

# **Fiction, Between Inner Life and Collective Memory.**

## **A Methodological Reflection.**

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### **Introduction**

In the writing of their fictional works, novelists often have to reflect on the functioning of memory, for memory lies at the heart both of inner life and of human experience in general. It is indeed in the works of writers such as Marcel Proust or Jorge Luis Borges that the best exemplifications of the subjective experience of memory are to be found. However, from a strictly mnemonic point of view, literature provides more than a means of reflecting on memory: it is also the site of the rebirth and construction of individual and collective memories, which can then serve as a foundation for the writing of fictional works. Creative writing has a meiotic function and is as such a powerful tool capable of rescuing memories from oblivion and bringing them back to life, thus reconciling the past with the present.

The present article seeks to bring to bear new perspectives on the relationship between a novelist's personal memories, collective memory, and the fictional narratives partially inspired by these two types of memory. In the first section we briefly examine the distinction traditionally made between individual memory and collective memory, which we then try to reconcile so as to arrive at an approach to the mnemonic phenomenon that best fits the needs of literary scholars. In the second section we challenge the conventional distinction made between memory and fiction, showing instead how the two concepts are linked and focusing, among other things, on the theory of "memory plasticity," which holds that imagination plays an important role in the formation and perpetuation of memories. Finally, we study the relationship between fiction and reality and discuss the specific powers of fiction in its treatment of individual and collective memories.

### **1. Individual and Collective Memory**

A fundamental question lies at the heart of the phenomenon of memory: "To whom should memory be attributed? To the individual or to the group?" To disentangle this complex and delicate relationship, we must first define the terms "individual memory" and "collective memory" and then attempt to reconcile these two sides of the mnemonic phenomenon. Leading scholars have taken clear-cut and conflicting positions on this matter. On the one hand, the school that Ricoeur calls "the tradition of inwardness" (*la tradition du regard intérieur*)<sup>2</sup> has argued that memory is an individual phenomenon. This tradition is based on the conviction, already enunciated by Aristotle, that it is in the very depths of his soul that an individual expresses what he has heard, felt or thought in the past. According to this longstanding tradition, supported by numerous philosophers and psychologists, memory is a

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, transl. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004) pp. 96-120.

subjective experience and memories belong to the individual, helping to build identity by differentiating this individual from others. As Augustine pointed out, the notion of reflexivity thus lies at the root of memory.<sup>3</sup> The development of this conception of the mnemonic phenomenon is linked to the emergence of the emphasis on subjectivity, giving to the concept of consciousness turning back upon itself, even to the point of solipsism.

Radically opposed to the concept of the subjective nature of memory is a school that Joël Candau has come to call “holistic rhetorics,” which argues for the existence of a collective consciousness and thus asserts the primacy of the collective aspect of memory.<sup>4</sup> This school, which Ricoeur calls that of “the external gaze” (*le regard extérieur*), casts into doubt the very notion of individual memory. Memories were first attributed directly to a collective entity by Maurice Halbwachs in his epoch-making *La Mémoire Collective (The Collective Memory)*.<sup>5</sup> This sociologist claims that all memory depends, on the one hand, of the group in which one lives and, on the other, to the status one holds in that group. To remember, one therefore needs to situate oneself within a current of collective thought.<sup>6</sup> As a result, Halbwachs concludes that there are no purely individual memories, i.e. memories that would belong only to the individual, and of which the individual would be the unique source.<sup>7</sup> We are therefore not the authentic subjects of attribution of our memories.

