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Memory in Culture

Astrid Erll

Translated by Sara B. Young

Original German language edition: **Astrid Erll: Kollektives Gedächtnis und Erinnerungskulturen. Eine Einführung. (ISBN: 978–3–476–01893–9) published by J.B Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung und Carl Ernst Poeschel Verlag GmbH Stuttgart, Germany.**

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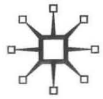

First published 2011 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

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Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN 978–0–230–29744–9 hardback
ISBN 978–0–230–29745–6 paperback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Erll, Astrid.
[Kollektives Gedächtnis und Erinnerungskulturen. English]
Memory in culture/Astrid Erll; translated by Sara B. Young.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978–0–230–29745–6 (alk. paper)
1. Collective memory. 2. Culture. 3. Memory—Social aspects. I. Title.
HM621.E7413 2011
306.01—dc23 2011016888

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

Contents

List of Tables and Figures

Tables

Figures

VI
Literature as a Medium of Cultural Memory

As a medium of cultural memory literature is omnipresent: The lyrical poem, the dime novel, the historical novel, fantasy fiction, romantic comedies, war movies, soap operas and digital stories – literature manifested in all genres and media technologies, both popular and 'trivial' literature as well as canonized and 'high' literature have served – and continue to serve – as media of memory. They fulfil a multitude of mnemonic functions, such as the imaginative creation of past life-worlds, the transmission of images of history, the negotiation of competing memories, and the reflection about processes and problems of cultural memory. Literature permeates and resonates in memory culture. But at what points exactly do cultural memory and its symbol system 'literature' intersect? How are literary media distinguished from non-literary media of memory? How do literary representations of memory refer to mnemonic contexts and how do those contexts, in turn, refer to literature? How does a literary text become a medium of memory? What mnemonic functions is it then able to fulfil? And which methodological tools can we use to study literature's impact in memory culture?

VI.1 Literature as a symbolic form of cultural memory

Literature is an independent 'symbolic form' (Ernst Cassirer, 1994) of cultural memory. It is a specific 'way of worldmaking' (Nelson Goodman, 1978) and that includes, in our perspective, also 'memory-making' (see chapter IV.2). Literature stands alongside other symbolic forms, or symbol systems, including history, myth, religion, law, and science. What are the specific characteristics of literature as a symbolic form? And how are those features related to cultural memory?

The effect of literature in memory culture rests on its similarities *and* differences to processes of remembering and forgetting. First of all, literature and memory exhibit several noticeable similarities. These include the forming of condensed 'memory figures' and a tendency towards creating meaning through narrativization and genre patterns. Form-giving operations such as these lie at the basis of both literature's and memory's world-making. Second, literature is characterized by significant differences to other symbol systems of cultural memory, such as history, religion, and myth. It is at least since the development of the modern system of art in the eighteenth century that literary texts have been equipped with particular privileges and restrictions, and from these results their specific contribution to memory culture.

VI.1.1 Literature and memory: Intersections

Memory proceeds selectively. From the abundance of events, processes, persons, and media of the past, it is only possible to remember very few elements. As Ernst Cassirer noted, every act of remembering is a 'creative and constructive process. It is not enough to pick up isolated data of our past experience; we must really *re-collect* them, we must organize and synthesize them, and assemble them into a focus of thought' (Cassirer 1944, 51). The selected elements must be formed in a particular manner to become an object of memory. Such formative processes can be detected in many media and practices of memory; they are also – and in fact primarily – found in literature. In the following I will highlight three central intersections between literature and memory. These are, first, 'condensation', which is important for the creation and transmission of ideas about the past; second, 'narration' as a ubiquitous structure for creating meaning; and, third, the use of 'genres' as culturally available formats to represent past events and experience.

(a) Condensation

With 'condensation' we look at what is arguably *the* main characteristic of literature. In German, the term *Gedicht* (poem) even maintains a linguistic connection to *Verdichtung* (condensation). One of the major effects of literary forms, such as metaphor, allegory, symbolism, and intertextuality, is the bringing together and superimposition of various semantic fields in a very small space.

In memory studies, 'condensation' has come to mean, at least since Sigmund Freud's *Traumdeutung* (1900; *The Interpretation of Dreams*), the compression of several complex ideas, feelings or images into a single, fused or composite object. The result is over-determination: many

different associations about the past can converge in one condensed mnemonic object; and therefore the object will lend itself to different interpretations. For example, the date '9 November' brings together several German memories: the opening of the Berlin Wall, the November Revolution of 1918, the Munich 'Beer Hall putsch' by Hitler in 1923, and the *Reichspogromnacht* in 1938. In a palimpsest-like structure, different events and different meanings converge into the memory of Germany's highly ambivalent past.

The idea of condensation can be found not only in psychoanalytical approaches to memory. It has also been at the heart of ancient and medieval *ars memoriae* (see III.2.1); and it is clearly present in the more recent theories of cultural remembrance, from Aby Warburg's 'pathos formula', to Maurice Halbwachs's 'idée étoffée', E.R. Curtius's 'topos', Pierre Nora's *lieu de mémoire*, and to Jan Assmann's *Erinnerungsfigur* (memory figure). Ann Rigney (2005) has shown how different memories tend to 'converge and coalesce' into a single site of memory. And finally, condensation is also at the basis of those global icons, 'transnational symbols', and 'floating signifiers' which move across time and space (see chapter III.1.6).

Just like literary works, and because both are the result of condensation, cultural memories require active reception, interpretation. The memory of 'Versailles', to give just one example, assumed rather different meanings in its various contexts: before and after the First World War, in France and in Germany, among pacifists and revanchists. 'Reading' memory is what social groups continually, and often contestingly, do. If we want to reconstruct such interpretive practices – and thus gain insight into the dynamics of cultural memory –, then one way to proceed is by looking at the various narratives, which unfold condensed mnemonic objects into meaningful stories.

(b) Narration

Cultural memory rests on narrative processes. To be more precise, every conscious remembering of past events and experience – individual and collective – is accompanied by strategies which are also fundamental for literary narrative. In analysing literary works, proponents of structuralist narratology make a fundamental distinction between the paradigmatic aspect of the selection of narrative elements and the syntagmatic aspect of their combination. Such a differentiation can also prove useful in looking at memory: Both individual and collective memory are only capable of taking up a limited amount of information. From the abundance of impressions, dates, or facts, only a few elements can be selected to be encoded and remembered. In this way, that which is important

(for the present) is distinguished from that which seems insignificant. The chosen elements, however, only become meaningful through the process of combination, which constructs temporal and causal orders. The individual elements are assigned a place in the course of events, and thereby also assume a specific meaning. In sum, large parts of cultural memory seem to be configured in much the same structure, namely narrative, that we encounter in large parts of literature. (Though it must also be emphasized that neither *all* of literature nor *all* of memory is inherently narrative. Visual, olfactory, and unconscious memories seem essentially non-narrative, although one could argue that they become conscious and meaningful through narrativization.)

