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Gendering Cultural Memory: Balzac´s *Adieu*

By Kristina Fjelkestam

Abstract

In this essay I examine the en-gendering of cultural memory in Honoré de Balzac´s story *Adieu* (1830), which proceeds from a repressed trauma originating in historical events. Balzac wrote the story in the spring of 1830, i. e. at a time when the French discontent with the Restoration regime was soon to explode in the July Revolution. The story is considered to claim that the Restoration regime's repression of revolutionary history will recieve serious consequences in the present. But the question is how the *now* of the Restoration can best be linked to the *then* of the Revolution and the Empire? How can history be represented in a productive way, without silencing traumatic memories? My suggestion is that the abyss between now and then has to be met with an ethically informed respect for difference. Stéphanie, the protagonist, dies when Philippe creates an exact replica of the traumatic situation in which they were separated many years ago. She then became a sex slave to the retiring French army, dehumanized during the hard Russian campaign, an experience that also dehumanized her. This Philippe refuses to acknowledge, since he wants to retrieve the woman he knew. That can of course never happen, but in insisting on it, I would claim that he actually renders Stéphanies life after the trauma impossible. Instead of emphasizing the distinction between past and present, Philippe overlooks it, with the severe consequence of Stéphanie's death. In my analysis I relate to pertinent discussions in the interdisciplinary field of cultural memory studies (an expanding field of research within the wider frame of cultural studies), but since it rarely discusses gender aspects I find it essential to relate also to feminist scholars who continually have scrutinized issues concerning memory and history writing.

Keywords: Cultural Memory, Gender, Balzac, *Adieu*, Napoleon, French Revolution

Introduction

Studies of "cultural memory", i.e. studies of what and how societies choose to remember and to forget, constitute an expanding field of research within the wider frame of cultural studies. In this essay, I would like to join the researchers who are developing a gender perspective in the field (cf. Reading 2002; Radstone 2007). They stress, for instance, that "what a culture remembers and what it chooses to forget are intricately bound up with issues of power and hegemony, and thus with gender" (Hirsch & Smith 2002: 6), a point that is never disussed by the handbook classics such as Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, the Assmanns.[1] However, feminist scholars have continually studied memory and history writing, so I would also like to discuss some of this critical research within gender studies.

My aim here is to examine the en-gendering of cultural memory in Honoré de Balzac´s story *Adieu* (1830/1974), which proceeds from a trauma linked to historical events. It concerns men's sexual assaults on women, which makes up for a kind of eloquent silence in the story. However, as memories start to materialize, the female protagonist dies, and thus the story problematizes the question of what can, or even should, be remembered.

In the first section of the essay I will present the story of *Adieu*, and then relate it to previous research of it. In the second part I will proceed with a discussion of cultural memory studies and then read *Adieu* in the light of it, focusing on the gender specific aspects. What seems to be at stake in the story is the question of how history can be represented in a constructive instead of destructive way, without silencing traumatic memories, and interestingly enough Balzac chooses to dress this pressing question in female clothes.

Adieu

Adieu is included in Balzac´s Human Comedy, *La comédie humaine*, more precisely in the section Philosophical studies. The story, less than seventy pages long, is divided into three parts, the first of which begins *in medias res* – lieutenant Philippe de Sucy is hunting in the forrest and runs into a ghostly woman. She turns out to be his beloved Stéphanie, Countess de Vandières, and she really is a phantom of the past. They parted seven years ago and the only word she ever utters now is the last one spoken between them: "Adieu!"

In the second part of the story, the narrative traces back into the time and space of their parting, which took place during Napoleon´s Russian war, more specifically at the Berezina river during the winter of 1812. The French troups have been defeated and are being forced to retreat. The exhausted and starving soldiers are freezing in the temporary camp. By now they have become dehumanized by their sufferings, just like the generals who, by setting the camp on fire, force them to continue their march over the bridge. When the Russians arrive soon after, even

the bridge is set on fire, although the French troups are still on it. The river is filled with burning corpses. The remaining soldiers quickly assemble a raft out of the remaining debris, but there is not room for all. Philippe nobly leaves his space to Stéphanie and her husband, one of the generals. When the raft drifts away from the river bank she cries a last "Adieu!" to Philippe, who is sure to be killed, and soon her husband falls off the crowded raft and is immediately decapitated by a passing block of ice.

In the final part, entitled *La guérison* ("The Cure" in the English translation by Katharine Prescott Wormeley available at Gutenberg Project), the narrative has returned to the "now" of the beginning, 1819, and Stéphanie's story is told in retrospect. The troops pounce on her after the raft voyage, and for several years she is dragged along as their "plaything" (*jouet*). Later on she is confined to a mental hospital, escapes and is found by the relative who is now her caretaker and knows her story. Philippe decides to restore her mind, and he will try to do so by building an exact replica of the scene by the Berezina where they were once separated.

