



Research Article

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Rethinking Transcultural Reception of Memories In Julian Barnes's *Nothing to Be Frightened of*

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Introduction

"People say of death, 'There's nothing to be frightened of.' They say it quickly, casually. Now let's say it again, slowly, with re-emphasis. 'There's NOTHING to be frightened of.' The word that is most true, most exact, most filled with meaning, is the word 'nothing', reflects the narrator in Julian Barnes's *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (2008). He continues: "We live, we die, we are remembered, we are forgotten" (Barnes, 99-100).

In several Barnes's works, the concept of nothingness provides access to important and yet unexplored aspects of human experience, displaying a dialectical relationship between remembering and forgetting. In *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, the narrative construction of semantic silence approximates to the conception of rhetorical nothingness, thoroughly analysed in J.M. Winter's examination of collective memory and carried out in *Beyond Memory: Silence and the Aesthetics of Remembrance* [1]. Instead of considering remembering and forgetting as hermetical and mutually exclusive, this study insists on their profound etymological connectiveness and thematical interplay, observable within contemporary social and cultural frameworks.

As stated in "Silences beyond remembering and forgetting", there is a clear theoretical articulation of the ability of literature to present silence as a complex social and performative act, capable of providing hidden sites of forgetting within the visible dimension of collective remembering. Defining Memory Studies as an intricate field of scholarship, Alexandre Dessingué and Jay Winter aim at considering the dialogical dimension of memory, regarding it as one of the most effective ways to approach the interplay between remembering and forgetting: "In recent times, many researchers within the interdisciplinary field of memory studies have stressed

the risks of a binary approach to our understanding of how remembering and forgetting operate and how they relate to each other. One way to go beyond an either-or distinction between the two is to explore issues of cognition and performativity" (Dessingué and Winter, 2016, 1).

The issues of cognition and performativity of memory, mentioned in the above-quoted passage, emphasize the etymological complexity of various processes of remembering and forgetting explored in Barnes's *Nothing to Be Frightened of*. Being intrinsically related to fluid narratological temporality, their discursive interweaving has been located within the "past-in-present focus of memory" (ibid., 1). Challenging the historiographical linearity of collective time, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* insists on considering remembering and forgetting as performative phenomena, operating within collective cognition, stressing the dimension of silence and nothingness as both narratively mediated phenomena. Moreover, in Barnes's narrative the concept of nothingness is located somewhere in between collective oblivion and personal recollection, while a discursively represented dimension of silence is keen of challenging various taken-for-granted social and cultural constructs featuring contemporary European consciousness. The present article aims to examine the relationship between different forms of remembering and forgetting involving the question of the temporality of memory within this text's narrative structure. Starting from the above-mentioned conception of silence associated to nothingness, it will proceed towards a wider understanding of a neatly crafted communicational context laying beneath a non-linear narrative representation of European historical backgrounds examined in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*. Addressing a complex interplay between what Aleida Assmann denominates memory as

ars and memory as vis, it will demonstrate an existing discursive connection between the process of narration and the process of recollection, which contributes to break the narrative chronology of collective memory represented in the text. Second, it will analyse the theoretical significance of relevant intertextual references to European collective past, illustrating various ways in which literary analysis of a text might contribute to new finding in Transcultural Memory Studies. Finally, the paper will provide further perspectives on narratology as an appropriate theoretical tool to critically address ontological connection between Transcultural Memory Studies and Literary Memory Studies [2].

Garrison Keillor's examination of *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, provided in "Dying of the Light" (2008), brings to the fore the significance of fragmentary recollections of collective past, represented as "past-in-present" narration of multiple life experiences, focusing on complex memory process. Keillor describes, for instance, how "Julian Barnes, an atheist turned agnostic, has decided at the age of 62 to address his fear of death - why should an agnostic fear death who has no faith in an afterlife? How can you be frightened of Nothing? On this simple question Barnes has hung an elegant memoir and meditation, a deep seismic tremor of a book that keeps rumbling and grumbling in the mind for weeks thereafter" (Book Review | 'Nothing to Be Frightened Of,' by Julian Barnes - The New York Times (nytimes.com)).