Several writers have attempted to reconcile these conflicting on individual memory and collective memory. For example, Paul Ricoeur argues that memory does belong to the realm of interiority, for we see ourselves as the true possessors of our own memories.<sup>8</sup> However, memory also involves “the other” and fully bears its mark.<sup>9</sup> From its declarative phase, memory enters the public sphere because a testimony is always presented to, and received by, an other. Moreover, Ricoeur, following in the footsteps of Halbwach, asserts that peers can assist an individual in the work of remembering.<sup>10</sup> He therefore draws the conclusion that memory processes involve both the individual and the group. Ricoeur thus differentiates among three different poles of attribution of memory: there exists, between the poles of individual memory and collective memory, an intermediate zone where exchanges between the living memory of individuals and the public memory of the communities to which they belong occur. This is the realm of one’s close relations.<sup>11</sup> Some scholars go further, emphasising the fluidity and reciprocity that characterize exchanges between

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<sup>3</sup> Augustine claims that memory is private because the memories of an individual are not those of others and that when one remembers, one always remembers oneself, which leads to the notion of reflexivity. This claim is the foundation of many contemporary cognitive-psychological studies, such as that of D.L. Schacter who defines memory as a subjective experience and asserts that memories only belong to the individual and characterize his personal life.

<sup>4</sup> Joël Candau, *Mémoire et Identité* (Paris: PUF, 1998), pp. 21-25 and Ricoeur, pp. 120-124.

<sup>5</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *La Mémoire Collective* (Paris: PUF, 1950), ch. I.

<sup>6</sup> Forgetting would thus be caused by keeping one’s distance from the group and from social interactions.

<sup>7</sup> Halbwachs’s theories have been criticised by numerous scholars, including Joël Candau, who admits the existence of a collective memory but who is hostile to what he has called “holistic rhetorics.” Candau especially dislikes Halbwachs’s claim that individual memories are fragments of collective memory. Nonetheless, Candau admits that Halbwachs is right to emphasize the importance of the social frameworks of memory and the influence of social thought on a person’s recollections. Moreover, Candau argues that the metaphorical term “collective memory” would be acceptable if it were true that all the members of a given group were able to share, through social communication, a determined number of representations of the past, but in Candau’s view, this is hard to conceive. In his opinion, it would therefore be more appropriate to speak (as Todorov does) of “public” or “common” memory.

<sup>8</sup> Ricoeur, pp. 124-132.

<sup>9</sup> In Ricoeur’s view, the experience of others is a given as primal as the experience of the self (p. 130).

<sup>10</sup> Halbwachs, pp. 1-15 and Ricoeur, pp. 124-132. Halbwachs and Ricoeur both highlight the fact that the past can be brought back more easily when recalled in groups, for the members of the group will help one another to remember past events.

<sup>11</sup> Ricoeur, pp. 131-132.

individual and collective memories, and argue that they mutually influence one another in their construction.<sup>12</sup> For instance, Candau claims that collective memory can only emerge when individual memories interact, and that this process inevitably leads to the partial homogenisation of the representations of the past. From this point of view collective memory can be seen as a regulative structure of individual memories.<sup>13</sup> In addition, A.J. Mayer<sup>14</sup> and N. Roussiau<sup>15</sup> have pointed out that individuals adopt the memory of the groups in which they live: an individual's personal memories will always interweave with the impersonal memories of the group, for memory is inherently shared and thus social in character. Collective memory thus functions as a framework within which individual memory is built and structured.<sup>16</sup>

This intermediary level is of primary importance for the field of literary research. A fictional narrative is inextricably bound to the social, historical and cultural context in which it is created. A writer belongs to a social group, shares a collective memory with it, and often deals in his fictional works with a past pregnant with meaning and that still impinges on the present. Moreover, a literary work is, in essence, an exchange between persons because it is meant to be read. The narrative act and the work of reading therefore help to constitute this intermediary level that connects the realm of the inner life with that of collective memory<sup>17</sup>. Literature thus plays an important role in the dynamic processes that are basic to the creation and the handling of a collective memory. Literary scholars will often deal with novels in which the characters, the narrator, even the writer himself recount their personal experiences, but in which these personal narratives transcend the individuals and concern a much larger group of people, sometimes mankind in its totality. Literature is thus often a skilful blend of individual and collective memories.