On his estate, Philippe finds a stream which vaguely reminds him of the Berezina. Here he erects a camp of small sheds along the bank and burns them down; he drives broken piles into the stream in order to imitate the destroyed bridge, and he builds a raft. Philippe also obtains hundreds of military uniforms in order to dress up the village peasants as soon as the winter snow falls. When it does, he conveys the sleeping Stéphanie to his "tragic representation" (*représentation tragique*), where he awakens her with a cannon shot. She regards this "living memory of a life past" (*souvenir vivant, cette vie passée*) and suddenly she is roused in the full sense of the word and really notices Philippe. When she thus relives the situation, her senses are infused with life, and she throws herself into his arms, cries and weakly utters: "Goodbye, Philippe. I love you, goodbye (*adieu*)!" But then she promptly dies, and the story ends with Philippe committing suicide.

Mediating History

Today, researchers like myself tend to be interested in the way the story questions the mediation of history, especially as put in Philippe's representation of Berezina in the final section (cf. Petrey 1993, Shuh 2001; Samuels 2002). But when *Adieu* was first re-issued in 1974, researchers instead focused on the realistic portrayal of war in the middle section of the story (cf. Gascar and Berthier in Balzac). The description of the horrors of war was hailed as lifelike, and the realistic style was considered to be new and as such to be the point of the story. Here, realism may thus be defined as a kind of representation where the sign harmonizes with the referent.

But already in 1975 Shoshana Felman argues quite the opposite, namely that the relationship between sign and referent in *Adieu* is disharmonious. Today Fel-

man's essay, "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy" from 1975, is considered a classic in its apprehension of the gender blindness of the male scholars of realism who completely overlook the central part of Stéphanie's. Their readings exclude both women and madness, Felman claims in her psychoanalytically informed deconstruction of the text.

From the very beginning the woman is considererd a problem in Balzac's story, according to Felman: "(…) She, who? (…) Who are you? (…) But who is this lady? (…) She? Who?" (Felman 1975/1997: 14) The questions are met with silence, or with the blank sign *adieu*, beacuse crazy women cannot speak. But at the same time madness is linked to femininity, since insanity implies the loss of it. For instance, Stéphanie can be tamed with lumps of sugar, and Philippe then gloomily mutters: "When she was a woman (…) she had no taste for sweet things" (*Quand elle était femme (…) elle n'avait aucun goût pour les mets sucrés*) To restore her sanity is to simultaneously restore her femininity, Felman stresses, which in the traditional Western gender discourse is the equivalent of a confirmation of men (Felman: 17). Stéphanie's insanity severs the correspondence between sign and referent, which Philippe tries to re-establish and normalize by making her pronounce his name. When he succeeds in forcing her to mirror his image of himself by the referential denomination "Philippe!", she dies, because a man's female Other can never be a subject in her own right. There have been other interpretations of Stéphanie's death besides Felman´s, however, and I will return to one of them below and in the conclusion of this essay I will try to formulate an interpretation of my own.

An important critique of the male realism scholars as well as of the feminist Felman is that, in the end, they take a similar view of what constitutes "realism", namely a transparent use of language where, unproblematically, the sign has a referent (Samuels: 85). But Balzac's realism does not consist of attempts to emulate a static reality; instead, according to recent research, it builds on insights about the complexity of reality and literature. Representations of "reality" always depend on literary conventions which change over time – something which was pointed out already by 1921 in Roman Jakobson's "Realism in Art." When history is depicted in new ways, as in *Adieu*, not only will our conceptions of the past be transformed, but also our conceptions of the present, since they are defined by the way in which we have constructed our history.

The Danish media scholar Søren Pold claims that Balzac's writings are emblematic of a kind of "media realism", aiming at investigations of mediation, literary *function*, rather than the production of works of art, a literary *artefact* (Pold 2004: 95). For instance, Pold points out *Illusions perdues* (1837-43), which actually deals with the function of literature as a specific medium, since it is a novel about how a novel is written, manufactured and sold within the capitalist process of production (Pold 2004: 78). But first and foremost Pold examines *Histoire des Treize* (1833-1835) which, amongst other things, discusses the panorama, a very

popular medium at the time. Here, the panorama's mediation of time and space is studied in terms of a technologizing of sense perception. These "spectacles" represented, among other things, famous war battles, and their purpose was to make the audience feel like they were really *there*. The panoramas were placed in dark rotundas, lit up only by flickering candles, and this dramatically visual realism – also represented in contemporaneous waxworks exhibitions and boulevard theatres – was meant to materialize the past, thus enabling an encounter with historical events.