The 'most narrative' of all our individual memory systems is autobiographical memory. From the mass of disparate lifetime events, we retrospectively select some experiences, and turn them – through the use of narrative structures – into coherent, meaningful life stories (see chapter III.3.2). Aleida Assmann transfers these insights to the level of the Cultural Memory: Nations, ethnic and religious groups create narratives ('myths') which tell the story of their origins and distinctiveness. Mnemonic communities tend to remember only those 'elements which are tied into the configuration of the story' (A. Assmann 1999, 135). Just like the narratives of autobiographical memory, the story – or 'master narrative' – of the Cultural Memory rests on the 'process of selection, connection, and the creation of meaning' (ibid., 137).

Narrative structures play a significant role in every memory culture. We find them in the life stories and anecdotes that are listened to oral historians; and in the patterns of oral tradition on which anthropologists focus. The main function of narrative in culture is, according to Jörn Rüsen, 'temporal orientation', the linking of past, present and future in a meaningful way (see III.1.1; see Ricoeur's theory of time and narrative in chapter VI.2). The narrativization of historical occurrences and pre-narrative experience first allows their interpretation. Even the profoundly condensed, and arguably non-narrative, *lieux de mémoire* are generally entwined with and accompanied by stories, which circulate in social contexts and endow those sites with their changing meanings. The world of cultural memory is a world of narrative. (But this does *not* mean that it is a world of 'fiction,' fictionality is one of the privileges of the symbol system of literature; see chapter VI.1.2.)

(c) Genre

Genres are conventionalized formats we use to encode events and experience; and repertoires of genre conventions are themselves contents

of memory. They belong to the body of cultural knowledge which individuals acquire through socialization and enculturation. We automatically draw on genre schemata (retained in our semantic memory) when we read literary texts – so that, for example, we expect death at the end of a tragedy, and a wedding at the end of a comedy. But genre schemata are also an essential component of autobiographical memory. The *Bildungsroman*, the adventure novel, and the spiritual autobiography, for instance, provide models of individual of development, which rememberers tend to fall back on when they want to explain the course of their lives (see Brockmeier 2001). Such genre memories are also an inherent part of the historical imagination (see Olick 1999b). Using nineteenth-century historiography as an example, Hayden White (*Metahistory*, 1973) has shown to what extent the choice of plot structure already pre-forms the meaning given to an historical event. The encoding of selected elements into opening, transitional, or closing motifs and their emplotment according to what Northrop Frye (1957) has identified as the archetypical narrative forms of romance, comedy, tragedy, and satire are various strategies of historical explanation, which White moreover associates with specific ideological implications: anarchist, radical, conservative and liberal.

Because literature is the site on which genre patterns manifest themselves most visibly (and in a socially sanctioned way), it is of pivotal importance for the circulation of memory genres. Literature takes up existing patterns, shapes and transforms them, and feeds them back into memory culture. Around 1800, for example, the process of a person's intellectual and social maturation found expression in the new literary genre of the *Bildungsroman*; and in turn, its typical plot structure of development became a powerful and persistent cultural model for the understanding an individual's coming-of-age. Other literary genres have primarily been used to encode the Cultural Memory. The epic, for example, was long a core pattern when it came to explaining the origin and uniqueness of an ethnic group. In nineteenth-century Europe, the historical novel became a dominant memory genre which represented the course of history and helped shape national identities. Pierre Nora (2001) has shown that at the same time statesmen's memoirs were used to exemplify French identity and values.

Genres are also a method of dealing with challenges that is faced by a memory culture. In uncommon, difficult, or dangerous circumstances it is especially traditional and strongly conventionalized genres which writers draw upon in order to provide familiar and meaningful patterns of representation for experiences that would otherwise be hard

to interpret. For example, in late-nineteenth-century British fictions of empire, the genre patterns of romance provided a ready format for dealing with colonial anxieties. In poems and novels remembering the First World War, it was – of all genres – the pastoral which authors fell back on to convey the traumatic experience of the trenches, provide images of peace, and reconnect with tradition (Fussell 1975). By the same token, the emergence of new genres can also be understood as an answer to mnemonic challenges. At the end of the twentieth century, the postmodern insight into the constructed nature of history and identity found suitable expression in the genre of historiographic metafiction (see Nünning 1997).

VI.1.2 Literature and other symbolic forms: Differences

Because literary and mnemonic processes have many resemblances, literature seems ideally suited to be a medium of cultural memory. And yet literary works should not be considered as being simply equivalent to media of other symbolic forms that play a role in the making of cultural memory – such as chronicles, historiography, legal texts, religious writings, and mythic tales. In the construction of memory, the symbolic form of literature displays distinctive characteristics. In the following, we offer four brief descriptions of these characteristics: fictional privileges and restrictions, interdiscursivity, polyvalence, and the 'reversible figure' of production/reflection.

(a) Fictional privileges and restrictions

One of the most important differences between literature and other symbolic forms results from the fictional status of literary works which Wolfgang Iser conceives of as the result of 'fictionalizing acts' (see Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, 1993). According to Iser's phenomenological and anthropological theory of literature, every fictional representation rests on two forms of boundary-crossing: Elements of external 'reality' are repeated in the literary text, but not simply for their own sake. In the context of the fictional world, the repeated reality becomes a sign and takes on other meanings. On the other hand, the 'imaginary' – which according to Iser 'tends to manifest itself in a somewhat diffuse manner, in fleeting impressions that defy our attempts to pin it down in a concrete and stabilized form' (ibid., 3) – is given form through its representation in the medium of fiction, thereby achieving a determinacy which it did not previously possess. We are thus dealing here with 'two distinct processes. ... Reproduced reality is made to point to a "reality" beyond itself, while the imaginary is lured into form.' The result is

that 'extratextual reality merges into the imaginary, and the imaginary merges into reality' (ibid.) Through this interplay between the real and the imaginary, fictional texts restructure cultural perception. In modern societies, an unwritten social compact restricts access to the realm of the imaginary to the symbol system of literature. Imaginary elements do also, it is true, find their way into the memory created by religious, and probably also historiographic writings. However, it is only in the literary text that they are simultaneously marked and accepted *as* imaginary.

As Ansgar Nünning (1997) has shown, literature's power in culture rests on a number of 'fictional privileges'. Fictive narrators, the representation of consciousness, the integration of unproven and even counterfactual elements into the representation of the past, and the imagination of alternative realities belong to the privileges enjoyed by the symbolic form of literature. It is these privileges that allow us to distinguish between historical fiction and historiography on the level of the text. But according to the 'logic of literature' (Hamburger 1957), the fictional status of literary works and their resultant depragmatization will also lead to certain restrictions, such as a severely limited claim to referentiality, adherence to facts, and objectivity (see Cohn 1999). Literary representations of the past are distinct from historiography in this aspect. They are also distinct from autobiographies and memoirs – however 'literary' in style those may be. Having said this, it must also be conceded that in the social sphere these distinctions are by far not as clear-cut as in literary theory. It is especially in connection with cultural remembrance that we find rather complicated performances of what Philippe Lejeune (1975) has called the 'autobiographical pact'.

