses about the past.

Thirdly, in the literary medium, the density and plurality that serve as the foundation of memory are manifested and embodied as semantic complexity, from which the aesthetic theory posits that the emotional expression of art stems. This also applies to the unique role that literature plays in memory culture.

Fourthly, literature has the ability to provide both a first-person and a second-person perspective on observing the world. On one hand, literary works construct cognitive representations of the past; on the other hand, they showcase this process. Therefore, literary works are both generative of memory and reflective of memory.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the above discussion on cultural memory theory provides important references for constructing the critical paradigm of literature studies. We can employ this theory to focus on how literature works shape and transmit specific memories, and how these works contribute to the formation and reconstruction of cultural memory. Also, we can examine the role of media in disseminating and shaping public memory, including the influence of news media, films, television programs, and other media forms. Since these aspects provide a comprehensive perspective on cultural memory research, we can profound our understanding of the relationship between individuals and society in memory, as well as the role of memory in identity formation, historical understanding, and social transformation.

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