Still, reviewing the process of composition of *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, Julian Barnes surprisingly remarks: "This is not, by the way, my autobiography". He reiterates, in a provocative mode: "some of this book will strike you as amateur, do-it-yourself stuff" (Review: *Nothing to Be Frightened of* by Julian Barnes | Biography books | The Guardian). It would be interesting to mention, at this stage, the existence of a strong intertextual connection between the above-mentioned Barnes's argument and Leo Tolstoy's description of a multilayered writing process in a trilogy *Childhood, Boyhood, and Youth* (1857). The narrative representation of remembering and forgetting, explored in Tolstoy's work, also led several literary critics to consider the text as a detailed autobiographical sketch featuring Tolstoy's own life. However, the author firmly objected such a simplistic argumentation, emphasizing instead the text's central question of "who cares about the story of my childhood?" (the writer's emphasis, Tolstoy, 3).

Even if the above-mentioned writers expose both contrasts and similarities between their own lives and the narratively staged recollections of collective past observable within their texts' narrative structure, Leo Tolstoy and Julian Barnes strongly objected such a reductive view of a thematical complexity exposed within socio-historical contexts described in their works. According to Tolstoy's aesthetics, the critical inclination towards a predominantly personal interpretation of a variety of cultural and social backgrounds which constitute the etymologically intricate thematic core of a literary memoir has been firmly stated. As assumed by many contemporary literary and memory critics alike, a too straight connection between one writer's life and his work greatly contributes to limit the texts' dialectical and critical potential. Various thematic and structural shortcomings derived from a discursively restrictive, autobiographical perspective,

adopted by several critical studies in addressing *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth* is thoroughly discussed by Judson Rosengrant's in her analysis of Tolstoy's work. Instead of leaning heavily on the analysis of extensive personal memories reworked in Tolstoy's text, she proposes to consider the narrative construction of a vast socio-historical context of the 19th century Russia, explaining how the narrative entanglement of different acts of remembering and forgetting, lying at the structural and thematic core of Tolstoy's trilogy, are linked to different modes of narrative representation of Russian social and cultural diversity of the past. Analysing the complexity of a memory process developed within the narrative construction of *Childhood, Boyhood, and Youth*, she affirms: "The story told in the trilogy is a brilliantly sustained imaginative construct, a social and psychological mediation derived, to be sure, from biographical experience as perhaps most works of fiction ultimately are, but not to be confused with that experience or with its merely private meaning. Indeed, to make such a confusion, as some biographers and critics have done, is to overlook or diminish the artistic skill which the trilogy has been made and to blur the outlines of Tolstoy's own life and its historical reality" (Rosengrant, 2012, 3).

The expanding scope of personal recollection of historical reality displayed in the above-mentioned passage comes to emphasize Tzvetan Todorov's concept of reading as an act of construction, describing multi-layered ways in which readers engage with texts and project fictional accounts of the rhetoric of memory involved in the fabrication of sociocultural reality. Moreover, as Todorov claims that novels do not imitate reality, they create it [3], revealing a deep connection between time, point of view and mode of narration. The combination between these three functions - time, point of view and mode - might be perceived as a foundational stylistic device in the narrative construction of Barnes's *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*. In this text, the imagination provides a fertile territory for the compelling engagement with different modes of narration addressing representation of culture, collective identity and history, as well as exploring a variety of links between text, reader, and memory processes.

Its fragmented narrative construction does justice to Dessingué's perspective on multidirectional nature of memory, related to a broader understanding of literary discourses as being dynamic, rather than fixed dimensions. He emphasizes the importance of considering both interdirectional and intradirectional essence of collective memory, operating within diverse cultural contexts. For instance, he argues that "Each act of cultural or collective remembrance can be considered as influenced by former acts of remembrance in different contexts, underlining again the intermediality of language and memory considered as dynamic and changing phenomena. Thus the multidirectionality of memory has to be regarded as both interdirectional because cultural memories influence each other; and interdirectional because cultural memories have a potentiality of being regenerated; they don't have a fixed material meaning, nor the words" (Dessingué, 2-3).

Pursuing a similar line of thought, acknowledging literary work as a living memory, Barnes approaches various acts of remembrance and forgetting as mutually co-dependent transcultural phenomena,

not fixed to a particular contextual meaning. Asked about why readers tend to focus on writer and not writing itself, Barnes notoriously replies:

“I have, obviously, a divided position on it. As a writer, I want my books to be read as something separate from myself. I produce them as crafted objects out there. To which the reader may respond in whatever way he or she wishes. As a reader of an impressive book, I have a natural human curiosity about who made it. On the other hand, I think I know enough - seen enough of the dealings of modern biography to be very protective of my own life and of those around me. There is a danger that celebrity, even the small celebrity of being a writer, joins you on to a different way of behaving and a different way of being behaved to. And as I said we are not running for office. You don't like me. I don't mind. You don't like my books I don't mind” (Julian Barnes talks about writing *Love, Etc.* (identitytheory.com))

