

History, Memory, and Personal
Narrative in Contemporary
French Prose
(Summary)

In recent decades, French literature has increasingly been reflecting the social milieu, including history. A number of stories draw on the tragedies of the 20th century, in particular World War II and the Holocaust, in order to capture their meaning and to bring to life the human existence. The narrativization of historical material inevitably focuses on memory, both individual and collective. Besides being a source of historical knowledge, memory has also become a dominant tool of conceiving works of fiction, which implies the search for new narrative forms and calls for ethical responsibility. The ambition of contemporary writers to tell the truth about the world and to bring knowledge, however, contributes to shifting the traditional boundary between fictional and factual narratives. Its permeability does not concern only the discipline of history, but the social science and humanities in general, which logically stimulates debate about the nature and specificity of particular disciplines.

Thinking about history, memory, and personal narrative is complex and requires an interdisciplinary approach. The insight of predominantly French historians (Jacques Le Goff, Paul Veyne, François Hartog, Pierre Nora), literary theorists (Gérard Genette, Dominique Viart, Jean-Marie Schaeffer, Vincent Jouve), cultural historians (Jan Assmann), philosophers (Paul Ricœur) or sociologists (Maurice Halbwachs), among others, provides an important contribution to the topic. Our approach to examining literary representation of history in this monograph is based on a double perspective. Applying Ricœur's conception of the triple mimesis, the first perspective deals with the theoretical questions concerning the literary transcription of history, i.e. its configuration in the fictional narrative in opposition to the historical one ("Writing History") as well as its refiguration represented

by the reception of fiction. The confrontation of two fundamentally different narratives, fictional and historical, allows for reflection on their similarities and differences and pointing out possible perspectives, limits and difficulties of writing history.

The second perspective focuses on the modalities of literary representation of World War II and the Holocaust depending on the author's approach to history, which can be based either on personal experience ("History as Personal Experience") or on mediated experience ("History as Mediated Experience"). A synchronic and diachronic analysis of the works of postwar authors (Jorge Semprun, Georges Perec and Albert Camus) and contemporary ones (Patrick Modiano, Laurent Binet, Nancy Huston and Sylvie Germain) in their social and cultural-historical context exposes various aspects of literary writing about history. These include among others the nature of historical fiction and its relation to history, the diversity of perspectives depending on the theme or choice of narrative techniques, the relation between factuality and fictionality, the question of trauma and its consequences, the representation of liminal experience and testimony, or the reader's perspective in relation to history.

Within contemporary narratives, Sylvie Germain's fictional work covers a wide range of themes related to writing history. By depicting it through the subjective experience of characters, she focuses mainly on showing the consequences of the individual's confrontation with the wars and/or the Holocaust, such as dysfunctional and traumatized memory, problematic transgenerational transfer, and disrupted identity. The author's novels reveal philosophical and spiritual considerations going beyond history itself, which explains why Germain was given more space within the monograph compared to the

works of other authors (“Novel Representation of History in the Work of Sylvie Germain”).

The reflection on the recent historical events, the traces of which continue to linger in the collective consciousness and unconscious, raises questions about memory on all levels of the literary transcription of history, particularly the questions related to forgetting and remembering, which are conditioned by individual and social factors, e.g. the displacement and manipulation of memory, public discourse, the disappearance of last witnesses, etc. The postwar and contemporary narratives also deal with the formation of collective memory, the dynamics of the relationship between memory and identity, the existence of a transgenerational trauma and the question of trauma as a form of memory. The monograph also touches upon the phenomenon of memory as a source of knowledge by means of fiction. Its legitimacy for historical knowledge is indicated by theoretical background concerning the fictional narrative, and especially by the analysis of selected works from the point of view of Jouve’s concept of the three-layer reader (a critical, affective and instinctive one), which illustrates the ways the reader can engage in the text, and subsequently in the world (“A Reader’s Perspective on Historical Experience”). In this respect, postwar narratives seem to appeal primarily to the affective reader (their aim being to arouse the interest and understanding of the reading public), while contemporary narratives require a greater degree of participation of the critical reader due to their heterogeneous and fragmentary nature, resulting partly from their different representation of history.

Particular authors’ approaches are so diverse and relevant that the potential of fiction in regard to the representation of history seems to be inexhaustible. They have

in common the ability to bring timeless knowledge, especially in connection with the Holocaust, which is relevant for both the present and the future.