## 2. Memory and Fiction

Before dealing more specifically with the relations between memory and fiction, we must now reflect, if only briefly, on the impact of the act of writing on memory. Scholars are in general agreement that the entry of living memory into the sphere of writing alters both its materiality and its transmission. Maurice Halbwachs believes that writing is the enemy of memory and causes its death. As long as a memory does not fade away, he claims, there is no need to fix it in written form; this only becomes necessary when there is no witness of that past event left, i.e. when a past event no memory of a group for support and no one any longer takes interest in it. That event then turns into History, which begins precisely where tradition ends.<sup>18</sup> Halbwachs here agrees with Plato, who in *Phaedrus* opposes living memory to text, which he considers the dead deposit of the past, even if he does admit that the writing down of recollections can preserve the past against the oblivion caused by old age – however, this is,

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<sup>12</sup> H. Rousso argues in *La Hantise du Passé* (in Fr. Barret-Ducrocq (ed.), *Pourquoi se Souvenir ?* Paris: Grasset, 1999, p. 18) that “collective memory cannot be grasped without individual memory” (our translation).

<sup>13</sup> Candau, pp. 25-46.

<sup>14</sup> A.J. Mayer, “Les Pièges du Souvenir,” in *Esprit*, July 1993 (7), pp. 45-59.

<sup>15</sup> Chr. Bonardi and N. Roussiau, “Quelle Place Occupe la Mémoire Sociale dans le Champ des Représentations Sociales ?” in S. Laurens and N. Roussiau (eds.), *La Mémoire Sociale: Identités et Représentations Sociales* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2002), pp. 33-49.

<sup>16</sup> In A.J. Mayer's view, an individual is never alone and is thus always deeply influenced by the memories of his peers in the reconstruction of his autobiographical memories. Moreover, those who want to perpetuate the memory of a past event on a large scale (even if they have not experienced it themselves) have to rebuild and restructure the personal memories of the people who have directly witnessed it; otherwise these individual recollections cannot function in a collective memory.

<sup>17</sup> The reader plays a crucial role in the construction of meaning. It is therefore of prime importance to examine how a text pre-empted and articulates its own reading.

<sup>18</sup> Halbwachs, pp. 68-70.

in his view, only *memory on crutches*. Ricoeur, on this basis, asserts that we cannot decide whether writing is remedy or poison for memory, because it freezes the always changing work of memory.<sup>19</sup>

This negative assessment of writing, synonymous with the death of memory, cannot serve the interests of literary research: literary critics will usually highlight the positive role of writing for memory and emphasise the usefulness of novels and other literary works that represent and reconstruct past events. The opinions of scholars like Joël Candau is thus more helpful for literary studies. Candau argues that a human being needs more than his brain to remember and thus resorts to “memory extensions,” such as written recollections, which allows some socialisation and a better transmission of memories.<sup>20</sup> Schacter<sup>21</sup> highlights the primordial role that literature and the arts in general play in the recalling of memories and in the construction of autobiographical memory and “narrative identity.”<sup>22</sup> The analysis of numerous literary works has indeed shown that it is through the writing process that memory is constructed and that seemingly lost memories can re-emerge. For instance, Marcel Proust considered the “search for lost time,” or the “remembrance of things past,” as inextricably linked to fiction writing.

## 2.1. Memory and Imagination

Even if writing can sometimes support and foster the work of memory, memory still seems opposed to fiction writing. As Ricoeur has pointed out, memory and fiction pursue different aims: memory, like history, pursues the past, whereas fiction need not do so, and when it does, it is in a way only as an addition.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, fiction is bound to the realm of imagination, while memory appears to reject imagination in order to focus exclusively on the real, for first and foremost it seeks to be *faithful* to the past. The relationship between memory and imagination is at the heart of a relatively complex philosophical debate. Ricoeur argues that these two mental processes have in common the ability to represent absent things.<sup>24</sup> However, he highlights the fact that memory is directed toward the real, i.e. toward the faithful representation, here and now, of a prior reality, whereas imagination is directed toward the unreal. He therefore concludes with Bergson that, even if a memory presents itself as an image, it is not the “de-realizing” function of imagination which is involved in its appearance, but its visualizing function. Ricoeur therefore asserts that it is usually possible to distinguish memory from fiction. Nevertheless, both Bergson and Ricoeur seek to guard against one of the pitfalls of the imaginary for memory; i.e. the intrusion of “hallucination” into the realm of memory, which would lead to a loss of the reliability of memory and would tend to discredit its claims to be faithful to the past. It therefore emerges from a purely

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<sup>19</sup> Ricoeur, pp. 141-145.

