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Against assimilatory forgetting: memory as identity in contemporary fiction on migration from Eastern Europe

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Abstract

According to Jan Assmann, the process of “transition from one group into another one” might be “accompanied by an imperative to forget the memories with the original identity” (Assmann 2008, 114). However, if one assumes that the process of migration represents such a transition (both in social and cultural terms), it is possible to single out a different approach to memory within contemporary English writing on migration from Eastern Europe. In particular, in Marina Lewycka’s *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* and Kapka Kassabova’s *Reconnaissance*, memory contributes to the construction of transcultural identities where any opposition based on the dichotomy East/West gradually loses its meaning.

Narrative strategies in both the novels revolve around memory as a trigger for a new definition of identity based on transition rather than on the identification with national groups. The main characters’ direct belonging to a group is questioned by the emergence of family memories connected to migration from Ukraine (in *Tractors*) and from Bulgaria (in *Reconnaissance*). The narrative of memories breaks the main action in the novel and the plot can develop towards an end just when the characters have acknowledged memories of migration and of Eastern Europe as part of their own identity. Memory, as in Assmann, is a form of “realisation of belonging” but without that “assimilatory forgetting” (Assmann 2008, 114) that he sees as part of a possible consequence of the transition among social groups. Sharing memories is thus the condition for casting new light on what has remained untold in narratives where Eastern and Western Europe are the object of a polarised perception of the European territory.

Keywords: memory, migration, Lewycka, Kassabova, identity

1. Defining the subject matter

Memory and migration from Eastern Europe are two tightly connected themes in two *operae primae* from the Anglosphere, Kapka Kassabova’s *Reconnaissance* and Marina Lewycka *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* (henceforth: *Tractors*). Despite being substantially different as long as tone of the prose and style are concerned, these two novels share several common traits in their structure, narrative strategies and themes.

In particular, the architecture of each novel can be dismantled in an almost analogous way by singling out three different layers in the plot. My thesis is that each of these layers contributes to the development of the plot by providing the axis along which the protagonists’ identity issue is developed. In particular, identity issues are deeply connected to memory issues in both the novels, where the main protagonists have to confront their Eastern European background with the experience of migration.

The definition of the protagonist’s identity is obtained through the acknowledgment of a heritage of memories providing the protagonists with the tools for reconceptualizing their own “Easternness” in the light of a present life in the West. All in all, both the novels outline migration as a process triggering the development of new forms of memory based on the passage from a social group to another. However, this passage does not seem to be accompanied by what Jan Assmann calls “assimilatory forgetting” (Assmann 2008, 114), the cancellation of a memory heritage due to the exposure to a different, dominant memory heritage within a new social group.

In both *Reconnaissance* and *Tractors*, memory does not concern the individual as a self but rather as part of a social sphere of contacts. In these novels, memories are triggered by the interaction between the characters on a narrative level and by the intersection of the different levels of the plot on a structural level. Nevertheless, before considering these aspects more in detail, I want to focus on the implications of the notion of memory as a social phenomenon.

2. Memory, culture and identity

The social dimension of memory is the origin of Jan Assmann’s notion of cultural memory. In his view, memory “like consciousness, language and personality is a social phenomenon” in so far as

“in the act of remembering we do not just descend into the depths of our own most inner intimate life, but we introduce an order and a structure into that internal life that are socially conditioned and that link us to the social world” (Assmann 2006, 1-2).

All in all, memory cannot exist within the individual without being steered by the social dimension. This mechanism develops along two directions: on the one hand the process of socialisation “allows us to remember”, on the other hand “our memories help us to become socialised” (Assmann 2006, 4). In other words, the individual can identify himself only with those groups he can share a memory with.