The panorama, "to see all" (from gr. *pan*, all, och *horama*, sight), consisted of enormous, circular paintings that gave the impression of depth, and when depicting different kinds of landscapes they can be said to have offered a kind of armchair tourism. But first and foremost they represented historically important war scenes with a nationalistic agenda. During the latter half of the 19th century, when even the French workers could afford a ticket, lost battles were depicted in order to install a patriotic lust for vengeance (Schwartz 1998: 158). During the former part of the century, when only members of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie could afford the entrance fee, French victories at Wagram, Navarino, and Sevastopol were depicted instead. Napoleon was supposedly so impressed by the medium that, in 1810, he decided to build more rotundas by the Champs-Elysées, which were to popularize his military success (his losses in Russia a couple of years later thwarted these plans; Oettermann 1980: 120).

From the entrance the audience was led through a dark passage up towards a platform in the midst of the rotunda. Here all parts of the panorama could be inspected, at first somewhat obscurely. An illusion of reality was created by means of strategically placed shadows and lights, and plastic *faux terrain* with objects and wax figures woven into the painting with the effect of *trompe l'oeil*. An illustrative example is the panorama that scored a formidable success in Paris in 1831. Here, the artist Jean Charles Langlois represented the naval battle at Navarino in Greece, where, five years earlier, the French together with the English and the Russians had conquered the Turks. Langlois had built a rotunda solely for his big painting, and he had obtained the battleship *Scipion*, whose deck constituted the outlook of the panorama. The dark corridor that led there went below deck and gave the audience an opportunity to experience the quarters of the seamen before meeting the actual theatre of war. The panorama measured about 125 metres in circumference and the different objects, among them the ship, melted seamlessly into the canvas of the painting. The painted flames of fire were enhanced with gas flames, which was said to have caused panic among the spectators (Oettermann 1980: 126). Pold stresses that not only did the panorama represent events of the past, but it also simulated a continuous present. As such, the panorama both *reproduces* and *re-presents* reality (Pold 2004: 158-161). This is also the case in Philippe's imitation of the Berezina river.

When Maurice Samuels discusses the role of the panorama in Balzac, he takes *Adieu* as his specific example. In his essay "Realizing the Past: History and Spectacle in Balzac´s *Adieu*", Samuels reads Balzac's reviews of contemporary panorama exhibitions and shows that he was very critical of them. Balzac believed that this kind of spectacle generated passivity in the audience and their relationship to the past, because they could only *watch* what was happening without having any means to actively intervene in the event. Therefore, with a slight exaggeration, Samuels could be said to argue that *Adieu* ends with the death of the panorama audience – in the symbolic shape of Stéphanie. Samuels thus problematizes both the history writing and the realist idiom of the period in an interesting fashion, but he is just as gender blind as the male realism scholars of the 1970s. What does it mean, for instance, that the panorama spectators are symbolized by a woman? Today we all well know that both passive imitation and mass culture phenomena were coded as female at the time, a fact that Samuels never discusses. The question is also in what way Balzac's views on history and realism were related to his aversion to rival sentimental novels written by female best-selling writers such as Madame de Staël – a matter I will not pursue in this essay, though (cf. Cohen 1999). Instead, I will now proceed with a discussion of cultural memory studies and then read *Adieu* in the light of it.

Cultural Memory

We remember as well as forget by way of the stories which make up our history, and these stories are filtered through power structures such as gender, class, ethnicity and sexuality. When using a term such as "cultural memory", the research field attempts to put these social and cultural dimensions of remembrance into words. A current stipulative definition could be said to contain a general formulation such as "the interplay of present and past in sociocultural contexts" (*A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*: 2). Three different dimensions may be distinguished here, namely the cognitive, the social and the mediating dimension. Thus, for a memory to be meaningful when it is represented in, for instance, rituals, media or institutions, it must be brought to the fore by individuals who are fairly agreed on apprehensions of the past – for instance citizens in a nation state. As such, cultural memory is something both individual and sociocultural (Bal 1999: vii). This is also the reason why it is a constantly ongoing process, since our memories of the past are steadily changing with the contemporaneous apprehensions and questions put to it.

Initially, however, memory and history were considered opposites in the field. Maurice Halbwachs defined his term "collective memory" as socially tied to local experiences, while "history" was defined in a positivist manner as an empirical, archive based re-construction of the past (Halbwachs 1950). This division has later been criticized by, amongst others, Peter Burke, who instead considers histo-

ry writing as something actually constructed by social memories, and by Aleida and Jan Assmann who introduced the term *kulturelles Gedächtnis*, cultural memory, which replaces "collective memory" in its inclusion of both history writing and locally established stories, rituals and monuments (Burke 1989; J. Assmann 1995).