<sup>20</sup> Candau, p. 99. See also R. Rémond, “La Transmission de la Mémoire,” in Barret-Ducrocq, pp. 87-91.

<sup>21</sup> D. L. Schacter, *A la Recherche de la Mémoire. Le Passé, l'Esprit et le Cerveau* (Paris: De Boeck, 1999), pp. 112-116 and pp. 345-350.

<sup>22</sup> The notion of “narrative identity” was first suggested by Paul Ricoeur, in “L'Identité Narrative,” in *L'Esprit*, 7-8, July-August 1988, pp. 295-314 and in *Temps et Récit*, vol. II (Paris: Seuil, 1984). Joël Candau explains how Ricoeur came to this concept : how can we make sense of one's life, of a series of unrelated and fragmented actions, of reality's discontinuity? What has made the identity of a person can never be totally remembered. Therefore, one needs to recount it, to transform it into a narrative that will take the form of a meaningful totality. The narrator thus gathers, orders, and renders coherent the events of his life that he finds meaningful and significant at the very moment of the narration. In doing so he adds, invents, modifies, simplifies, infers, schematizes, forgets, and censors some elements (Candau, pp. 63-71).

<sup>23</sup> Ricoeur, pp. 238-248.

<sup>24</sup> Since memory is a representation of the past in the form of an image, it is perceived by some philosophers as belonging exclusively to the territory of imagination and is therefore devalued. This is the reason why some philosophers have tried to differentiate memory from imagination, and even to oppose them to one another (see Ricoeur, pp. 5-55).

phenomenological analysis of memory that fiction and imagination constitute an obstacle, or at least a potential trap for memory. Those who insist on a rigid memory of genocide are totally opposed to the recourse to fiction: they only allow literal testimonies and reject all the additions and transformations that fiction necessarily implies. They seek to “denarrativize” the event and reject the idea that literature can be of service to the work of memory<sup>25</sup>. Nevertheless, numerous writers have shown that memories have a certain plasticity and that, in this sense, imagination and fiction do not just set up obstacles for memory, but are also the *sine qua non* conditions of its very existence.

## 2.2. The Plasticity of Memory: A Reconstruction of the Past in Light of the Present?

Human memory has been compared to computer memory, with a hard disk on which the past is printed and stored. Memories can thus be kept intact, as faithful images of past experiences, and can also be automatically retrieved. Saint Augustine uses in his *Confessions* the well-known metaphor of the “spacious palace” to describe memory and its processes:

When I use my memory, I ask it to produce whatever it is that I wish to remember. Some things it produces immediately; some are forthcoming only after a long delay, as though they were being brought out from some inner hiding place; others come spilling from the memory, thrusting themselves upon us when what we want is something quite different, as much as to say ‘Perhaps we are what you want to remember?’ These I brush aside from the picture which my memory presents to me, allowing my mind to pick what it chooses, until finally that which I wish to see stands out clearly and emerges into sight from its hiding place. Some memories present themselves easily and in the correct order just as I require them. They come and give place in their turn to others that follow upon them, and as their place is taken they return to their place of storage, ready to emerge again when I want them. This is what happens when I recite something by heart [*cum aliquid narro memoriter*].<sup>26</sup>

Other writers, such as Marcel Proust, who was directly influenced by Bergson, believe in the existence of “pure memory.” They consider that memory is always faithful to the past and can thus be reconstructed in its entirety, as long as one holds the key to that past<sup>27</sup>.

