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Lost Memory as a fundamental structural element in Dystopia

Many instances of memory, lost, persisting, found and lost again, can be analyzed in dystopian novels. In my paper I will study the erasing of collective memory enforced by the State, and the effect this erasing has on the individual mind. My point is to demonstrate that this kind of ‘lost memory’ is a dystopian key-structure as central and founding as others which dystopian criticism has identified over the years.

To do this, I have chosen to concentrate on this theme in a few of the most famous 20th century English dystopias¹, with a few glimpses at other texts of the same genre², and to consider a recent American dystopia, Le Guin’s *The Telling*³, to verify the permanence of the pattern.

In my second part, I hope to demonstrate how the intellectual phenomenon of the erasing of history is conveyed to the reader through a device endowed with a strong fictional and concrete quality, with a procedure which is typical of dystopian novels (as opposed to utopian ones).

I will call this “the objective correlative” for lost memory.

¹ Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955) and reprints (the edition quoted in this paper is the 1972 Penguin edition, and we will refer to it indicating the page in brackets after the quotations);

George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Secker & Warburg 1949, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954) and reprints (the edition quoted in this paper is the Penguin 1973 edition, and we will refer to it indicating the page in brackets after the quotations);

Katharine Burdekin’s *Swastika Night* (London: Gollancz, 1937, New York: The Feminist Press, 1985) (the edition quoted in this paper is the 1985 edition, and we will refer to it indicating the page in brackets after the quotations).

² Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

³ Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Telling* (New York: Harcourt, 2000).

1. First Part: The Obliteration of Memory

Research on dystopia in the last thirty years has come to identify some elements which are structural in many texts and common to many utopias and dystopias. I will only mention them to make myself clear, as a brief reminder of the key structures among which I propose to include “lost memory”.

Some of these elements are:

- the journey from our reality to the new reality (a journey that in dystopia is more often an implicit one, performed through memory-research-imagination-desire);
- alienation, dislocating either our world (*Lettres persanes*) or the new world, either through familiar eyes (a Traveller from our time/space) or through alien ones (those of the protagonists of most dystopias, from Zamjatin’s *We* to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and many others);
- the role of the female protagonist as revolutionary stance, unconscious as in the case of Orwell’s Julia (in the terrible definition that is one of the bathetic points of the novel, ‘a rebel from the waist downwards’) or conscious as in Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*;
- the central role of language in the shaping of rebellion or, more often, of conformity (for example Newspeak in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World* nursery rhymes, for conformity; on the other hand, the retrieval of lost language, of the ‘word denied’, especially in many feminist dystopias);
- the relationship of the Inquisitor to the Heretical rebel.

I will be trying to prove that lost memory is a *topos* as fundamental and recurring as the ones I have just mentioned.

Let us practically come to identify it in a few texts.

1.1 *Brave New World*

Here the obliteration of the past is painless, as everything else in this world, and is obtained on the one hand through the exploitation of the boredom it is supposed to entail, and of the glittering amusements that are opposed to it on the other.

We find the explicit statement of the New World philosophy in Mustapha Mond's words, in the third chapter of the book. It is useful to quote, even though it is a very well known passage, because it is interesting to place it in the context we are exploring.

The World Controller is referring to the upheaval that gave birth to the New World: in the past, after the Nine Years' War, people tried to go "Back to nature... Back to culture. You can't consume much, if you sit still and read books."

So there was

a campaign against the past; [...] the closing of museums, the blowing up of historical monuments; [...] the suppression of all books published before A.F. 150. [...] There were some things called the pyramids, for example [...] and a man called Shakespeare. You've never heard of them, of course. [...] Such are the advantages of a really scientific education'. (50-51)

Mond is somehow contradicting himself, mentioning past events to people – Fordian students – who are supposed to have no interest in them; but the didactic aim deprives the concepts and images of all possible glamour for his listeners.