Following these two directions, Jan Assmann emphasises a “communicative” and a “cultural” value in memory (Assmann 2006, 3). Memory is communicative in so far as it “belongs to the intermediary realm between individuals; it grows out of intercourses between people, and the emotions play a crucial role in the process” (Assmann 2006, 3). Emotions provide memories with what he calls a “horizon”, without which “they would not imprint themselves in our mind; they would lack relevance and meaning within a specific cultural context” (Assmann 2006, 3). Memory, thus, is a collective phenomenon that grafts itself onto culture thanks to its empathic sense. By playing together with the empathic sense of memory, a culture develops “forms of life, opens up possibilities in which the individual can invest and fulfil himself” (Assmann 2006, 6). Specifically, Jan Assmann mentions the sense of belonging to a social group as a particular feature of emotions, namely a horizon triggering a “bonding” action of memory (Assmann 2006, 4). It is at this point, at the crossroad between communicative memory and culture, that cultural memory develops.

Despite being a social phenomenon, in fact, Jan Assmann’s notion of memory never coincides with the memory of just a group or of a culture. It is rather a culturally and socially determined phenomenon concerning human beings. To define this relation he holds as crucial the notions of communication and tradition: “What communication is for communicative memory,” he writes “tradition is for cultural memory” (Assmann 2006, 8). More in detail, “tradition can be understood as a special case of communication in which information is not exchanged reciprocally and horizontally, but is transmitted vertically through the generations” (Assmann 2006, 8). Following this perspective, he concludes that “cultural memory can be considered to be a special case of communicative memory” and that the main difference between communicative and cultural memory lies in their “different temporal structure” (Assmann 2006, 8).

Jan Assmann defines this temporal structure clearly, by identifying a “synchronic memory-space” running along an imaginary three-generation timeline (Assmann 2006, 8). This is the communicative memory cycle. On the other hand, the “diachronic axis” of memory corresponds to the space of cultural memory and it reaches “far back into the past” than the three generations timeline of communicative memory (Assmann 2006, 8). Cultural memory looks further back in time than communicative memory, beyond the communicative possibilities of living generations, and it is directly rooted into the dimension of traditions that are still living due to their being remembered. The pillars of the diachronic axis are what Jan Assmann calls “memory sites”, a system of “markers enabling the individual that lives this tradition to belong, that is, to realise his potential as the member of a society in the sense of a community where it is possible to learn, remember, and to share in a culture” (Assmann 2006, 9).

3. One plot, three levels

The distinction between communicative and cultural memory as outlined by Jan Assmann can be enlightening to cast light on narrative strategies in both *Reconnaissance* and *Tractors*. Starting from the very name of the main characters and narrating voices, *Tractors* and *Reconnaissance* are novels sharing several common features. Both the main characters bear a name meaning ‘hope’: in *Tractors*, the name version is the Ukrainian one, Nadezhda, whereas in *Reconnaissance* it is the Bulgarian one, Nadejda. Both these characters, christened in the name of hope, live a problematic relationship with their family history, marked by the experience of migration.

The collision between past and present is presented by the means of the aforementioned fragmented plot, divided into three subplots set in different narrative times. One is a narrative in the present tense, led by a first person narrator, which is, in both cases, the protagonist struggling for combining together the pieces of a chaotic present life. Chaos is however rooted in the past, in the story of an immigrant family coming from a different country than the one where present life develops. The family lore provides thus the second narrative axis, on to which the third one is grafted. In the case of *Reconnaissance*, this third narrative level is provided by Nadejda’s dreams as a sleepwalker and by a series of digressions narrated by a mysterious Voice, which in the end of the novel reveals itself as the voice of Bojan, the protagonist’s biological father. In *Tractors*, the third narrative layer takes the shape of a history of the tractor industry in Ukraine written by Nikolai, Nadezhda’s father.

The plot develops similarly in both the novels. The subplot in the present contains the main action. The family lore is triggered by event in the present and causes a shift into the past of the action, in this way leaving room for the third narrative axis. The third subplot is presented as a narrative in the narrative, but it is deeply connected to the family lore by providing an historical – although fictional – frame for it.