In general, contemporary philosophers, psychologists, sociologists and historians do not agree with this conception. For them, there is no pure memory totally faithful to the past, memory is instead always a reconstruction of the past based on present concerns and purposes. Research in neuroscience has shown that memory does not retain and does not reconstruct the original impression. D.L. Schacter explains that memory only stores fragments, bits and pieces of the past, that later serve as a foundation for the reconstruction of those past experiences.<sup>28</sup> Maurice Halbwachs also emphasizes how our present concerns enter the framework of, and modify, our memories of past events. The image of a person or event continually evolves in our memory, for we perceive our past in light of the present: as we change, as we belong to new groups or occupy new positions in the group to which we belong (for example, when we become parents), the way we perceive the world changes, elements we had never perceived seem to emerge.<sup>29</sup> New ideas and memories that originate from other

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<sup>25</sup> See A.J. Mayer, pp. 46-47 and Vincent Engel, “*Le Procès de Shamgorod d’Elie Wiesel: ‘Imaginer’ l’Inimaginable Mal*,” in P.-A. Deproost and M. Watthee-Delmotte (eds.), *Imaginaires du Mal* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 2000), pp. 255-259.

<sup>26</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* 10.8, transl. R.S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), quoted in Ricoeur, p. 518, fn. 5.

<sup>27</sup> See G. Poulet, *L’Espace proustien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982) and *Études sur le temps humain* (Paris: Plon, 1968), vol. I, pp. 364-404 and vol. IV, pp. 299-337.

<sup>28</sup> See Schacter, pp. 112-116 and pp. 345-350.

<sup>29</sup> Halbwachs, pp. 57-66.

persons can also fit in and modify our already existing memories. This constant readjustment of our memories (functioning on both the individual and collective levels) according to our present concerns and to the concerns of other members of our social group, is an unconscious phenomenon: the image of the past that stems from this modification therefore seems real.<sup>30</sup> Memory is thus a dynamic and evolving phenomenon. For Candau memory is more of a constantly updated reconstruction of the past than its faithful reconstitution.<sup>31</sup> Forgetting also plays a major role in this reconstruction process. As Tzvetan Todorov has remarked, forgetting is an integral part of memory, for the latter is selective in its reading of the past.<sup>32</sup> This notion of the plasticity of memory is essential for literary research, for it introduces the ideas of fiction, creativity and reinvention of history into the very material of literature, i.e. personal and collective history.

### 2.3. Fiction and Reality

Now that we have tackled the relationship between memory and imagination, we need to reflect on the one between fiction and reality. From an epistemological point of view, this relationship seems at first impossible to comprehend from a purely structuralist perspective, for structuralism holds that a literary text is a system of signs closed on itself. If this conception of the literary text, derived from Saussurian linguistics, has obvious heuristic advantages, its radical and dogmatic application can eclipse the other dimensions of the aesthetic object that need to be taken into account if it is to be understood in all its aspects.<sup>33</sup> An immoderate formalism could underplay the impact of a text on individual and collective memory and identity and even render this impact incomprehensible, for structuralism excludes the notion of an outside referent and only admits the existence of a “reality effect.” Sociocriticism, on the other hand, has shown that a literary work is linked to the social reality and collective consciousness of a given nation or social group and that literature is therefore bound to the real world.<sup>34</sup> Lucien Goldmann, for instance, compares the writer to what could be called a “writing hand”: a writer shares with all the members of his social group a specific vision of the world and is strongly influenced by the thoughts and views of the group in which he lives; his writing is thus heavily dependent on this collective conception, but also helps the group to become aware of it.<sup>35</sup> This socio-critical tenet, which foregrounds the role of fiction in the construction and handling of collective memory and identity, has been criticised by literary theorists for overemphasising the role of a supposed collective consciousness in the creative act, and thus underestimating the role of the individual. Moreover, sociocriticism does not, as Ricoeur has pointed out, take into account the fact that fiction is directed toward

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<sup>30</sup> This phenomenon is especially visible in the literature of the inner life, i.e. autobiographies and diaries. The way a person perceives and gives meaning to his or her past can evolve and sometimes change radically with time. Sand’s numerous autobiographical works provide many examples of this phenomenon. On the collective level, a group’s perception of its past can also alter following a present event that leads to the revaluation of the past. For instance, the myth of the Edwardian age as an era of perfect bliss emerged after and in contrast to the Great War.