(b) Interdiscursivity

As Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1981) showed as early as the 1920s, literary works are characterized by their 'heteroglossia.' They represent varying idioms and discourses and bring them together in the space of a single text. Bakhtin emphasizes that 'all languages of heteroglossia ... are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, ... each characterized by its own objects, meanings, and values. As such they may all be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another, and be interrelated dialogically' (Bakhtin 1981, 291f.). By representing different ways of speaking about the past (and of memory), literature gives voice to the epistemological and ideological positions connected with these languages. In this way, literary works can display and juxtapose divergent and contested memories and create mnemonic multiperspectivity. In a world of increasingly specialized – and separated – discourses (such as those of history, theology, economy, and law), literature thus also acts as a 'reintegrative interdiscourse' (Link 1988), as a medium which brings together, and re-connects, in a single space the manifold discrete parlances about the past

(c) Polyvalence

In the medium of literature, the condensation and over-determination which are at the basis of every process of remembering are augmented in such a way that literary representations of the past usually display a semantic complexity foreign to other media of cultural memory. Highly ambiguous versions of memory are therefore reserved for the symbolic form of literature (see Eco 1989; on 'polyvalence' as a literary convention, see Schmidt 1992). Aesthetic theories postulate that art's affective potential and power derive from its very complexity. This pertains also to literature's specific role in memory culture.

(d) Production/reflection of memory

A specific feature of literature, and indeed of art in general, is its ability to offer (as systems theory would formulate it) first- *and* second-order observations of the world simultaneously (see Luhmann 2000a). On the one hand, literary works construct versions of the past: affirmative and subversive, traditional and new ones. On the other hand, they make exactly this process of construction observable, and thus also criticizable. Literary works are memory-productive *and* memory-reflexive, and often, like a reversible figure, simultaneously. There are varying ratios of memory-productivity and memory-reflexivity in literature, which may be characteristic of certain periods or genres. (The history of the historical novel proves a good example of those changing ratios.)

All of the distinctive characteristics of literature discussed here must be seen as 'conventions of the modern system of literature' (see Schmidt 1992). They may take on a different shape in earlier historical times or in non-western contexts. Bearing these limitations in mind, it can nevertheless be maintained that much of modern western literature's specific contribution to cultural memory seems to have rested on the interplay between literature's *similarities* with mnemonic processes on the one hand, and its *differences* to competing media of memory on the other. Certainly, literature is only *one* way of memory-making among many. It shares methods with everyday storytelling, historiography,

and even with monuments. Yet at the same time, literature, because of its unique characteristics, offers representations of the past which are significantly different to those of other symbol systems. Literature can inject new and distinct elements into memory culture.

VI.2 Literary text and mnemonic context: Mimesis

How does literature construct versions of the past? Which different processes must be considered when one speaks of the 'literary creation of cultural memory'? What is the relationship of literary text and the sociocultural contexts of remembering and forgetting? One model which can help to illustrate these complex interrelations between literature and cultural memory is that developed by Paul Ricoeur in his philosophical treatise on time and narrative *Temps et Récit* (1983–5; *Time and Narrative*, 1984–6). Ricoeur proceeds from the presupposition that 'time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience' (1984, 3). To illustrate the dynamics of fictional narrative in the making of human time he introduces the model of a 'circle of mimesis,' Ricoeur refers to the classical concept of mimesis that goes back to Aristotle, but he differentiates among three levels of representation, which he terms mimesis_1, mimesis_2 and mimesis_3. For Ricoeur, literary world-making rests on a dynamic transformation process – on the interaction among the 'prefiguration' of the text, that is, its reference to the already existent extratextual world (mimesis_1); the 'textual' configuration, with its major operation of emplotment, which creates a fictional world (mimesis_2); and the 'refiguration' by the reader (mimesis_3). In this approach, literature appears as an active, constructive process, in which cultural systems of meaning, narrative operations, and reception participate equally, and in which reality is not merely reflected, but in fact 'poetically refigured' (xi) and 'iconically augmented' (81). Text and contexts, the symbolic order of extratextual reality and the fictional worlds created within the medium of literature, enter into a relationship of mutual influence and change.

Slightly reformulating Ricoeur's tripartite model for the purpose of conceiving of literature as a medium of cultural memory, we can distinguish among three aspects of mnemonic mimesis:

1. the prefiguration of a literary text by memory culture,
2. the literary configuration of new memory narratives, and
3. their refiguration in the frameworks of different mnemonic communities.

VI.2.1 Mnemonic prefiguration: Drawing on the reality of memory culture

Ricoeur points out that our experience of reality is symbolically preformed, or prefigured. Cultural practice establishes a 'conceptual network' that makes 'practical understanding' possible (1984, 55). Cultures create symbolic orders which include, among other aspects, value hierarchies and an understanding of temporal processes. Within this complex, symbolically mediated 'world of action', our experiences are characterized by their 'prenarrative quality' (74). Ricoeur emphasizes that every literary text is related to this extra-literary world. The idea of mimesis_1 brings home the fact that 'whatever the innovative force of poetic composition ... may be, the composition of the plot is grounded in a pre-understanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character' (54).

Looking at mnemonic prefiguration means focusing attention on those areas of pre-understanding that concern cultural memory. It is in the 'textual repertoire', to use Wolfgang Iser's term, that the literary text's prefiguration becomes palpable: The structure of its paradigmatic axis of selection indicates from which cultural fields the text draws its elements. Literature can refer to the material dimension of memory culture (for example, historiography, memorials, memory movies, and discourses about the past); to its social dimension (for example, commemorative rituals, different mnemonic communities and institutions); and to its mental dimension (for example, values and norms, stereotypes and other powerful schemata for representing the past). It appropriates elements from these dimensions through intertextual, intermedial, and interdiscursive references.

Literature fills a niche in memory culture, because like arguably no other symbol system, it is characterized by its ability – and indeed tendency – to refer to the forgotten and repressed as well as the unnoticed, unconscious, and unintentional aspects of our dealings with the past. It is thus already on the level of mimesis_1, through the references that constitute the textual repertoire, that literature actualizes elements which previously were not – or could not be – perceived, articulated, and remembered in the social sphere. Through the operation of selection, literature can create new, surprising, and otherwise inaccessible archives of cultural memory: Elements from various memory systems and things remembered and forgotten by different groups are brought together in the literary text.

VI.2.2 Literary configuration: The creation of fictional memory narratives

With the term $mimesis_2$ Ricoeur (1984, 53) describes 'the concrete process by which the textual configuration mediates between the prefiguration of the practical field and its refiguration through the reception of the work'. Elements chosen within the framework of $mimesis_1$ are connected syntagmatically and moulded into a specific story. While in the extratextual world elements of the conceptual network may exist 'in a relation of intersignification' (55), in the literary text they we find them arranged, or emplotted, in a certain temporal and causal order. Within the narrative structure of the literary text, every element has its place and thus also gains its meaning. 'This passage from the paradigmatic to the syntagmatic constitutes the transition from $mimesis_1$ to $mimesis_2$. It is the work of the configurating activity' (66). It is also the passage into fiction; with their configuration into a story the ontological status of the chosen elements changes: 'With $mimesis_2$ opens the kingdom of the *as if*' (64). Literary mimesis is therefore not simply a *re-presentation* of reality; in fact, configuration is an active, constructive process, a *creation* of reality, so that the term 'poiesis' seems a more fitting description (66).