4. Reterritorializing displacement: Kapka Kassabova’s *Reconnaissance*

“Exile” and “displacement” (Calleja 2006, 18) are keywords to understand the figure of Nadejda, the protagonist of *Reconnaissance*. She is twenty-one and her life is thorn between Bulgaria and New Zealand. Her father Madlen lives in Sofia, in the flat her family has inhabited all her life long. Her mother Ana, on the contrary, left Bulgaria to move to New Zealand four years before, after 1989, when the country was living a period of transition from the single-party republican system to democratic parliamentarianism¹. At that time, Nadejda went with her mother to New Zealand, where they rejoined Ana’s brother Vassil, who had left Bulgaria already in the Seventies. After four years in New

Zealand, Nadejda decides to fly back to Sofia to establish whether she should move back to her home country. However, Sofia is living a time of violent political unrest. After a few weeks, Nadejda opts for flying back to New Zealand but, instead of reaching her mother, she embarks herself into a journey along the Kiwi islands. Her travel ends with a revealing meeting with Bojan, a man who not only turns out to be Nadejda's biological father but also a key-figure to reinterpret her family's history and migration experience.

Nadejda's experience between Bulgaria and New Zealand is presented as an *Odyssey sui generis*:

She could hardly call that an Odyssey, and she wants nothing less than an Odyssey. But this is the opposite of an Odyssey: beginning at a foreign place, she goes home, and gradually returns to the foreign place. New World, Balkans, New World. No, Odyssey or nothing: that's Nadejda's desire. (Kassabova 1999, 36).

The spatial movement between Bulgaria and New Zealand is the ground for the real Odyssey of *Reconnaissance*, Nadejda's journey through time and memories. The final station of this *nōstos* is the awareness of her family history, of her own transcultural identity developed thanks to the transition among social groups rather than on the basis of the static belonging to a national group.

The chronological development of the plot in *Reconnaissance* is blurred since the very beginning. The first chapter opens with a dream, where Bulgarian and Kiwi landscapes merge with each other. The narrative of Nadejda's trip along New Zealand is then repeatedly interrupted by flashbacks, often covering entire chapters. Those flashbacks constitute the memories of Nadejda's family but they are not represented as a continuative family lore. On the contrary, their memories consist of private secrets concerning the past, kept secluded as private memories and left out of any form of communication among generations. Paradoxically enough, Nadejda is the only *trait d'union* among the family members, yet she has limited access to the stories about their past.

In the characters' flashbacks, personal history and Bulgarian national history merge with each other. The family lore is displayed along three main episodes. The first is represented by a tape recorded for Nadejda by uncle Vassil. In his audio message, he explains that he was declared an enemy of the people, had to flee "his" land and be the victim of "violence" in refugee camps in Greece (Kassabova 1999, 176-181). What he does not know is that Bojan's father was sentenced to death for helping him crossing the Bulgarian border. At the other side of the Equator, in Sofia, Madlen writes the second main flashback, conveyed by a letter to Nadejda. In his letter, he confesses to have killed a demonstrator during his military service and to have learnt in that way that one can "do something evil without being evil" (Kassabova 1999, 113). Like Vassil, Madlen is also unaware of a secret concerning Bojan: he is the biological father of his daughter Nadejda. In her turn, Ana, the guardian of the secret about Nadejda's paternity, has cut any kind of communication with her former lover Bojan since the time he became an informer for the Bulgarian secret police, left for Germany and from there to New Zealand. She also has avoided any contact with her husband Madlen after he had refused to leave for New Zealand with her. The key-figure in all the flashbacks, Bojan, does not directly appear in the novel before the third and last section, unless in the shape of a mysterious Voice addressing Nadejda when she sleepwalks.

Nadejda's flashbacks appear as burdened with the weight of history as her relatives' stories. "Nadejda doesn't care for history [...]" the narrator informs the reader. "What's the point in recounting events that have no relevance to us? But history haunts us. [...] We are blind slugs that crawl out of history's caves [...]. We are history" (Kassabova 1999, 136-137). This attitude emerges from her meetings with other tourists during her trip along New Zealand, when she herself pretends to be a European tourist in Oceania. These meetings always open a breach on the past and remind her of foreigners she met during her childhood in Bulgaria. Family and Bulgarian history merge together when Nadejda indulges in memories of the soviet summer school camps where she had to perform her duty as a Pioneer Leader or when she remembers her teenage love Moni, half Bulgarian and half Australian, who represented her first connection to Bulgarian exiles in Oceania. Particularly intense is the meeting with a Frenchman, who reminds her of an episode involving her father in France, during which he felt the humiliation of being treated as the 'poor relative' due to his being Bulgarian (Kassabova 1999, 62).