The same is true of these other statements:

'You all remember, I suppose, that beautiful and inspired saying of Our Ford's: History is bunk. History', he repeated slowly – [almost religiously] - , 'is bunk'. He waved his hand; and it was as though, with an invisible feather whisk, he had brushed away a little dust, and the dust was Harappa, was Ur of the Chaldees; some spider-webs, and they were Thebes and Babylon and Cnossos and Mycenae. Whisk, whisk – and where was Odysseus, where was Job, where were Jupiter and Gotama and Jesus? Whisk – and those specks of antique dirt called Athens and Rome, Jerusalem, and the Middle Kingdom – all were gone. Whisk – the place

where Italy had been was empty. Whisk, the cathedrals; whisk, whisk, King Lear and the Thoughts of Pascal; whisk, Passion; whisk, Requiem; whisk, Symphony; whisk...’ (38)

In *Brave New World*, therefore, Mustapha Mond, the World Controller, describes the very efficient abolition of a past which is the tiresome reminder of the possible wealth of creation, of the attempt to attain some higher goal, something as far as possible from the tame and banal situation of the New World (where “If the individual feels the community reels”, where contentment is obtained through sex, rounds of obstacle golf and *soma*, through the abolition of death and awareness).

In *Brave New World*, therefore, the control over the past, as over anything else, is obtained through painless and sedate conditioning, and, if John the Savage wasn’t there to remind us of a possible alternative, the main characters would experience nothing but a slight form of very adjustable malaise.

1.2 *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

The abolition of memory is something much more violent in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where the past is controlled ruthlessly and in all details of common life.

The most fascinating statements about the abolition of history are in the descriptions of Winston Smith’s work at the Ministry of Truth:

Day by day and almost minute by minute the past was brought up to date. [...] All history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and reinscribed exactly as often as was necessary. (35)

The written instructions [...] never stated or implied that an act of forgery was to be committed: always the reference was to slips, errors, misprints, or misquotations which it was necessary to put right in the interests of accuracy. (36)

The whole novel is, therefore, ‘a palimpsest’ of scraped memories; we could quote many examples, from the Ingsoc history books for students (describing 20th century capitalists in top hats pushing slaves in the gutter and

practicing *jus primae noctis* on common people) to the vain attempts on Winston's part to revive the memory of the old man in the Proles area (who should testify about politics and oppression and only babbles about the difference between litres and pints of beer); it will be more interesting to concentrate briefly on the procedures of memory and forgetfulness in Winston, because *the representation of what Dystopia does to the mind of his/her protagonist* is one of the most effective alienation techniques describing its horrors *from the fictional and emotional point of view*.

When Winston starts writing his diary, he writes the date, April 4th, 1984, and this is what follows:

A sense of complete helplessness had descended upon him. To begin with, he did not know with any certainty that this *was* 1984. It must be round about that date, since he was fairly sure that his age was thirty-nine, and he believed that he had been born in 1944 or 1945; but it was never possible nowadays to pin down any date within a year or two. (9)

And then, on the contrary, in the canteen of the Ministry of Truth:

there had even been demonstrations to thank Big Brother for raising the chocolate ration to twenty grammes a week. And only yesterday, he reflected, it had been announced that the ration was to be *reduced* to twenty grammes a week. Was it possible that they could swallow that, after only twenty-four hours? Yes, they swallowed it. [...] Was he, then, *alone* in the possession of a memory? (50)

And again:

Actually, as Winston well knew, it was only four years since Oceania had been at war with Eastasia and in alliance with Eurasia. But that was merely a piece of furtive knowledge which he happened to possess because his memory was not satisfactorily under control. (30-31)

A book which in many aspects is very different from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, follows two procedures of the same kind. First, as in Winston's case, the protagonist Offred's attempts to retrieve the past are the only possibility of keeping her mental health and to survive;

second, an alienation effect of the same kind is carried through: *some of the most fascinating elements in the novel are the ones which directly and implicitly demonstrate the brainwashing the Party in power has been operating*, by letting us live the vain efforts to remember Offred makes throughout the novel, and perceiving them concretely in their making.