Ricoeur emphasizes the 'emplotment's mediating role in the mimetic process'. $Mimesis_2$ is the site where *'a prefigured time ... becomes a refigured time through the mediation of a configured time'* (54; emphasis in the original). The level of configuration is thus the key to literature's role as a medium of cultural memory. It is here that literary works bring together, reshape and restructure real and imaginary practices of remembering and forgetting. With their transition into the literary text, elements of cultural memory are separated from their original contexts and can be combined and arranged in novel ways, into new and different memory narratives.

Not only emplotment is to be counted among the configurating activities taking place on the level on $mimesis_2$. Other literary forms also contribute in great measure to the creation of fictional memory narratives: Narrative voice, perspective, and focalization, literary chronotopoi (time-space combinations), metaphors, and symbols, to name just some particularly significant examples, are strategies involved in the performance, or staging, of cultural memory *in* literature (see also VI.2.4).

VI.2.3 Collective refiguration: Effects of literature in memory culture

According to Ricoeur, the act of reading brings about the transition between $mimesis_2$ and $mimesis_3$ and closes the mimetic circle. $Mimesis_3$ 'marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader' (1984, 71). In the act of reading fiction enters into a renewed connection with the world of action. What results is not only the reader's actualization of that which is represented in literature, but at the same time the 'iconic augmentation' (81) of reality. 'It is only in reading that the dynamism of configuration completes its course. And it is beyond reading, in effective action, instructed by the works handed down, that the configuration of the text is transformed into refiguration' (Ricoeur 1988, 159). The meaning(s) ascribed by readers thus affect not only their understanding of the text. Literary works can also change perceptions of reality and in the end – through the readers' actions, which can be influenced by literary models – also cultural practice and thereby reality itself.

One of the first 'actions' to result from the refiguration of literature as a medium of memory is temporal orientation: With their narrative structure, literary stories shape our understanding of the sequence and meaning of events, and of the relation between past, present and future. Literature moulds memory culture thus through its structure and forms, but of course, and more obviously so, also through its contents: Representations of historical events (such as wars and revolutions) and characters (such as kings and explorers), of myths and imagined memories *can* have an impact on readers and *can* re-enter, via $mimesis_3$, the world of action, shaping, for example, perception, knowledge and everyday communication, leading to political action – or prefiguring further representation (and this is how the circle of mnemonic mimesis continues to revolve).

With a view to literature's effects on the collective level of memory, $mimesis_3$ should, however, be conceived of as *collective* refiguration, as socially shared ways of reading. There are two conditions for literary works to affect cultural memory: They must be received *as* media of memory; and they must be read in a broad swathe across society. Clues to such an 'effective presence' of literary texts in memory culture are provided by public debates as well as bestseller lists, forms of institutionalization such as their being added to school or university curricula, and the use of literary quotes in everyday speech. Social institutions may attempt to monitor, force or curtail the collective refiguration of literary texts – for example, by canonization. Political intervention, such as censorship and state-sponsored publications, must be taken into account. But economic factors, publishing and marketing strategies also play a crucial role. As far as the appropriation and interpretation of literary works is concerned, we must start from the premise of the existence

of mnemonic 'interpretive communities' (see Fish 1980). Social groups agree or disagree on possible refigurations and on the value of a literary text for cultural memory. In all of these social processes, power is a factor that cannot be underestimated: Literary texts offer possible interpretations of the past and develop a number of – partly affirmative, partly subversive – narrative potentials. How these potentials are actualized in the social arena is a matter of negotiation and contestation.

From a media studies perspective, a literary work's prefiguration and refiguration can be observed in the ways it has been premediated and remediated. Refiguration manifests itself in remediating activities such as intertextuality and different forms of intermedial references (film adaptation, digitalization, and so on). A literary text's premediation is more difficult to pin down, but clues as to the media schemata which might have prefigured the text can be found by looking at earlier media representations which display, for example, similar narrative patterns and rhetoric strategies.

To sum up, literary narratives mediate between pre-existing memory culture on the one hand and its potential restructuring on the other. Connected with this mediation process is an exchange in two directions. First, the exchange between cultural memory and the literary text on the level of mimesis$_1$: The literary text makes reference to contents, forms, media, and practices of memory. Second, the exchange takes

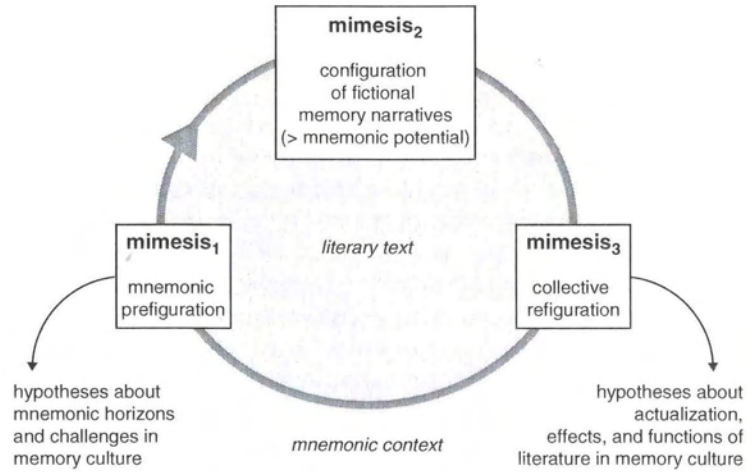

Figure VI.1 The three levels of the mimesis of cultural memory

place in the opposite direction: On the level of mimesis$_3$, (collective) reception may lead to an 'iconic augmentation' of memory culture, and shape perception, representation, and action (see also Figure VI.1).

VI.2.4 A narratology of cultural memory?

Ricoeur emphasizes that for those interested in a semiotic analysis of the text, it is solely mimesis$_2$, its configuration, which is accessible. He points out that 'a science of the text can be established only upon the abstraction of mimesis$_2$, and may consider only the internal laws of a work of literature, without any regard for the two sides of the text' (1984, 53). What can narratology, as a science of the narrative text, contribute to understanding literature's mnemonic dimension? What are the possibilities, limits, and pitfalls of a narratology of cultural memory?

From a narratological perspective, the totality of the 'internal laws' of the literary text can be termed its 'narrative potential'. Roy Sommer (2000, 328) defines the narrative potential of fictional texts as 'an assumption substantiated by the text regarding the possible effects of the narrative strategies which structure and organize its content and are thus essential for its meaning'. The narrative potential is thus a purely textual feature; it must be distinguished from actual historical realizations, effects and functions of a literary text. Reformulated in the terms of Ricoeur's model: An analysis of the narrative potential allows us to draw *hypotheses* about both the text's refiguration, its realization, effects, and functions in culture (mimesis$_3$), as well as about its prefiguration, the horizons within which it is produced and the challenges it answers to (mimesis$_1$). Such hypotheses will of course never pinpoint the actual pre- and refigurations of a literary text. But in combination with sound historical knowledge, they promise insight into the work that literature does in culture. Starting from these premises, we can speak of the mnemonic potential of a literary text, which materializes on the level mimesis$_2$ and which can provide clues as to the pre- and refiguration of the text in memory culture.

