

Pre-workshop comment

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Preliminary Points

My work on cultural memory originated in my research on representations of the Great Irish Famine in literature and memorial culture. More recently, my interests lie in the commemorative culture of trauma and the role of literature therein, with specific reference to the aftermath of the Ryan Report on institutional abuse in Ireland which was published earlier this year. In theoretical terms, this work is informed by the work of Pierre Nora, Paul Ricœur, Cathy Caruth and others; for example, Ricœur's deceptively simple call for 'amnesty' rather than 'amnesia' poses particular challenges in the contemporary context.

With reference to the question of LCS and the four issues raised, I would like to table the following issues for potential discussion:

1. The role and responsibility of the creative writer with regard to 'the truth of memory' or its 'truth-claim'; the opportunities and/or perils provided by 'fiction' or 'factual fictions'. To provide some discursive examples from the Irish situation, the author Colm Tóibín has spoken of his reluctance to write on the contemporary issue of institutional abuse, lest the creative writer usurp the place of the victims; in his collection *Mothers and Sons* he includes a short story 'A Priest in the Family' which narrates the incident from the perspective of the mother of the alleged abuser. Novelist Edna O'Brien generated significant controversy in her choice of a real historical event for her novel *In The Forest*, leading some commentators to suggest that the invasion of privacy for the family involved was too high a cost to pay.
2. The significance of material commemorative objects in relation to 'regimes of memory': the question of a 'fitting' memorial to victims of institutional abuse is currently a very contentious issue in many countries. Whether blame should be assigned as part of the memorialising process has been a controversial issue with respect to commemoration of traumatic history, internationally. Who chooses the commemorative object? Where is it located? How does it reconcile the immense personal investment in its efficacy, with the official commemorative role?
3. Trauma and Memory: following on from the issues raised above, the question I would like to explore in this context, guided by recent work by David Lloyd, is that of the interaction of the individual and the collective. Lloyd (*Irish Times: Temporalities of Modernity*, 2008) warns of the danger of conflating the concepts and vocabulary of individual personal trauma and that of large-scale collective events. This continues to be a challenging issue leading some historians and commentators to warn that 'psychobabble' may replace the language of historical and social analysis. Is this a significant danger? How may it be avoided?
4. The politics and ethics of memory underlie all of the questions above, including the arguably more challenging issue of the politics and ethics of 'forgetting'. In Ricœur's words, 'We have a good example in the present state of Europe: in some places we could say that there is too much memory, but in other places not enough. Likewise, there is sometimes not enough forgetting, and at other times too much forgetting' (Ricœur, 'Memory and Forgetting', 1999). Can these generalizations translate into ethical practice for literary authors and cultural theorists?