<sup>31</sup> Candau, p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> T. Todorov, “La Mémoire et ses Abus,” in *Esprit*, 7, July 1993, pp. 34-44. Memory is selective; it cannot store all the elements of one’s life, or it would be totally overloaded. For Joël Candau (p. 86), “if one can always choose between memory and forgetting, it is certainly because not all that can be remembered is memorable [...]. It is the construction of identity based on *memoranda*, i.e. things ‘worthy of being remembered’, that is responsible for this selection of meaningful events, this ordering of mnemonic points of reference” (our translation).

<sup>33</sup> Bakhtin (*Esthétique et théorie du roman*) and Pavel (*L’Univers de la fiction*) have both made this point.

<sup>34</sup> See J. Leenhardt, “Littérature (sociologie de la)” in *Encyclopédie Universalis corpus*, p. 905.

<sup>35</sup> L. Goldmann, *Pour une Sociologie du Roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).

the unreal and need not deal with any external reality whatsoever. However, Ricoeur<sup>36</sup> does argue that the aims of history and fiction often interweave, for “history and fiction each concretize their respective intentionalities only by borrowing from the intentionality of the other.”<sup>37</sup> Therefore, if fiction is based on the “wilful suspension of disbelief” and on the neutralization of realistic features,<sup>38</sup> it is also moved by a referential impulse: to recount something is indeed to recount it as though it happened. The immanent sense is thus inseparable from an external referent. It is thanks to this simulation of existence, in the mode of the “quasi,” that a fictional narrative is able to detect, in the mode of the imagination, the unactualized potentialities of the historical past.

Vincent Engel<sup>39</sup> and Jean-Marie Schaeffer<sup>40</sup> have chosen this middle way, arguing that fiction is a type of discourse that enables us to deal better with the real world but that also provides models of substitution for a reality that does not always conform to our desires. Nonetheless, they add that the relation between fiction and reality is not based on truth, but on logic and internal coherence. A novel indeed takes shape in another type of reality: a real event only makes sense *inside* the world of fiction, whose rules it has to follow. In the works of writers (such as Primo Levi, Jorge Semprun, or Louis-Ferdinand Céline) who rewrite, in the fictional mode, historical events which they or their relatives have experienced, fiction feeds on reality, or the novel on History.<sup>41</sup> It is this relationship that gives a novel its force and its power to influence the real, but, for all that, fictional and historical narratives should not be confused; to use Schaeffer’s words, fiction is only *feintise ludique partagée* (playful communal make-believe).<sup>42</sup>

### 3. The Powers of Fiction in its Treatment of the Past

Now that we better understand the relation between fiction and reality, we can begin to reflect on the powers of fiction in its treatment of memories and of the past, i.e. on its ability to convey something about past events and experiences that could not be expressed otherwise. First, it is clear that literature is a powerful means of preserving memories of the past. A.J. Mayer has shown that memory, and especially collective memory, needs material supports to endure, such as monuments, movies, music, but also books and especially novels that allude to or recount historical events.<sup>43</sup> Literature is thus one of the numerous possible supports for memory and helps to expand it in time and space. Because of its written form, a novel can last longer and circulate on a relatively large scale. Moreover, a historical novel will always appeal to a larger audience than a history book, thanks to the fictional techniques that make the narration more attractive than mere facts. Literature thus seems to be an almost eternal site of memory that preserves the memory of the past, passed down from generation to generation

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<sup>36</sup> Ricoeur, pp. 559-560, fn. 49.

<sup>37</sup> Ricoeur, p. 559, fn. 49.

<sup>38</sup> For Ricoeur this is also true for the historical narrative and the autobiographical narrative.

<sup>39</sup> V. Engel, “Fascisme et Nazisme: le Triomphe d’une Fiction,” in L. Van Ypersele (ed.), *Imaginaires de Guerre : l’Histoire entre Mythe et Réalité* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 2003), pp. 469-472.

<sup>40</sup> J.-M. Schaeffer, *Pourquoi la Fiction?* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), pp. 103-118.