As a contribution to a narratology of cultural memory, and using war novels as well as (post-)colonial fiction as examples, I have introduced elsewhere the notion of the 'rhetoric of collective memory' (see Erll 2003, 2004, 2006), which describes such mnemonic potentials for literature to transmit versions of a socially shared past. I define the rhetoric of collective memory as an ensemble of narrative forms which provokes the naturalization of a literary text as a medium of memory. I distinguish among various modes of this rhetoric.

Different modes of remembering are closely linked to different modes of (narrative) representation (see chapter IV.2). Changes in the form of representation may effect changes in the kind of memory we retain of the past. In the following I will give some examples of how such mnemonic modes are constituted in the medium of literary narrative. It is, however, never one formal characteristic alone which is responsible for the emergence of a certain mode; instead we have to look at whole clusters of narrative features, whose interplay may contribute to a certain memory effect. It is, of course, impossible to predict how stories will be interpreted by actual readers; but certain kinds of narrative representations seem to bear an affinity to different modes of remembering, and thus one may risk some hypotheses on the *potential* memorial power, or effects, of literary forms.

Literary works represent the past in varying combinations of experiential, monumental, antagonistic, historicizing, and reflexive modes. Some of the narrative forms involved in establishing different mnemonic modes are narrative voice (such as personal, authorial and communal voice; see Lanser 1992), forms of unreliable narration, internal focalization, circumstantial realism, metaphors of memory, and literary chronotopoi. The following three examples show how different modes can be constituted in the literary text:

- Experiential mode: This mode is constituted by literary forms which represent the past as lived-through experience. Experiential modes evoke the 'living memory' of contemporary history, generational or family memories (that is, those forms of cultural remembering which the Assmanns subsume under the 'communicative memory'). In contrast, monumental modes envisage the past as mythical (that is, as part of the 'Cultural Memory'); and historicizing modes convey literary events and persons as if they were objects of scholarly historiography. Texts in which the experiential mode predominates tend to stage communicative memory's main source: the episodic-autobiographical memories of witnesses. Typical forms of this mode of literary remembering are the 'personal voice' generated by first-person narration; addressing the reader in the intimate way typical of face-to-face communication; the use of the more immediate present tense; lengthy passages focalised by an 'experiencing I' in order to convey embodied, seemingly immediate experience; circumstantial realism, a very detailed presentation of everyday life in the past (the *effet de réel* turns into an *effet de mémoire*); and, finally, the representation of everyday ways of speaking (sociolects, slang, and so on) to convey the linguistic specificity and fluidity of a near past. Travel literature often operates with such features of the experiential mode. So do war novels presenting 'the soldiers' tale' (Hynes 1997), that is, views 'from below'. And much Holocaust fiction resorts to strong experiential modes (but also shows, reflexively, the limits of experience and its representation).
- Antagonistic mode: Literary forms which help to promote one version of the past and reject another constitute an antagonistic mode. This mode of remembering tends to infuse literary works which represent identity-groups and their versions of the past, for example, feminist or postcolonial writing. We also find it in imperial fictions and in politically oriented *littérature engagée*. Negative stereotyping is the most obvious technique of establishing an antagonistic mode. More elaborate is the resort to biased perspective structures: Only the memories of a certain group are presented as true, while those versions articulated by members of conflicting memory cultures are deconstructed as false. 'We'-narration may underscore this claim.
- Reflexive mode: As already mentioned in chapter VI.1.2, literature always allows its readers both a first- and a second-order observation. It gives us the illusion of glimpsing the past and is, often simultaneously, a major medium of critical reflection upon such processes of representation. Literature is a medium which simultaneously builds and observes memory. Prominent reflexive modes are constituted by narrative forms which draw attention to processes and problems of remembering, for instance by explicit narratorial comments on the workings of memory, metaphors of memory, the juxtaposition of different versions of the past (narrated or focalized), and also by highly experimental narrative forms (like the inversion of chronology in the novels by Kurt Vonnegut and Martin Amis). Most of present-day historiographic metafiction features strong reflexive modes.

Such an alliance of narratology and cultural memory studies is made possible through the assumption that literary forms are 'semanticized' (Nünning 1997): They are not simply 'vessels' to hold content, but carry meaning themselves. However, memory culture also follows what Meir Sternberg (1982, 148) has termed the 'Proteus Principle': 'in different contexts ... the same form may fulfil different functions *and* different forms the same function'. An unequivocal correlation between literary form and mnemonic function is thus impossible; this is a relation which is never stable. For example, first-person narration can convey the authenticity of the eyewitness in one literary text, yet undermine

the reliability of the narrated past in the other. Just as forms of cultural remembering change from one historical period to the next and from one cultural context to the other, so too do the forms of their representation. Moreover, literary memory narratives are not confined to the written medium. They can also manifest themselves in oral, visual, and digital media. Narrative is a transmedial phenomenon (Ryan 2004); and the stories of cultural memory therefore travel not only across time and space, but also 'across media', from novels to drama to movies to TV series and to the Internet. What we need, then, is not universal recipes, but instead flexible categories of a context-sensitive narratology, which takes into consideration the historically and culturally variable contents, forms, media, practices, and ideologies of cultural memory, and orients its narratological analysis accordingly (for more on a cultural narratology, see Erll 2005; on political narratology, Bal 2004).

In the field of literary studies – which redefines itself more and more as part of 'media culture studies' and shows interdisciplinary leanings towards cultural history, cultural sociology, and media theory – a narratology of cultural memory is only *one* option, *one* methodological tool. For the study of literature as a part of memory culture, it is ideally combined with other, contextualizing approaches, which accompany and enrich the text-centred analysis. Such wider social and media perspectives will be presented in the following section, which addresses the question of how literary works can become effective media of cultural memory.

VI.3 Literature as a medium of collective and individual memory

As we know from Aby Warburg, all media of cultural memory need to be *actualized*, charged with meaning, in order to unfold their mnemonic potential and to have an effective presence within the social sphere. This is also the case for literary works. Literature as a medium of cultural memory is therefore first and foremost a phenomenon of reception. When we study literary works and ask what functions they fulfil in memory culture, we must start from the premise of their appropriation through readers, from the aspect of refiguration.

On the collective level, literary works can fulfil all three functions of media of cultural memory (see chapter V.4). Literature is a storage medium and a circulation medium. Both aspects will be discussed in the following by using the concepts of 'cultural texts', 'collective texts', and 'literary afterlives'. Literature can moreover serve as a media cue,

for example when during each year devoted to Shakespeare, Goethe or Cervantes the mentioning of those authors and their works is used to awaken ideas of a 'great' tradition and national identity among people across a broad spectrum of society – even if the texts in question were never even read by many of those same people. On the individual level, our '*collected* memory', literature exerts great influence as a media framework of remembering. Literary stories and their patterns are represented in our semantic and episodic memory systems. They shape knowledge, life experience, and autobiographical remembering.

VI.3.1 Literature as a storage medium: Cultural texts

The importance of literature as a medium of collective memory has always been at stake in discussions about the literary canon (see chapter III.2.3). One influential approach to canonization was developed by Aleida and Jan Assmann, who coined the term 'cultural texts'. Because this concept can help us understand how literary works are turned into storage media of cultural memory, the 'cultural text' will be discussed in the following and then serve as a starting point for further reflections on literature as a medium of memory.