1.3 *Swastika Night*

As Baccolini very clearly demonstrates in her 1996 essay on “Journeying through the Dystopian genre”⁴, also in this text the erasing of memory is fundamental to the ideology of the party. As we know, the novel takes place 700 years after the victory of the Nazi dictatorship in Europe. Hitler is venerated as a God; Germans have in every way become the elected race, and anything having intellectual value (science, culture, music, sculpture as so on) has allegedly been produced by them.

Women – poor, squalid, ugly beings, closed in Pales, their hair cropped, their self-respect stolen, made ashamed of their “bulging, misshapen bodies”, supposedly fit only for the bearing of children – are maintained to be inferior not from a cultural, but from a biological point of view: any memory of something different must therefore be prevented.

The Nazi dictatorship has had to erase all memory of life as it was, because its hold on its subjects makes it necessary for them to think that the Germans are the only civilized race and others nothing but inferior barbarians, and, as far as women are concerned, that their present situation is perceived not as a historical, but as a biological and therefore inevitable phenomenon.

Therefore, as it is clearly stated in the novel,

Those Germans wanted future generations [...] to be ignorant, wholly ignorant of the existence of other civilizations (117):

It was not enough for them to know that they *now* ruled a third of the world, that in them rested the only true and holy civilization; they wanted to forget that there

⁴ Raffaella Baccolini, ‘Journeying Through the Dystopian Genre: Memory and imagination in Burdekin, Orwell, Atwood, and Piercy’ in Raffaella Baccolini, Vita Fortunati and Nadia Minerva (editors), *Viaggi in utopia* (Ravenna: Longo, 1996).

ever had been, in Europe, any other civilization at all. there was so much beauty *they* had not made, so many books they had not written, [...], and so many ideas of human behaviour, which were anathema to them. [...] In the heart of their pride lurked a *fear, not of anything physical, but of Memory itself.* (78-79)

which clearly states the deep, central reasons of the procedure I have been trying to illustrate, that is the one of the erasing of history.

1.4 *The Telling*

I will close the first and by far the longest part of my paper discussing the erasing of history in 2001 novel by Le Guin *The Telling*.

As it often happens in Le Guin's *sf*, and differently from what happens in her fantasy, the structure of the novel is complex: as in *The Dispossessed*, as in *Always Coming Home*, there are two societies in the book (Urras and Anarres in the former, the Valley and the Dayao world in the latter): in *The Telling* the violent Teocracy on the Earth and the violent, atheistic world of the Corporation on Aka.

The first thing we must notice is that the political, opposed content of the two dictatorships is presented by Le Guin as almost irrelevant: what she condemns is the imposition, the denial of different modes of thought, that both dictatorships practice. Both persecute any deviation from the Sacred Norm; both destroy any kind of different belief.

They both burn books (as in *Fahrenheit 451*); both bomb libraries (as in *Brave New World*); in both, regime literature is vapid and empty, as in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and is made to have no vital function or effect. The dictatorship on Aka, the new planet (taking about four fifths of the books), is busily occupied in destroying its own past, obliterating the old language, literature, religion, and something which tries to keep all this alive, a custom which all the opponents of the regime lovingly practice, and which is called 'the Telling'.

It is necessary to mention two more elements of the plot: the female protagonist comes from the Earth (called *Terra* in the novel, with the Latin or Italian world); she works for the Hainish Ekumen, and *is a historian*. She is chosen for her first assignment, to work on Aka – the atheistic planetary

dictatorship – because she is an expert on literature and language. But there is no literature on Aka: before the political upheaval there was a strong religious quality in its language, its music, its literature, and all this has been erased in consequence.

The Resistance to the Dictatorship is the effort to preserve books, the old written language and the structure of the Telling: again a “word denied” which is passed, through memory, from the ‘maz’ (an invented Le Guin’s word which indicates something between teacher, doctor, poet and priest) to other people.