Nadejda's fictive tourist identity provides her with the possibility of moving the focus of her national belonging from a country, Bulgaria, to a continent, Europe, which "allows her to deconstruct the assumed bases of her 'Bulgarian' identity" (Calleja 2006, 25-26). Moreover, during her travelling, the spatial relation between past and present reaches a standstill, giving her the possibility of exploring the past in its connections to the present without the urgency of taking up the immigrant role. Each meeting during her trip along New Zealand becomes an occasion for symbolically fulfilling those relationships that Nadejda had to abort in the past, in Bulgaria. During each episode, she makes a step further with respect of the past antecedent fact. The complementarity of past and present meetings provokes a shift in Nadejda's relation to history. From a burden to be hated, the past and the present becomes for the first time complementary dimensions of life connected to each other in the individual's experience. It is with this in mind that Nadejda casually meets Bojan, an acquaintance of some friends.

On a structural level, the meeting with Bojan represents the unifications of the three subplots of the novel. Bojan gives Nadejda the opportunity to put together the puzzle of her family history: he tells her the story of her uncle migration to New Zealand, he reveals to have loved her mother and to be her father. Furthermore, he also reveals to have been together with Nadejda's grandmother when she died on a flight to New Zealand. Bojan is admittedly the voice of the past: "I'm nothing but the past," he says "nobody knows me. Nobody remembers me" (Kassabova 1999, 154). His intervention in the novel coincides with the necessity of the past of being acknowledged, voiced, of being

remembered and letting people remember. Nadejda's family own Bojan "recognition" (Kassabova 1999, 214) inasmuch as they own recognition to the past as a price for having preferred to hide their memories rather than sharing them with others. Nobody of them is "free of debt" (Kassabova 1999, 214), except for Nadejda, who represents hope and the future.

Since the family memory has been precluded to Nadejda, she finds herself in a circuit break between past and present and she is incapable to move on towards her future, to choose between places and memories. Until the meeting between Nadejda and Bojan, any possibility for memory to circulate is blocked by the lack of interaction among generations on a diachronic level. Since memory "enables us to live in groups and communities, and living in groups and communities enables us to build a memory" (Assmann 2008, 109), the lack of a shared memory keeps Nadejda out of her family as a Bulgarian family, but also out of the possibility of identifying with them as a family of migrants to New Zealand.

When Nadejda is invested by the burden of the truth, she wails "the way all the women before her wailed" (Kassabova 1999, 296). In her wail her disgust for history is hidden: "Life is disgusting. [...] Before she was born, and after she dies, there will be suffering for nothing, and she will have made no difference" (Kassabova 1999, 289). However, the truth revealed by Bojan functions as a catalyst: it hits, it overcomes her, but at the same time provides her with the awareness of that "death-lock of great history and smaller destiny" all her family is connected to (Kassabova 1999, 291). Voicing this truth, passing it from generation to generation, sharing it along a diachronic chain is the first form of what Nadejda herself calls "reconciliation" (Kassabova 1999, 292), which is reconciliation with the past but also with one's own identity.

If we consider the distinction made by Jan Assmann between "memory" and "knowledge", where memory is "knowledge with an identity index" (Assmann 2008, 114), one can state that the meeting with Bojan marks the shift from Nadejda's knowledge of the past into memory. Bojan adds that identity-index to Nadejda's knowledge which is crucial for her to turn knowledge into "knowledge of herself", into the shared memory of a group she is a member of. In this way, her action of remembering becomes "a realization of belonging" (Assmann 2008, 114), of sharing a cultural memory that starts from *communication* between close generations and overtakes it, leading her to identify the connection between her family's and her country's history. Having acknowledged this bond allows her to acknowledge also the reason for a migration, identifying herself with as a transcultural group which created its own identity out of its moving along both space and time.