Jan and Aleida Assmann introduced the 'cultural text' as a prototypical instance of the Cultural Memory's 'reusable texts' (see chapter II.4). However, it is important to note that the term neither refers exclusively to literature, nor is it restricted to written media. An oral tale, a legal document, a holy scripture, or a political tract can, depending on certain circumstances, all be assigned the status of 'cultural text'. This tendency to level the differences between objectivations of various symbol systems and media technologies comes as a result of the Assmanns' definition of 'text', which they understand, following the linguist Konrad Ehlich, as 'retrieved communication' (J. Assmann 2006, 103; see chapter V.2). Defining text in this way means that it is 'not the written form that is decisive, but the act of storage and transmission'. What constitutes a text is thus its separation from the immediate speech situation. Communication via texts means that 'the *immediate* situation of copresence is replaced by the "*expanded* context"'. Texts are 'speech acts' in expanded contexts; they connect producers and receivers of a message across spatial and temporal borders (ibid.). Defined in this way, texts can indeed take shape in different media and symbol systems. There are, for example, 'oral texts', such as orally transmitted myths; but 'not every utterance is a text' (104).

What Aleida and Jan Assmann refer to as '*cultural* texts' is a 'potentiation' of such texts. Cultural texts 'possess' a special normative and

formative authority for a society as a whole' (J. Assmann 2006, 104). Cultural texts, too, are media-unspecific and manifest themselves in oral, visual, and written media. An oral narrative, a painting, a ritual, or a legal document can take on the function of the cultural text. No matter what media are used to store and transmit the cultural texts of a society, according to Aleida and Jan Assmann's theory, they are all functionally equivalent; they all produce cultural identity and coherence: 'Everything can become a sign that represents community. It is not the medium that matters, but rather the symbolic function and the structure of the sign' (J. Assmann 1992, 139).

What can we say about the workings of literature as a cultural text? How can a piece of literature be transformed into such a normative and formative medium? These questions are answered in Aleida Assmann's essay 'Was sind kulturelle Texte?' (1995, 'What are cultural texts?'). She emphasizes that the 'cultural text' is not a literary genre that could be identified by the text's inherent characteristics. It is instead a framework of reception. Assmann differentiates between two 'reception frameworks ..., within which texts are constituted either as "literary" or as "cultural"' (ibid., 234). The two frames are characterized by 'differing approaches to potentially identical texts'. The particular reading, or actualization, thus cannot be deduced from any text-internal features. It is in fact based on the 'decisionist act' of the reader, who assigns to the text either the status 'cultural' or the status 'literary' (ibid.).

From the multitude of literary works which a society produces and preserves, only a few are chosen and attributed a 'cultural', and this means for Aleida Assmann: canonical status. This attribution fundamentally changes the way these texts are perceived. Once they enter into the core area of the Cultural Memory, literary texts are turned into normative and formative texts and thereby gain additional semantic and pragmatic dimensions: They now seem to embody – and are used to transmit – cultural, national or religious identity as well as shared values and norms. By establishing a 'canon of religious, national, or educational texts' (ibid., 241), societies describe themselves.

Aleida Assmann emphasizes that cultural texts are made to differ from literary texts through an entirely different reading practice. Instead of solitary reception, aesthetic distance, and the desire for novelty, the reception of cultural texts is characterized by 'reverence, repeated study, solemnity' (ibid., 242). This type of reading is guided by the reader's certainty that he or she is, through the act of reading, part of a mnemonic community. Unconditional identification with what is supposed to be the text's message; a desire to acquire – through reading – knowledge

about cultural origins, identity, values and norms; and the search for truth are further characteristics of the specific reading practice connected with the cultural text. Given this definition it is little surprising that Aleida Assmann sees the Bible as the 'paradigmatic cultural text' (ibid., 237).

Reading a literary work as a cultural text seems to imply both a retrospective reduction in literary ambiguity *and* an enrichment in cultural meaning. The publication of a piece of writing as a literary text marks it as a *version* of reality, one which is by no means unambiguous or normative, but rather marked as fictional, and which therefore lends itself to different interpretations. This is certainly a convention, but at least since the development of the modern system of art in the eighteenth century it has become standard practice. The prerequisite for a literary text to be read as a cultural text, however, is that it must be simultaneously simplified and over-determined. The polyvalence of the literary text dissipates and gives way to a uniform message; and its original historical situatedness is lost to view. With the loss of its 'literary' and 'historical' characteristics, however, it gains 'cultural' depth: The cultural text is now taken to impart a 'binding, ineluctable, and timeless truth' (ibid., 242).

The cultural text is a storage medium, or, to be more exact: It is through the reception framework of 'cultural texts' that literary texts are turned into storage media of the Cultural Memory. For centuries, the works of Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, and Bunyan have been a core component of enculturation, in school or religious education. They were medium *and* object of the Cultural Memory at the same time: media which 'remember something' about a community's past and are themselves remembered as canonical works. They thus fulfilled the typical double function of storage media of cultural memory (see chapter V.4.1).

VI.3.2 Literature as a circulation medium: Collective texts and literary afterlives

But what about all those other literary texts which are not canonized, not conceived of as a vital component of 'a culture'? In order to fully grasp and do justice to the role of literature in the social production of memory, we must distance ourselves from the assumption that only so-called high literature is read in association with the Cultural Memory. (On the contrary, often it is precisely 'popular' or even 'trivial' literature which makes use of its mythical and symbolic resources, as the example of fantasy fiction clearly shows.) Literary works of all origins

and qualities can produce and transmit images of the past – within the framework of the Cultural Memory as well as within communicative memory. The concept of 'collective texts' is therefore meant to describe literature's function as a circulation medium that disseminates and shapes cultural memory. As in the case of the Assmanns' 'cultural texts', the 'collective text', too, is first and foremost a phenomenon of reception. But in contrast to the cultural text, the concept of the collective text points to a way of reading in which literary works are actualized not so much as precious *objects* to be remembered themselves, but rather as *vehicles* for envisioning the past. Collective texts create, circulate, and shape contents of cultural memory.

Examples of collective texts abound: Historical novels, such as Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814), provided large audiences with a sense of the course of history; war novels such as Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) seemed to take their readership back to the battle; romances such as Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) or Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* (1936) had the power to shape images of the lifeworld in past periods and regions; Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) inspired an imagination of South American and Indian history in worldwide audiences. All of these are instances of the circulation of literature through global media cultures, often in translation, thus constituting what one might call a 'world literature of memory' (see Damrosch 2003). Most examples are, moreover, cases in which textual and filmic versions of the same story have provided mutual mnemonic support. Because narratives of memory tend to travel across media, the collective text, too, is a transmedial phenomenon.

But how does the phenomenon of the collective texts come about? Paradoxically, one important condition for literary works to have such an influence on cultural memory is that readers ascribe to them some kind of referentiality. Wolfgang Braungart (1996, 149) is thus correct when he argues that 'The disempowering of the text through the awareness of its fictional status has evidently not yet been completely achieved. This is not exclusively a problem of the "logic of fiction," nor of the (onto-)logical status of fiction, and cannot be explained solely by recourse to narrative form and narrative time, but must also take into account reading habits and desires.' Literary theory might well be able to show that and how fictional worlds differ from non-fictional representations. And this basic research is indeed necessary if we want to gain insight into the specific forms of expression and the epistemological possibilities of literary texts; and to counteract all-too-simple

poststructuralist positions which claims that all facts are fiction and every narration about the past is literature. A look at the actual reading strategies of empirical interpretive communities, however, seems to justify the assumption that the ontological gap between fiction and reality postulated in theory is smoothly overcome in practice, and that literary works clearly shape our ideas about past realities.

