Pre-workshop comment

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(i) Preliminary points

When I first began to think of cultural memory — and memory in general — as a focus for literary research, I was immediately struck by the potential it seemed to offer for continuing the work I was doing on intertextuality and imitation in Renaissance poetry. I was reminded of Gian Biagio Conte who speaks of 'poetic memory' (or 'memoria dei poeti') to characterise what happens when the meaning and cultural prestige of one work is transferred to another through imitation or emulation. The theories of 'cultural memory' seemed to me to provide a more inclusive context in which to think about this process (the ways in one text imitates, adapts, appropriates or even translates another text) than mere textually-based theories did. To give an example: in *The Faerie Queene*, Edmund Spenser, appropriating the well-known ending of the *Aeneid*, uses Virgil's text as a matrix whose components can be reconfigured in a variety of ways because the source-text, as explicated by commentators and imitated in innovative ways by earlier poets such as Ariosto and Tasso, is endowed with well-defined meaning(s). Spenser, importing key Virgilian passages into a new context, is able to draw on the various components of this powerful cultural memory, assigning to his protagonists (and their antagonists) by turns the positions of Aeneas and Turnus, Aeneas' opponent; in this way, their various shortcomings and strengths within Spenser's ideological system are subtly hinted at.

What happens if the perspectives of cultural memory are applied to contemporary literature? My own work has above all centred on Irish literature, particularly poetry. More than perhaps any other national literature that I am familiar with, Irish poetry draws on communally shared memories, many of them connected with places, events and objects of well-known significance. Surprisingly often, translations supplement intertextuality in the poets' attempts to introduce cultural memory in this process. One example: in their poetry, Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon have engaged in playful conversation on topics of ideological, cultural and poetological importance on which they disagree. Two such topics are 'origin' and 'home'. Heaney has a poem about an eel crossing the Atlantic to its home in Ireland; to counter this, Muldoon (who previously wrote a poem about an eel setting out from the East River into 'the open sea') translates Eugenio Montale's famous love poem 'The Eel', making his translation at once an integral part of the collection in which it appears and a thoroughly Muldoonian poem in terms of register and syntax; at the same time, his poetic banter with Heaney takes on an altogether new dimension through appropriating Montale's poem, which at least in the eyes of the rhizomic audiences that poetry relies on these days constitutes a powerful cultural memory.

My immediate reaction to the four specific issues (in the form of observations on literary works that have impressed me in recent years):

Truth of memory: fact and fiction

In my view, some of the most interesting writers of the past decades have used linguistic and narrative devices of various kinds and sometimes also seemingly biographical content in ways which blur the boundaries between fact and fiction (Coetzee, Sebald). Instead of trying to construct (or reconstruct) 'reality' in the detailed manner of a Truman Capote, they subtly query the truthfulness of memory (and perception) by combining the dry, factual tone of fiction with various stylistic devices (in Sebald's case including images) which paradoxically appear to question the veracity of what is being told.

Regimes of memory: spaces, texts, objects, bodies

In much contemporary Irish poetry (for example Ciaran Carson) the careful evocation of space and geography is performed by an embodied consciousness that simultaneously appears to perform an enquiry of itself. In David Malouf's autobiographical memoir *12 Edmondstone Street* a well-informed mature voice recounts the memories of a very young self whose view of himself, his family, and the world around him is tightly bound up with a detailed exploration of the house he grew up in. Tomas Tranströmer's long poem *Baltics* is another excellent illustration of this phenomenon.

Trauma and memory

Paul Muldoon's sonnet 'The Sightseers' addresses the traumatic effects of the divisions of Northern Irish society by making an innocuous family outing to a roundabout the occasion of a family member's story of having a pistol pressed to his forehead by terrorists so that an O (resembling the roundabout) is formed. The seemingly trivial memory thus doubles as an involuntary reference to the humiliation suffered by Catholics.

The politics and ethics of memory

Just before the 1994 ceasefire the Irish poet Michael Longley wrote a sonnet adopting the episode in the *Iliad* where Priam visits Achilles to fetch his son Hector's corpse from Achilles (who has killed Hector). On its publication in the *Irish Times* the poem provoked a great deal of discussion about the necessity and impossibility of conciliation and forgiveness.

Position paper

The enthusiasm I felt for memory studies on first encountering the notion of cultural memory was due simply to a feeling that literary studies were in great need of a new direction and a new sense of urgency and relevance. Memory studies seemed – and still seem – to me to provide precisely that. Literary texts, even those best described as imaginative or linguistic fantasies, are of course linguistic artefacts making complex use of memories which, once they have been perused and absorbed by a reader, turn into memories themselves. Thus, literature describes and imitates the workings of memory while also constituting a formidable body of memories. Typically, it differs from most other memoirs in having a linguistically memorable – and usually pleasurable – form. One of the challenges of literary memory studies – and of LCS – is to clarify the similarities and differences between literature's memory and the processes through which individuals, communities and entire societies remember and forget important topics and experiences. The most interesting and rewarding instances of such study are those where literary texts constitute a crucial or perhaps even privileged form of realization of important communal memories.

The most engrossing examples of this phenomenon that I came across during the ESF-COST Workshop were those provided by colleagues from East European countries where the recounting and interpretation of deeply traumatic experiences in some cases appears to have to be done without the support of commonly shared linguistic resources. Coming from a country which has been spared such experiences and has been noted, if anything, for its innocent homogeneity (at least until recently) I was not sure that I would have much to offer that might be of interest in this regard. However, I would like to put forward two examples from recent Swedish literature that seem to me to be relevant to the general issues I think literary memory studies should address in order to vitalise literary studies.

The first is *Pölsan* (Hash) a novel published in 2002 by Torgny Lindgren, one of Sweden's most distinguished contemporary novelists. *Pölsa* is a Swedish version of tripe, basically consisting of hashed entrails and grain, a dish especially associated with northern Sweden. It seems fair to say that it is not considered a delicacy in the rest of the country. However, in the novel, which is set in the late 1940s, two characters traverse the vast inlands of northern Sweden looking for refined and distinguished versions of *pölsa* – their dedication to this task is almost reminiscent of the search for the Holy Grail. The two men form a strange pair; one is a schoolmaster supposedly immune to TB which is still raging in northern Sweden. The other is a German; rumour has it that he is in fact Martin Bormann. Thus, a variety of cultural memories concerning Sweden in the late 1940s are activated in the novel, which itself takes the form of a long newspaper article written by a former contributor to a local newspaper who was fired when it turned out that he was making up his news items; having now reached a very advanced age, he learns that the editor-in-chief is dead so he plucks up courage and takes to writing again. The novel, which might be characterised as akin to magic realism, seems to me through its dialectal but highly poetical language and intricate mixture of folkloric and political memories to constitute a highly engaging example of how literature can provide LCS studies with relevant material.

My second example is Tomas Tranströmer´s remarkable long poem *Baltics*. This poem, which is made up of six sections, is a curious mixture of different genres and stylistic registers; it ranges from the personal (the poet's recollections of ancestors) to the communal (selected events from the history of the countries around the Baltic) while also highlighting the zoological, geographical and ecological diversity of the area in question. It is not an overtly political poem though it does convey a strong sense of the tensions predominant in the area at the time of its composition (it was published in 1974). But above all, the poem is concerned with memories, with remembering and forgetting, and the mental processes involved.

These two works are not as dramatic as some of the ones discussed at the Workshop, but they are relevant to a fuller discussion of the memory of the tensions of the cold war and its aftermath in northern Europe.