Sutty, that is the protagonist’s name, has some difficulties in keeping the neutral attitude which is required of a Hainish observer. Later the reader finds that the fundamental psychological fact of her life has been a homosexual relationship, presented by Le Guin as a marriage, and that her lover Pao has been killed in a State raid; this is probably the outcome of the diatribes with Sarah Lefanu and other feminist critics about the genre of the protagonists in *The Left Hand of Darkness*⁵.

After a fruitless time when she finds rather paradoxical, and rather frustrating, her situation as a historian on a planet without history, she travels to a distant country and finds that many people are organized in a kind of secret resistance, which centres on what her new friends call “the Telling”.

Sutty spends many months trying to discover what the subject of the Telling is, only to find that it is practically infinite: traditional legends dating from the year 1000; lists of rivers, plants, stellar systems, medicines which risk being lost in the Matter of Fact, hyper-practical and technological system of knowledge of the Dictatorship; and a patterned rendering of common life, which can be told as soon as it is ended.

Diffident of religion because she comes from violently Teocratic Terra, at the beginning Sutty distrusts the Telling, but enthusiastically finds out that it contains no normative prescriptions; it has something to do with Buddhism or

⁵ Sarah Lefanu, *In the Chinks of the World Machine* (London: The Womens Press, 1988), and *Feminism and Science-Fiction* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988); Le Guin published two versions of the same apologetic essay (‘Is Gender Necessary?’ and “Is Gender Necessary? Redux’, in *The Language of the Night* (edited and with introductions by Susan Wood) (New York and New York: Perigee Books, 1979, 1980), and in *Dancing at the Edge of the World. Thoughts on words, women, places* (New York: Grove Press, 1989).

Taoism (which is Le Guin's now explicit focus); no heaven, no hell, no afterlife, no reward or punishment, but a religious quality of life which has its own reward in being.

One of the explicit definitions of the Telling in the novel is history, though it seems to have a more teleological and a less descriptive aim than history in our world has: it "tells" any fragment of a tradition which it helps in keeping alive, or any fragment of the contemporary reality of the people who believe in it, and gives it meaning – or, more exactly, reveals the splendour and the meaningfulness which would remain unnoticed and would be lost, if the story was not told.

It uses charts, ideograms, pictures, and chanting, and is therefore a sort of compendium of the arts, literature in the first place, accompanied by various sister arts which the Dictatorship abolishes.

Most of all, it relies on ideogrammatic writing; and this writing is forbidden by the regime, while what is allowed is only an insipid propaganda pre-digested jargon. Literature, languages, poetry have been destroyed by the State.

I will end this first brief survey of *The Telling* noticing two more episodes.

In the first one, the early contact Suttu has with the local resistance is in a shop, a kind of herbalist's shop, where all the walls are covered in the forbidden ideograms, and the door is painted with the symbolic colours of red and blue, hinting at the quasi-religious symbol of the Tree, with its trunk, its double branches, and the multiple foliage; Suttu spends some time in the shop, comes back to it two or three times, and on her third visit finds the walls whitewashed, deprived of the breathing, lively words and images: dumb, silent as any other house of the planet.

In the second episode, the only effective way for Suttu to fight the blind political fury of her personal enemy on Aka, the zealot Yara who, throughout the first two thirds of the book, is called the Monitor (role instead of individual identity), is to dismiss her own prejudices and to work on memory: both hers and his. Retelling her suffered past on the earth, digging out his suffered past on Aka, she establishes a shared experience of pain, so that Yara's complex memory supersedes the dogmas and fruitfully gives birth to his death, which is in turn a coming back to his remembered loved past (he dies in the sign of the Telling, a precious memory of his grandparents in childhood, which he had totally suppressed).

1.5 Conclusion of the first part

Any dystopia – but in particular repressive dictatorships like the Party’s in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Gilead’s in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and the Nazi dictatorship in *Swastika Night* – has to maintain that the ruling ideology has no viable alternative; reality is simplified to one dimension, cancelling the multi-layered and fertile structure of past-present-future and ruthlessly denying the possibility of a different past and a different future.

2. Second Part: The Objective Correlative for Lost Memory

We have now arrived to the second and last part of my paper, a much briefer one, discussing what I have called the objective correlative for lost memory.