Literature is frequently produced and received in rather pragmatic ways, and often enough with a referentializing and disambiguating eye. The ideological, didactic, and normative functions of historical novels, war literature, and children's books and also their 'this is the way it was' tone are one example. Yet this does not render obsolete the borders between the symbol systems. Readers do not confuse an historical novel with historiography, or an elegy with a memorial service. Indeed, in contrast, one can see what a sensitive topic the transition between symbol systems in fact is in mnemonic practice when one considers the social performance, the way that readers deal with, autobiography or autobiographical writing. As soon as the 'literarization' of a lived life crosses the line to fictionalization, such texts are as a rule no longer accepted by readers as autobiographical. The 'Wilkomirski Case', the heated discussion about the autobiography of an ostensible Holocaust survivor (*Fragments*, 1995) which – along with the persona of the author – soon turned out to be fictive, has been one of the best examples for the impenetrable lines which the social sphere draws between different symbol systems, despite all the similarities and overlaps.

The power of literature as a circulation medium of cultural memory must therefore be founded on a downright paradoxical reading practice. Literary works are perceived *as* literature, and that means (according to the specific characteristics of that symbol system) as polyvalent and interdiscursive forms of representation, which can also integrate imagined elements into their versions of the past. Yet *simultaneously* they are ascribed a certain kind of referentiality. This referentializing movement in the reading process, however, does not seem to be directed towards the pre-narrative reality of past events (as is the case when reading historiographical texts), but rather towards the horizons of meaning that are produced by cultural memory – and thus to a 'reality' which is already profoundly symbolically condensed, narratively structured, and transformed by genre patterns. What is at stake when reading literature as collective texts is thus 'truth' according to memory. Collective texts have to 'fit', have to be able to resonate with a memory culture's horizons of meaning, its (narrative) schemata, and its existing images of the past. These are the grounds on which 'mnemonic authenticity'

is generated. And this is why Scott's visions of the past could exert such great influence in the historicist nineteenth century; Remarque's narrative of young men at war in a time bristling with generational antagonism; Rushdie's magic realist image of Indian history in the postmodern age; and Wilkomirski's forged autobiography in an age used to 'fragmented' patterns in Holocaust-representation.

Collective texts emerge from, intervene in, and can only be understood in conjunction with the 'plurimedia networks' of cultural memory (see chapter V.5.2). To give one example: Around the millennium, the topic of flight and expulsion of Germans from the eastern territories at the end of the Second World War was slowly (re-)emerging as a topic of social discourse in Germany – pervading political discussions, newspaper commentaries, and TV programmes. Günter Grass's novella *Crabwalk* (2002) moved into this burgeoning mnemonic field, gave shape and articulated much of that which until then might have seemed shapeless and disconnected, and was consequently awarded the status of 'taboo-breaker' by the German press. As Kirsten Prinz has argued with a view to the heated discussions following the publication of Grass's novella: 'The border between fiction and non-fiction becomes functional here: With its limited claim to referentiality and depragmatization, literary works can put certain versions of the past to the test; the social and political relevance of which is then determined in non-fictional, say journalistic, discourse' (Prinz 2004, 193).

While the concept of 'collective texts' directs attention to such synchronic networks and the circulation of cultural memory through literature, the study of 'literary afterlives' (which is reminiscent of Aby Warburg's research on art's afterlife) opens up a diachronic perspective. Historical approaches to the 'life' and ongoing impact of literature in memory culture are gaining increasing currency in memory studies. There are, for example, studies on the 'afterlives' of Walter Scott's novels (Rigney 2004, 2011), on more than 300 years of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and its worldwide transmission (Hofmeyr 2004), and on the afterlives of anticolonial prophecy in South African literature and other media (Wenzel 2009). Such research addresses the basic process of memory culture: that of continuation and actualization. And it testifies to what Ann Rigney (2010, 17) has identified as the 'specificity of the arts as media of collective remembrance', namely their 'temporally convoluted combination of "monumentality"' (that is, their persistence) and 'malleability' (that is, their 'openness to appropriation by others').

In reconstructing the 'social life' (*sensu* Appadurai 1986) or 'cultural biography' of a literary text we may ask how – across long periods of time – it was received, discussed, used, canonized, forgotten, censored, and re-used. What is it that confers repeatedly upon some literary works a new lease of life in changing social contexts, whereas others are forgotten and relegated to the archive? These questions may be addressed from social, medial, and textual viewpoints – and the phenomenon of literary afterlives will arguably be tackled best by a balanced combination of all three.

The social perspective emphasizes the active appropriations of a literary text by social actors. How do changing social formations – with their specific views of history and present challenges, their interests and expectations, discourses and reading practices – receive and re-actualize literature? How do the responses to the same literary work change from generation to generation? For example, as is shown by Jesseka Batteau (2009), the social performance and public reputation of iconic Dutch authors, such as Gerard Reve, changed greatly over the past decades along with the transformations of Dutch society, and this in turn also altered the images of the religious past that their works convey.

Looking at 'literary afterlives' from a media culture perspective means directing the focus to the intermedial networks, which maintain and sustain the continuing impact of certain stories: intertextual and intermedial references, rewriting and adaptation, forms of commentary and cross-reference. Using the concepts of premediation and remediation I have shown elsewhere (Erll 2007, 2009b) how the narratives and iconic images of the 'Revolt of 1857' (a colonial war in Northern India against British rule) were pre-formed by stories and images of similar earlier events (such as the 'Black Hole of Calcutta' of 1756), then remediated in colonial and postcolonial contexts across the spectrum of available media technologies (from newspaper articles to novels, photography, film, and the Internet), in order to turn, finally, into premediators of other stories and events (such as the Amritsar massacre of 1919, nostalgic postimperial novels of the 1950s, or current debates about terrorism).

In a more text-centred perspective, we may ask if there are certain properties of literary works which make them more 'actualizable' than others, which effect that the works lend themselves to rereading, rewriting, remediating, and continued discussion. For example, studying the long and rich afterlife of Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819), Ann Rigney (2010, 215f.) has shown that the novel's continuing appeal can be attributed to a combination of two (seemingly contradictory) characteristics of its plot: More than any other novel by Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe* is both 'highly schematic' *and* highly 'ambivalent'. On the one hand, it offers a basic

narrative paradigm that can be used as a model 'for dealing with *other* events'; on the other hand, it keeps readers puzzled and engaged by its 'de-stabilizing tension between the outcome of the story and its emotional economy'. (On women's rewriting, see also Plate 2010.)