<sup>41</sup> It is possible to develop a typology of the different uses of History in novels. First, History can be used as a mere *décor*, a background for plot and characters. Second, a historical event can also be the driving force behind the plot and have an influence on the fate of the characters, like the Revolution of 1848 in Flaubert’s *A Sentimental Education*. Lastly, a specific historical period can sometimes be the main focus of a novel. The writer therefore tries to reconstruct the past and give it life, as if it were one of the protagonists of the story.

<sup>42</sup> Schaeffer, pp. 103-118.

<sup>43</sup> Mayer, pp. 50-55.

to readers who have not themselves experienced the events. As de Romilly puts it, “some have learnt more about Napoleonic wars from Stendhal’s novels than from history textbooks [...]. Even the most convincing documents could not have made the memories of the Holocaust as vivid as Primo Levi’s books.”<sup>44</sup>

Vincent Engel adds that, apart from its ability to preserve memories of the past, literature can also help overcome the three major obstacles potentially obstructing the recollection of a traumatic event. According to Engel, a traumatic event can seem “unimaginable, incommunicable, and unspeakable.”<sup>45</sup> However, it is essential, when confronted with these three impediments, to imagine, communicate and speak,<sup>46</sup> which can be achieved thanks to fiction, as Elie Wiesel’s novels have shown.<sup>47</sup> Engel strongly believes in the powers of fiction in this domain and asserts, against those who argue that the memories of genocides like the Holocaust are sacred and should not be tainted by History or fiction, that one needs to write to be able to live with traumatic memories.<sup>48</sup> In Ricoeur’s view, when confronted with events “at the limits” that seem impossible to imagine and represent through the detached discourse of history, one needs to explore other modes of representation capable of depicting the horror and preserving its memory.<sup>49</sup> Fiction is one of these modes, for it is, in the words of Schaeffer, *feintise ludique partagée*: unlike history, fiction does not have the obligation to tell the truth and can thus express things that would remain unsaid otherwise. Paradoxically, fiction is able to say essential things about reality precisely because it does not have to tell the truth about this reality: after all, one can always add that “it is *only* fiction.” Through the creation of fictional characters, plots, and narrators responsible for the telling of the story, and the transposition to another temporal and spatial frame,<sup>50</sup> fiction can help overcome the obstacles that prevent the recounting and transmitting of a traumatic past. Moreover, since fiction does not have to keep to the historical and factual truth, it can imagine what will otherwise never be known or said and explore the uncertainties of the past.<sup>51</sup>

It should also be noted that art is the only place where the past can be resurrected. Imagination, and thus literature, is indeed structured by a desire to fight against our finitude.<sup>52</sup> Literature thus creates eternal worlds over which time has no hold. This ability to resurrect the

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<sup>44</sup> J. de Romilly, “L’Histoire entre Mémoire Individuelle et Mémoire Collective,” in Barret-Ducrocq, pp. 54-55. Our translation.

<sup>45</sup> V. Engel, “*Le Procès de Shamgorod*,” pp. 257-259. Our translation. We have already highlighted the role that writing can play in the construction and retrieval of long-dormant memories. In addition, the slow process of writing, the demanding structuring of the real it requires, and the necessary distancing it imposes, enable one to deal with one’s traumatic past and put a plaster of words on one’s wound.

<sup>46</sup> One cannot live with the memory of a traumatic past which has not been confronted, for it haunts the present and eventually prevents one from living a fulfilling life.

<sup>47</sup> However, this conception has been challenged by those who champion the idea of the sacred nature of the memory of genocide. They cannot accept the interference of History or fiction in such memories (such as the Holocaust) and have sometimes considered the treatment of the past in films and novels as iconoclastic and revolting (e.g. Roberto Begnini’s *La Vita è Bella*).

<sup>48</sup> V. Engel, “De l’Histoire à la Fiction, de la Fiction à la Mémoire,” *Conférences des midis de l’Institut de littérature*, November 22 2001, to be published.

<sup>49</sup> Ricoeur, pp. 257-261.