5. A different Ukraine for different memories: Marina Lewycka's *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*

Differently than in *Reconnaissance*, family memory is set into motion from the very first paragraph of *Tractors*. It is Valentina, "a glamorous blonde Ukrainian divorcée" who gives "the family memories a kick up the backside" (Lewycka 2005, 1). She is thirty-six and she is about to get married with the eighty-four years old Nikolai Mayevsky, a widower since two years, causing a rebellion in his daughters, Nadezhda and Vera.

Valentina places herself in the generational gap between the parents the children, working as a foil revealing the differences in their perception of their own Ukrainian background. In particular, she triggers a debate within the family about migration and the presence of Eastern European immigrants in the UK. The family members' opposite views are displayed along the novel by means of the aforementioned breaking of the plot in three different subplots.

In the case of *Tractors*, the family lore told by Nadezhda results from many stories circulating within family Mayevsky. It constitutes the second narrative axis, and, together with the passages from Nikolai's book on the history of tractors (the third narrative axis), it reflects two different patterns of perception of history. Nikolai associates Ukraine to an idyllic landscape spreading the scent of "mown hay", the ideal background for the development of engineering, whereas Nadezhda strongly perceives "the distinct whiff of New Russia" (Lewycka 2005, 1). Nikolai devotes himself to a chronological narrative ending with a moral warning. In his *History of Tractors*, in fact, events follow each other in a consequential way, bearing a specific meaning within a teleological perception of history. His daughter's approach cannot be more different: "All this Ukrainian nationalism bothers me – it seems outdated and irrelevant. Peasants in the field, folk songs at harvest, the motherland: what has all this got to do with me? I am a post-modern woman" (Lewycka 2005, 82). Her family lore results from a collage of stories rather than a grand narrative of events. In her stories, history appears fragmented as well, and recollections of past events graft themselves onto the main narrative structure almost by association: present actions recall past ones, as past actions could provide an explanation for present ones. In this way, the past and the present become just an echo of each other.

Valentina can enter in the family thanks to a void left by the past, the death of Nadezhda's mother, Ludmila. This void is not just emotional, but corresponds rather to a circuit break in the circulation of family stories and memories. The equation between memories and stories is made by Nadezhda herself, who introduces them in the narrative as overlapping forms of knowledge of the past: 'I sit on the bench under the wild cherry tree in the cemetery and sort through memories, but the harder I try to remember, the more I get confused about which are memories and which are stories' (Lewycka 2005, 47). Ludmila was "the guardian of the family archive, the spinner of stories, the custodian of the narrative that define who we are" (Lewycka 2005, 49) and her death caused an identity crisis in the family. Ludmila's legacy has been passed on both materially and symbolically to Vera, the eldest sister. However, Nadezhda does not recognise her sister's role of custodian of the family memory. "It's time" declares "to find out the whole story, and to tell it in my own way" (Lewycka 2005, 49).

It is the arrival of Valentina that brings the two sisters together. They both perceive her as a “usurper” (Lewycka 2005, 2) of the maternal role. Not only cannot Valentina replace their mother due to age reasons, but also as she brings along a different memory heritage. The quest of the two sisters for pushing Valentina out of the family becomes a quest for defining their family identity. Nevertheless, in order to defend her mother’s legacy against Valentina, Nadezhda has to put order among family stories and memories.

All the Mayevskys are bearers of a certain storytelling ability connected with their past in Ukraine. Each member of the family has her/his own way of passing on family stories:

When I was little my mother used to tell me family stories – but only the ones that had a happy ending. My sister also told me stories [...] Vera’s stories always had a beginning, an end and a moral. Sometimes my father told me stories, too, but his stories were complicated in structure, ambiguous in meaning and unsatisfactory in outcome, with lengthy digressions and packed with obscure facts. (Lewycka 2005, 47-48).