What the 'cultural texts', 'collective texts' and 'literary afterlives' all have in common is that they are *approaches* to studying literature as a medium of cultural memory; they mean taking on a certain perspective on literary texts – and often, one and the same text may potentially be regarded through all three lenses. However, each lens raises different questions and will yield different answers. While the 'cultural-texts approach' looks at literary works as storage media, and asks about the social institutions involved in the preservation and interpretation of canonical, holy, or classical texts, the 'collective-texts approach' is more interested in (often popular) literature's interventions in current memory-debates, in its lively depiction of the past, and in the ways in which it thus shapes collective images of history. The 'afterlives approach', finally, transfers these concerns to the diachronic dimension. It means asking about the continuing impact of some literary works, how they manage to 'live on' and remain in use and meaningful to readers; and it means addressing the complex social, textual and intermedial processes involved in this dynamics. To round out the discussion of literature as a mediator of memory, the following chapter will complement the approaches delineated so far with psychological perspectives on the relation of literature and individual memory.

VI.3.3 Literature as a media framework of memory

How can literature be conceived of as a medium of individual memory? On the one hand, literature is a part of everybody's semantic memory. We remember the characters and plots of the novels we have read and the movies we have watched. Such individual actualization is a necessary condition for the kind of socially shared reading practices described above with the concepts of 'cultural texts' and 'collective texts' (and, of course, it can be at odds with socially dominant readings). On the other hand – and perhaps more disturbingly – literature is also a medium which shapes episodic memory: the way we recall our life experience.

To understand literature's significance for episodic remembering, let us turn, once more, to Maurice Halbwachs's anecdote of a 'walk through London' (see chapter V.4.2). Halbwachs not only emphasizes the role that different social frameworks and media play for his perception of the city; he also hints at the importance of literary models: 'Many impressions during my first visit to London – St. Paul's, Mansion House, the Strand, or the Inns of Court – reminded me of Dickens' novels read in childhood' (Halbwachs 1980, 23f.). The complex interrelations of literature and memory emerge clearly here: The perception of the London cityscape reminds the visitor of a literary work, and the past readings, in turn, pre-form his appreciation of the city. Because Halbwachs is interested in social frameworks, he concludes, 'so I took my walk with Dickens' (ibid.). Like the architect or the painter, therefore, the (then long-deceased) author of a novel can form a social group with the rememberer and serve as a virtual communication partner in the socially shared production of individual memory.

A literary scholar might find Halbwachs's statements too imprecise, or perhaps even wrong. And, of course, the representations of London in *Bleak House* (1852), *Great Expectations* (1860/61) or *Oliver Twist* (1837/38) are not exact and verifiable representations of the metropolis such as we would expect to find in historical treatises or maps. Dickens's novels are *fictional* texts, which do not mimetically reproduce London's reality, but which instead create poietic models of the city. It is equally unwarranted to ascribe to the real author Charles Dickens the description of the location, the fictive events that take place there, or their meaning. Narratology maintains that fictional worlds are mediated by fictive narrative instances (which may be extremely unreliable). But how can fictive depictions, conveyed by an equally fictive narrator, influence a real situation? For Halbwachs, literature obviously functions as a medium from which social frames of reference can be derived. Literature is a *cadre médial*. The reading of literary texts would appear to shape the individual memory as much as social interaction within groups or communication through other, non-fictional media.

And indeed, much recent research has shown that literature plays a central role in the perception and remembering of individual life experience. It is a medium which already pre-forms our encounter with reality; and then helps re-shape experience into our most personal memories. In her book *An Intimate History of Killing* (1999, 28), Joanna Bourke provides a series of examples for the efficacy of literary and filmic representations of war. She reports, for example, that during the invasion of Grenada in 1983 American soldiers played Wagnerian operas, thus imitating Colonel Kilgore (Robert Duvall) – a protagonist from the war movie *Apocalypse Now* (1979) who flew his helicopter attacks to the soundtrack of the 'The Ride of the Valkyries'. Here we find life imitating literature, as Oscar Wilde would have it. And also in less dramatic situations of everyday life, literature has an – often inconspicuous – presence, for example, when we suffer under the burden of our work

like 'Sisyphus', search for a suitable partner like Elizabeth Bennet, migrate, get lost and in danger like Odysseus, feel jealous like Othello, or appreciate a field of spring flowers like Wordsworth's persona. The screenwriters' guru Robert McKee (1997, 62) emphasizes the influence of literary structures on the way we think about ourselves and our lives: 'Most human beings believe that ... they are the single and active protagonists of their own existence; that their existence operates through continuous time within a consistent, casually interconnected reality; that inside this reality events happen for explainable and meaningful reasons.' In Mark Turner's (1996) words, we all possess a fundamentally 'literary mind'.

The key to literature's influence on individual memory lies in its circulation of cultural schemata – and arguably, it is no coincidence that Bartlett's fundamental work on cultural schemata was done by using literary narratives an example (see chapter III.3.1). Today, it is in particular literature communicated through mass media which plays an important role as a source of such schemata. From movies and TV series to radio-plays and Internet role play games – literary media assimilate, embody, alter, and transmit patterns for encoding experience. They thus reinforce existing structures of cultural schematization, but also generate new ones; they pre-form experience (of war and revolution, but also of graduation and marriage) and guide recall into certain paths.

The function of literature as a media framework of memory and as generator of cultural schemata has also been studied in the fields of social psychology and the neurosciences. Harald Welzer (2002), for example, conducted interviews with veterans of the Second World War and realized that literary models taken from popular war movies (ibid., 179f.) and prose fiction (from the *Odyssey* to Karl May and the Grimms' fairy tales; ibid., 186) serve as templates for autobiographical remembering. Welzer considers it 'rather probable that we have all added to our life stories elements and episodes which other – fictional or real – people have experienced and not we ourselves' (ibid., 169). He argues that fiction in particular provides 'tested models for stories which have been proved successful, with which one can captivate and excite one's listeners' (ibid., 186). Our accessing of already existing stories, however, does not seem to occur consciously. On the contrary, as a rule, the interviewees considered their memories to be a quite precise representation of their past experience. In fact, the feeling that our autobiographical memories are authentic tends to be supported by the very elements taken from literary texts. By using literary structures, we overwrite the incoherent events of the past in such a way that they follow one another in a plausible manner, and thus appear particularly authentic, quite logical, and thus 'real'.

One thought-provoking insight into the relation between literature, memory, and our ideas of authenticity has been gained in the field of neuroscientific research. Welzer mentions 'that the neuronal processing pathways for visual perception and for imagined contents overlap to such an extent that even when remembering purely imaginary events, people can vividly see them "before their eyes"' (ibid., 39). This would perhaps explain why the condensed images created through literary texts can sometimes not be distinguished in our memory from that which we have actually experienced personally. However that may be, from a memory studies perspective, literature clearly proves to be 'part of a social, cultural, and historical intertextual web, a distributed memory' (ibid., 187).

Conceiving of 'literature as a medium of cultural memory' requires a rigorous contextualization of literary works. It means envisioning literature as a part of memory culture, entangled in its social, medial, and mental dimensions. It also calls for a nuanced view, and to some extent entails a modification, of basic assumptions made by traditional literary theory, for example, regarding the clear separability between text and context, literature's (non-)referentiality, actual reading practices (which are in dire need of rigorous study), or the alleged stability and unchangeability of literary works. What is at stake here is the realization that the literary production of cultural memory is an ongoing process, characterized by a dynamic interplay between text and context, the individual and the collective, the social and the medial.