Narrated as a collection of memory fragments, Barnes's *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* deeply explores the complex non-linear connection between collected memory (i.e., socially shaped individual memory) and collective memory (i.e., public discourse of the past), also discussed in detail by Olick in *Collective Memory and Collected Memory: Two Roads to the Past* (1999). This line of thought is carefully reworked in the already mentioned Aleida Assmann's distinction between memory as *ars* and memory as *vis*, advocating their etymological proximity in the process of the narrative construction of memories of the past. Although Olick claims that the connection between individual and collective approaches to memory and forgetting are rarely articulated in literature, Aleida Assmann insists, in *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization* [4], on a well-structured reflection on the relationship between these two processes of memory performed within a literary text. While memory as *ars* aims to articulate safe storage and identical reproduction of relevant historical information in the archival form, memory as *vis* focuses on emphasizing constant revision of memories.

According to Assmann's perspective, occurring within a specific historical time, the act of remembering inevitably selects certain social experiences and excludes others, additionally doing justice to Erll's argument that “historical consciousness and remembering in a social context are two of the central components of cultural memory” (Erll, *Memory in Culture*, 39). In parallel with remembering, forgetting constitutes a constructive, narrative process, acute to the problem of time, change and transformation, being directly related to the psychological process of identity and frequently extinguished from the collective memory. The tension between ‘objective-scholarly’ and ‘subjective-memorial’ forms of dealing with the past can be approached through the interplay of memory and counter-memory in socio-cultural contexts, within the analysis of ruptures and continuities in (trans)cultural reception of literary memories not only in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, but also many other English contemporary memory narratives alike.

It might be claimed that in *Nothing to be Frightened Of* a tension between memory as *ars* and memory as *vis* challenges the structural unity of a book, displaying a harmonious coexistence of factual and

fictional narratives. On the one hand, it revolves around a gradual reconstruction of relevant historical and cultural heritage, stored in the archival form. On the other hand, it focuses on the critical revision and analysis of personal, collected, memories of the past. The close discursive interaction between these two dimensions of memory - *ars* and *vis* - permits to critically confront not only the narrative articulation of personal and collective memory constructs, but also to acknowledge the existence of silenced, not visible, discourses represented within the territory of forgetting.

Therefore, according to Assmann, re-examining the narrative dimension of forgetting may provide solid critical tools for the reconstruction of memories and concealed meanings, which can contribute to the revision of the constructed nature of historical past and contemporary present. In *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, the narrator emphasizes close semantic intertwining between remembering and forgetting, revealing various symbolic ways in which both dimensions can contribute to a gradual revival of the forgotten memories stemming from distant historical and cultural contexts. For instance, describing modern consciousness, bereaved of the sense of shared memory and common cultural background, the narrator relates the distancing from God to “secular modern heaven of self-fulfilment: the development of the personality, the relationships which help define us, the status-giving job, . . . the accumulation of sexual exploits, the visits to the gym, the consumption of culture. It all adds up to happiness, doesn't it - doesn't it? This is our chosen myth” (Book Review | ‘Nothing to Be Frightened Of,’ by Julian Barnes - *The New York Times* (nytimes.com)).

In this way, in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, the thematic dimension of forgetting operates on several narrative levels, bringing to the fore the importance to reconsider anew a hidden territory of multiple cultural frameworks stemming from distant historical past. In this narrator's opinion, the remembrance of God on a collective level can greatly add to etymological consolidation of knowledge about historical, cultural and social contexts of the European past. On the other hand, a collective distancing from God and discourses on religion taking place in contemporary society also translate, in this narrator's perspective, an extended form of forgetting related to collective past and its transcultural historiography.

The narrator reveals, for instance, that the foundation for memory lies in the attentive revising of the forgotten cultural masterpieces which still provide a significant support for the development of modern European societies. A fragmentation of memory and a gradual distancing from the past deprives modern society not only of the sense of purpose and belonging, but also of the possibility to revisit a variety of transcultural dialogues concealed beneath the silenced and forgotten memories of the past. The narrator's acknowledgement in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, “I don't believe in God, but I miss Him” provides further critical insights into the narrow relationship between remembering and forgetting, the present and the past. It also reveals the significance of the narratively addressed connection between collected and collective dimensions of memory previously developed by Olick. For instance, the narrator reiterates:

"I miss the God that inspired Italian painting and French stained glass, German music and English chapter houses, and those tumbledown heaps of stone on Celtic headlands which were once symbolic beacons in the darkness and the storm."