2.1 As I mentioned at the beginning, in many dystopias lost memory is effectively represented through an object, a tangible datum, which proves the existence of a reality different from the one publicized by the party in Power; sometimes this evidence is vital, and survives, to represent the possibility of recovering the past; more often, it is destroyed, by the Party in power, giving us an extremely forceful image of the helplessness of the protagonist and his/her impossibility of discovering the truth, recovering the dimension which Power has abolished.

2.1.1 First of all, I will note that in many dystopias the secret and precious Book – often written, or supposed to have been written, by some member of a hidden resistance – is the expression and the compendium both of history and of the possibility of its survival. To quote only the most obvious ones, I will mention the Book O’Brien gives to Winston in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the Book Von Hess gives to the protagonist Alfred in *Swastika Night*.

2.1.2 A slightly different use of the ‘forbidden book’ is in Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*: there the books are not specifically political or historical ones, they are the whole bulk of our literature, an effective stronghold against

the dictatorship of banality which reigns in that world: a reality somehow similar to the one we are experiencing with “Big Brothers” or reality shows in TV. In *Fahrenheit 451*, people learn books by heart, and become the living reminder of a lost world. The reader is sure to remember the effective ending of Bradbury’s novel, when Montag is introduced to people in their capacity of books: this is *Moby Dick*, this is the Bible, etcetera.

2.2 Beside books, other elements, often iconographic ones, are present in some novels, and I will limit myself to quoting four examples.

There are moments when the presence of an objective correlative for lost memory demonstrates the falsification of history, and the destruction of the piece of evidence communicates superbly the helplessness of the protagonist, in his/her feeling that the hold on history is slipping through his/her hands.

2.2.1. A very effective moment is the episode of Jones, Aaronson and Rutherford in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

The theme and the atmosphere conveyed concern again the *quality* of Winston’s memory, or loss of memory, and describe his physical holding a piece of evidence in his hands.

Everything faded into mist. The past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became truth. Just once in his life he had possessed – *after* the event [...] – concrete, unmistakable evidence of an act of falsification. He had held it between his fingers for as long as 30 seconds. (63)

Winston’s memory proceeds relating to the moment when three important Party members, Jones, Aaronson, and Rutherford, were arrested, and confessed having betrayed the Party, travelling to Eurasia and selling Party secrets to the enemy.

About five years after this, [...] Winston was enrolling a wad of documents... when he came on a fragment of paper which had evidently been slipped in among the others. [...] It was a half-page torn out of *The Times* of about 10 years earlier [...] and it contained a photograph of the delegates at some Party function in New York. Prominent in the middle of the group were Jones, Aaronson, and Rutherford.

[...] The point was that at both trials all three men had confessed that on that date they had been on Eurasian soil. [...] There was only one possible conclusion: the confessions were lies.

Of course, this was not in itself a discovery. [Because most people guessed that confessions were not literally true.] **But this was concrete evidence: it was a fragment of the abolished past, like a fossil bone which turns up in the wrong stratum and destroys a geological theory. It was enough to blow the Party to atoms...** (65-66).

When O'Brien tortures Winston – in the climactic 2nd chapter of the third part, which leads to the total destruction of his mind – the picture is again a key moment.

That's what O'Brien tells Winston:

'Some years ago you had a very serious delusion indeed. You believed that three men [...] were not guilty of the crimes they were charged with. You believed that you had seen unmistakable documentary evidence proving that their confessions were false. There was a certain photograph about which you had a hallucination. You believed that you had actually held it in your hands. It was a photograph something like this. (198)

O'Brien produces an oblong slip of newspaper, *the* photograph, as Winston rejoices in noticing:

'It exists!', he cried.

'No', said O'Brien.

And he throws it away in one of those incinerators that, with the usual Orwellian paradox, are called 'memory holes'.

O'Brien continues:

'Ashes [...] Not even identifiable ashes. Dust. It does not exist. It never existed.'

'But it did exist! It does exist! It exists in memory. I remember it. You remember it!'