Nadezhda has always been just the listener of those stories, having grown up in the UK. On the other hand, her sister, who is ten years older, shares not only memories about Ukraine, but also family secrets, “things that were whispered but never spoken about [...] secrets so terrible that just the knowledge of them had scarred her heart” (Lewycka 2005, 49). Even Nadezhda’s version of the story on how the family left Ukraine differs from her sister’s (Lewycka 2005, 237). The gap between the two versions corresponds to the gap between the notion of memory and the notion of story. Vera’s version has a claim for authenticity due to her first-hand involvement into it, while Nadezhda’s version is based on what she has heard from her father. The question of whose story should prevail is however not even raised. “That is the story of how my family left Ukraine”, comments Nadezhda, “two different stories, my mother’s and my father’s” (Lewycka 2005, 237). Different versions of the family lore are thus simply juxtaposed, without any pretence for authenticity. Authenticity lies in fact in both of them, in the way they intertwine and contribute to shape a shared family memory. Both versions, in fact, “enable to form an awareness of selfhood”, an “identity”, allowing Nadezhda and Vera to identify with their family on a diachronic level (Assmann 2008, 109).

Nadezhda’s awareness of the value of stories in the shaping of a shared family memory contributes to her reassessing her father’s approach to Ukraine and to history. She understands that the gap between their perspectives is yet again connected to the generational gap running between them and providing them with different memories. At this point, she can also revise her opinions on Valentina. What makes her different from her mother and from the Mayevskys is the fact that they ultimately come from different countries. Valentina “is a daughter of the Brezhnev era” (Lewycka 2005, 170) and her Ukraine is different than the country left by Vera at the end of World War II. Moreover, Nadezhda’s Ukraine is based on a collage of stories and images of a post-Soviet country. Not only does Nadezhda understand that each member of the family interprets Valentina’s actions in the light of her bond to their mother Ludmila, but also of their memories of Ukraine.

Nadezhda’s understanding is made possible by her privileged position at the confluences of the memories of the characters pivoting around her. Like the meeting between Bojan and Nadejda in *Reconnaissance*, the meeting with Valentina adds an “identity index” (Assmann 2008, 114) to Nadezhda’s knowledge of the family past, in this way turning knowledge into memory. As Bojan, Valentina re-awakens the circulation of family memories and compels the protagonist to reassess her identity in the light of a shared memory.

6. Conclusions

In both *Tractors* and *Reconnaissance*, the circulation of family memories connected to the experience of migration is a fundamental element in the building of the protagonists’ identities. Without the knowledge of their family past, not only do Nadejda and Nadezhda find impossible to come to terms with their own present life, but also to understand the different implications of present events for the different generations of their family members. Using Jan Assmann’s words, we have seen that, in their case, “remembering is a realization of belonging, even a social obligation” (Assmann 2008, 114).

In these two novels, memories are specifically connected to the experience of migration from Eastern Europe to the West. Passing on this memory from one generation to another, relating it with its historical background and allowing for a reassessment of national identities prevents the characters from becoming victims of forms of assimilatory forgetting. In their case, their “transition from one group into another one” is not “accompanied by an imperative to forget the memories with the original identity” (Assmann 2008, 114). Quite the opposite: transition is what awakens memories in both *Tractors* and *Reconnaissance* and the experience of migration stimulates a confrontation with the past.

In this way, the three-generation cycle typical of cultural memory is fulfilled. Moreover, migration does not simply trigger the circulation of memory concerning an imaginary three-generation timeline in these novels. In *Reconnaissance* and *Tractors* the individual who comes to terms with migration and embraces a transcultural identity changes his points of observation by experiencing shifts in perspective, which can be disorientating at first, but then becomes a means to re-territorialize not only his identity, but also his perception of history. In other words, communicative memory of migration allows for the formation of the cultural memory of a transcultural social group in so far as it allows for a reassessment of history, traditions and representation further back in time than the experience of living generations.

By going beyond national belongings and exploiting the notion of movement in the creation of their characters, Kassabova and Lewycka question the bias implied in choosing either Eastern or Western Europe as a limited standpoint from which stories can be told. Doing this, they create the possibility for memories to circulate on the basis of new mental map where Eastern and Western Europe cease to exist as incompatible poles of an opposition. In this way, they re-territorialize the reader's perception of the European territory, making it a space where people's movements can be traced rather than a map where people's positions can be objectified and arranged.

Notes

¹ For political changing in post-communist Bulgaria, see: Richard Crampton, 'Post-communist Bulgaria, Part I: Incomplete transition 1989-1997', in: *A Concise History of Bulgaria* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University press, 2005), pp. 212-258.

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