The demand to revise Medieval discourses on religion, featuring the existence of God and the creation of Universe, essentially reveals the narrator's greater preoccupation with socio-historical dynamics of remembering and forgetting observable on a transcultural level. The etymological complexity of the transcultural mnemonic processes registered in a global age is thoroughly articulated within *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*. Its structural and thematic construction not only leans on exploring diverse historical places and times during the process of narrative remembering, it also emphasizes the importance to (re)consider strong intertextual devices operating within its narrative structure and bringing to the fore a dynamic approach to acts of remembrance and forgetting.

For instance, the necessity to reconnect the individual "I" to a larger context of the "Universe", mentioned in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, also appeals to a widely discussed philosophy of a universal self, represented in Leo Tolstoy's essay entitled "What is Art?" [5]. Defining art as a communicative intercourse between human beings, Tolstoy reflects on literature's ability to reconnect individual memories to a commonly shared collective memory process, thus establishing the relationship between past and present, memory and forgetting, memory as *ars* and memory as *vis*. He claims, for instance, that the multi-layered reception of memories is crucial for both literature and culture:

"If people lack this capacity to receive the thoughts conceived by the men who preceded them and to pass on to others their own thoughts, men would be like wild beasts. And if men lacked this other capacity of being infected by art, people might be almost more savage still, and, above all, more separated from, and more hostile to, one another".

From the intertextual perspective, this passage clearly articulates the idea of interconnection between memory as *ars* and memory as *vis*, also laying at the discursive foundation of Barnes's *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*. For instance, the opening lines of the book emphasize the relationship between the process of cultural memory and the process of individual identity, demonstrating how remembering reflects forgetting. As mentioned earlier, Olick discusses both the differences and similarities between personal and collective understanding of memory, trying to grasp manifold moments of contact between the two concepts. Moreover, the non-chronological narrative construction of collected and collective memories reworked in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* provides a fertile theoretical background for further insights into complex entanglements between individual memories and the historically anchored public discourses about the past constructed within the narrative:

"Memory is identity. I have believed this since – oh, since I can remember. You are what you have done; what you have done is in your memory; what you remember defines who you are; when you forget your life you cease to be, even before your death. [...] Identity is memory, I told myself; memory is identity" (Barnes, 140-141).

In this text's perspective, the narrative articulation of forgotten

cultural and historical dimensions featuring not only personal recollections, but also literary and artistic heritage of the collective past, becomes of a crucial importance for the transcultural transfer of memories within a larger European cultural context. It provides a dialogically-articulated glance not only towards the past, but also on various mnemonic ways the past is described and narrated, imagined, used and received in the present, entailing a double-edged perspective on memory: temporal arrangement and transculturality. The narrator's personal quest for a gradual recovery of the forgotten, silenced transcultural memories located within the European collective and cultural past brings to light Erll's recently developed concept of "implicit collective memory". In *The hidden power of implicit collective memory* [6], she argues that beyond the visible, observable and explicit dimension of collective memory there exists a yet unexplored dimension of a largely unacknowledged world of "implicit collective memory":

"Over the past decades, the field of memory studies has produced a wealth of research on explicit (conscious, commemorative, official) collective memory. But beyond this realm of the visible, there is a largely hidden world of 'implicit collective memory'. Elements of this invisible world include narrative schemata, stereotypes, patterns of framing, or world models, which are usually not explicitly known or addressed".

Considering implicit memory as a predominantly collective phenomenon, she provides various examples of dialogical relationship between conscious, intentional and non-conscious, hidden forms of cultural memory, demonstrating how the concept of implicit collective memory operates across the *longue durée*. In tune with *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, Erll's theory proposes to look anew at two crucial aspects in European historiography which tend to establish connections between memory as *ars* and memory as *vis*:

"Two aspects need to be taken into account. First, examples ranging from Homeric myths and their narrative templates to Christian iconography all the way to tenacious stereotypes and conspiracy theories show that long-term memorata are always built up plurimedially" (Erll, 8). In addition, and similarly to Barnes's narrative, she considers etymologically relevant to recover forgotten, hidden and implicit in the collective realm of cultural consciousness masterpieces from the past, denominating them "transmedial phenomena, remediated again and again across the spectrum of available media. This is (...) a social process through and through: Interaction, collaboration, dialogue, negotiation, agonism – the entire spectrum of the dynamics of social memory-making needs to be taken into account here" (ibid., 8).