'I do not remember it', said O'Brien. (198)

Because of some irritating moments in Orwell's political stance, we sometimes forget how good this novel is. I find that the way in which the erasing of history, and the mental principle of doublethink, are shown at work in this moment is absolutely superb. THESIS, thought and the idea of past itself can be controlled; ANTITHESIS, evidence against what the Party says does not exist; SYNTHESIS, if it exists, the control of memory which any good party member should be able to perform makes it irrelevant.⁶ Two and two are five. It is not a chance, of course, that, a few pages after this, Winston's will collapses.

2.2.2 A similar, though more optimistic, use of a picture from the past is in *Swastika Night*.

One of the key moments of the book is when the member of the Party at Power, the Knight Von Hess, a sympathetic O'Brien, gives to the English protagonist Alfred the book his ancestor wrote, proclaiming all the falsehoods of Nazi history; this book is accompanied by a photograph: the objective correlative I was describing.

Here, the picture *represents and objectifies the concrete belying* of the Party's falsifications. One of the people who are represented in the picture is Hitler, who is literally considered a god by the party, and whose statues and pictures advertise a very different image from the historically true one: "Colossal height, long thick golden hair, a great manly golden beard spreading over his chest, deep sea-blue eyes, the noble rugged brow..." (66).

The picture, of course, represents him as the rather ugly, definitely ungodly man he really was.

But here is the most important element: near him sits someone who is seen by the protagonists as a very handsome boy: "He, though immature, had more of the holy German physique than either the Lord Hitler or the Two behind." (67) Large blue eyes, noble forehead, upright carriage... "He looked – to their eyes, more noble, more German, *more manly*" than the supposed God.

Von Hess reveals to the two protagonists that this is a girl: "a girl as lovely as a boy, with a boy's hair and a boy's noble carriage, and a boy's direct and

⁶ See also page 199: 'Winston: How can you control memory? You have not controlled mine! [...] On the contrary, [O'Brien] said [sternly]. 'You have not controlled it'.

fearless gaze”. Nothing more different from the poor, mean figures of the Nazi slave-women.

So, a picture is again enough to blow the party’s version of history to pieces.

On the one hand *Swastika Night* is a desperate book, as some critics have shown; on the other it is more optimistic than most dystopias, as the closing of the book leaves open the possibility of a perpetuation of memory; therefore here the objective correlative is not destroyed.

2.2.3 Also in *The Telling* one of the physical reminders of the past, the beautiful herbalist’s shop with its ideograms and images, is destroyed, and Suttty experiences almost the same kind of helplessness Winston Smith is subjected to; in a book where her anger against the oppressive system flashes frequently, this is one of the strongest moments of refusal of her situation and of the world where she finds herself in.

2.2.4 Finally, I’ll mention Atwood’s *Handmaid’s Tale* again.

Offred’s narration is discovered at the end as having been recorded on tapes. The whole book is the transcription of these cassettes performed by a scholar of a future time, who has found them hidden on Offred’s way to salvation and presents them to the public of a Convention; the elusive character of Dystopian memory is conveyed not only through the blank spots in the narration, but also through the fact that the order of the cassettes is declared arbitrary: they were not numbered, and the philologist has arranged them according to his narrative hypothesis. We don’t know if the reading is correct; we don’t really know how Offred’s story ended.

3. *To conclude*: in all the books I have quoted, the memory which was lost represents an alternative to the Dystopian world which imposes itself as the One Reality, the One claustrophobic plane of existence: history is the perspective which could belie the linear vision of the world imposed by the Party in power, and restore a fertile dialectics of planes, in a multi-levelled, multi-dimensional reality made of a different past and therefore a different possible future, a reality which is multi-dimensional in a strictly Marcusean sense, revealing the existence of more kinds of reality that the Power would wish to allow.

I hope I have therefore reached my aim, proving that the solution of the objective correlative for the effacing of history is a concrete, typically dystopian fictional device, and that this structural element is a founding one in most dystopian fiction.