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 lifeworlds, 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