To better understand how explicit and implicit concepts of collective memory might connect in *Nothing to Be Frightened of* and in *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth* alike, it would be necessary to address, briefly, several theoretical approaches to memory and forgetting which have been developed over the last decades in Cultural Memory Studies. Taking into consideration the already referred to theories on the discursive interplay between remembering and forgetting, proposed by A. Assmann and A. Erll, it is necessary to revise how those findings may contribute to readdress the narrative construction of collective memory as a transcultural phenomenon. As demonstrated in Erll's

investigation, “vastly different temporal horizons are at stake in the study of collective memory”, defined as the *longue durée* of collective memory. As *Nothing to Be Frightened of* illustrates, a larger part of these concealed and unobservable cultural legacies constitute mostly unacknowledged historiographical afterlives of contemporary Europe, operating mostly on a non-conscious collective level and framing manifold official events of its history. In Erll’s perspective, the complex process of mnemonic remediation and premediation of certain cultural memory constructs operates not only on a local, boundary-fixed historiographical landscape, but also on a larger, transcultural level:

“What I can only sketch here (...) is the dynamics of remediation in memory culture – the transcription of memorata into ever-changing new media, a process, in which traces (here: framings) of older mediations travel along, often unheeded, across potentially very long stretches of time. Remediations are a vital agent in the dynamic plurimedial constellations which emerge around remembered events and keep them on the agenda of memory culture” (Ibid., 10). From the discursive perspective, developed in both Tolstoy’s and Barnes’s literary works, the creative interplay between remediation and premediation of the collective memory constructs operates on a still unacknowledged, transculturally conceived intertextual level.

As has been formerly mentioned, from the theoretical point of view, those works lean heavily on importance of acknowledging the process of cultural memory as a transcultural phenomenon, thoroughly discussed in the field of Memory Studies and Literary Studies. Tea Andersen’s *The Twentieth Century in European Memory* (2020), addressing Transcultural Mediation and contemporary reception policies, provides a detailed cross-cultural analysis of different ways in which mediation of memory in literature has a long-lasting impact on the theoretical findings accomplished within the field of Memory Studies. It contributes to elucidate the complex interconnectedness between Memory and Literary Studies, inviting scholars to reconsider the value of transcultural collaboration existing within the process of construction of cultural memory narratives within Europe. As demonstrated in *Nothing to Be Frightened of*, the transcultural circulation of memories in literature contributes to a detailed historical revision of both collective and collected memory, providing fertile theoretical foundation for further investigation into the relationship between memory as *ars* and memory as *vis*. It might be claimed that a transcultural perspective adds to a deeper analysis of literary mediation of memories in contemporary British literature, expanding its thematic scope beyond local boundaries.

The interconnection between remembering and forgetting extends towards the dialectics of cultural and social perspectives on transcultural contemporaneity, discussed in the text. In *Travelling Memory: Remediation across Time, Space and Cultures* (2010), A. Erll acknowledges cultural memory as a transcultural phenomenon, constantly moving across the globe and gaining momentum in specific local settings. Erll’s idea of “transcultural remediation” foregrounds a variety of intercultural connections featuring not only contemporary literary studies, but also the reception of memories in literature [7-10]. By critically addressing

the acts of reception located beyond national boundaries, Barnes’s *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* both benefits from and contributes to the processes of internalization and externalization of memory contents and memory forms within specific historical contexts. As recently articulated in Andersen’s study, reception of memories in literature and culture is a new concern of transcultural memory studies. The study claims, for instance, that “No mediation of memory can have an impact on memory culture if it is not ‘received’ – seen, heard, used, appropriated, made sense of, taken as an inspiration – by a group of people. Collective memory is an ongoing process of mediation” (Andersen, 3) [11,12].

Additionally, the intertextual connections established between Barnes’s *Nothing to Be Frightened of* and Tolstoy’s *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth* referred to in the present paper, demonstrate different ways in which a literary text can be considered as an object of transdisciplinary memory research. As suggested by Urania Milewski and Lena Wetenkamp in *Relations between Literary Theory and Memory Studies* [2], literary theory and the detailed narrative analysis of a text may contribute in a number of ways for a more systematic approach to Transcultural Memory Studies, providing new perspectives on the already existing theories and concepts.

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Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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