<sup>50</sup> Literary works often transpose the present or recent past into another (sometimes undetermined) time and place. For instance, Elie Wiesel’s *Le Procès de Shamgorod*, which reflects on fundamental questions about the Holocaust, is set in 1649. In *Le Régiment Noir* Henri Bauchau transposes the Great War into another war context, that of the American Civil War.

<sup>51</sup> As Ricoeur (pp. 559-560, fn. 49) has pointed out, fiction is “authorized to detect unactualized potentialities of the historical past, in the mode of imaginative variations.”

<sup>52</sup> See G. Durand, *Les Structures Anthropologiques de l’Imaginaire. Introduction à l’Archétypologie Générale* (Paris: Dunod, 1969) and J. Burgos, *Pour une Poétique de l’Imaginaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1982).

past seems peculiar to fiction. Paul Ricoeur<sup>53</sup> has shown that, if history recreates the past, it also separates it from the present in creating a sepulchre for the past, and thus effectively silences the voices of the deceased. Unlike history, literature can, thanks to fictional conventions, resurrect the dead and revive the voices from the past. Therefore, some fictional works do not only function as the sepulchre of the past, they also defeat death and make the past present.

Finally, literature is also the site of sharing and communication, for a literary work is always meant to be read. The reader identifies with the narrated event, takes part in it and makes it exist in his memory. As Vincent Jouve has argued, literature, like cinema, is a privileged place where one has total vicarious knowledge of the other and experiences all the situations that would otherwise be impossible to experience.<sup>54</sup> Literature has the ability to give the reader access to the inner world of characters, to their conscience and feelings. Through the narrative category of “voice” (Genette), literature thus gives flesh and blood to History. Fictional characters lend their eyes to the reader and help him to put a face and a name on historical events and characters. For instance, the reader of Céline’s *Journey to the End of the Night* does not learn about the sufferings and doubts of just any French soldier of the Great War but in particular about those of Bardamu; in Stendhal’s *The Charterhouse of Parma* the reader witnesses the chaos of Waterloo through the eyes of Fabrice, and not those of an unknown soldier.

## Conclusion

First, we have shown that memory cannot be unilaterally attributed either to a single individual or to a group, but that there is always an exchange between the personal memories of an individual and the collective memory of the social group to which he or she belongs. Second, we have seen that the act of writing, long considered the mortal enemy of memory, efficiently supports memory’s work. Moreover, research has shown that memory is not as faithful to the past as has often been assumed and that imagination does play a major role in the formation of memories, for they are always the products of a reconstruction of the past according to present concerns. Fiction, which belongs first and foremost to the realm of fantasy and imagination, is also in constant relation to reality, if only because telling something means telling it as if it had actually happened. Third, we have shown that fiction is a site of memory characterised by its ability to preserve individual and collective memories on a larger scale in time and space. Moreover, fiction is a powerful device in the treatment of a traumatic past such as genocides, because it can transpose reality – an approach that appears profane to the champions of a rigid memory of the past. Fiction can also resurrect the past thanks to its generic conventions. Finally, thanks to the infinite possibilities of its narrative techniques, literature is a privileged means to gain access to the inner life of others.

We are well aware that we have only scraped the surface of this vast and under-researched topic. However, our primary main aim was only to initiate an inquiry into the relations between memory and literature and to provide bibliographical references for those

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<sup>53</sup> Ricoeur, pp. 361-369.

<sup>54</sup> V. Jouve, “Le Héros, Effet de Texte ou de Contexte,” in *Cahiers Electroniques de l’Imaginaire* 1, 2004, pp. 63-73 and V. Jouve, *L’Effet-Personnage dans le Roman* (Paris: PUF, 1992). This identification does not depend on the reader, Jouve argues, but on the text and its shaping through narrative techniques such as focalisation. Because the identification depends more on the textual organisation than on the reader’s values, it is possible to identify with negative characters or with characters whose views the reader does not share, such as Madame de Merteuil in *Dangerous Liaisons* or Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*. We would argue that this is at the root of the “decentring experience” that is brought about by the reading act.

wishing to investigate this field further. As we hope to have shown in this article, a multidisciplinary approach is a prerequisite for a thorough exploration of this engaging topic.

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