More recent researcher Pierre Nora, for his part, also draws up problematic polarities concerning different kinds of memories. In his gigantic inventory of French monuments, or memory sites, *Les lieux de mémoire* (seven volumes, 1984-1992), Nora considers monuments as materializing cultural memory. However, these monuments and sites of memory are defined as inauthentic in comparison to people's lived memories, which are defined as authentic. Nora considers the intense memory work taking place in today's society as depending on a prevalent feeling of loss: "There are *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory" (Nora 1989: 7). This apprehension of memory as being either authentic or inauthentic has of course been criticized, and instead researchers now seem to agree that the relation between different types of memories is of an interactive kind.

Remembrance as such constitutes a dynamic reflexive act with political consequences, and I would like to claim that feminists have taken this fact as a starting point both earlier and more explicitly than has been the case in the field of cultural memory studies. Ever since the feminist consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s, individual memories have been considered political in elucidating repressive structures and thus enabling change. Feminist memory work has been systematized first and foremost by Frigga Haug (Haug 1987). The central question here is whose memories and whose experiences are considered valid. What society chooses to remember becomes "the truth", from the greek word *alatheia*, the opposite of which is not untruthfulness but oblivion, *lethe*. Oblivion is one of the principal means of the exercise of power (as Herbert Marcuse also rightly pointed out).

Memory and history writing have thus constituted essential interests for the feminist endeavour ever since the *gynæceum* of the Middle Ages catalogued women in history. Eventually, the empirically additive *herstory* of the second wave led up to a theoretical revision of History (in singular with a capital letter), in favour of histories (in plural and with a lower-case letter). As Annette Kuhn expresses it: "Telling stories about the past, our past, is a key moment in the making of our selves." (Kuhn 1995: 2) Thus o*ral history* has developed into an important tool in feminist work because it puts the spotlight on forgotten or dropped memories and experiences (cf. *Gender and Memory* 2005). One example is the debate on incest that broke out in the 1990s. At that time feminist scholars had begun to study the occurrence of domestic sexual abuse, but women's memories of childhood traumas were questioned by critics. Later on, the ideological content of the debate has been examined, and here reflections on the truthfulness of re-

membrance – constantly discussed in law and witness psychology – have been brought to a head (Haaken 1998). Thus, memory research can be closely linked to trauma research, and feminist memory studies have often come to deal with sexual abuse, whereas cultural memory studies are often dealing with the Holocaust.

National Trauma

There is no sharp dividing line between trauma and history either. Instead, history writing deals almost exclusively with war and genocide. What I find interesting in Balzac's *Adieu* is the very fact that the story en-genders a silenced national trauma. Here, the societal repression of (some) historical events is represented by the eloquent silence of Stéphanie, and the consequences of war are materialized in her devastated body.

Adieu is, as I see it, above all an attempt to mediate this repressed history in the form of cultural memory. Balzac wrote this story in the spring of 1830, i. e. at a time when the French discontent with the Restoration regime was soon to explode in the July Revolution. The story seems to claim that the Restoration regime's repression of the revolutionary history will have serious consequences in the present (Shuh 2001: 50). But the question is how the *now* of the Restoration can best be linked to the *then* of the Revolution and the Empire? How can history be represented in a productive way, without silencing traumatic memories?

Rachel Shuh points out that the middle section of *Adieu* depicts the Berezina theatre of war in a way that resembles the new kinds of history writing which had begun to appear, perhaps in particular Philippe de Ségur's widely disseminated *Histoire de Napoléon et de la Grande-Armée pendant l'anné 1812* from 1824, the graphic and unflattering details of which were hailed by people like Stendhal. However, in de Ségur the dehumanization of the soldiers, caused by hardships, takes the shape of cannibalism, while in Balzac it is represented by the sexual abuse of Stéphanie (Shuh 2004: 42). Balzac can thus be said to annex the markers of the new history writing, and to transpose them to his human comedy by changing the gender of the main character and have her experience a gender-specific trauma.

In the final part of *Adieu*, Philippe tries to bridge the gap between now and then by imitating the Berezina episode. However, as Rachel Shuh points out, the bridge has already been burnt down even in a figurative sense (i. e. in terms of the Restoration regime's annihilated relations to the past):

> Given the anguish that post-Revolutionary society experiences in its alienation from the past and in the collapse of continuity, one can read the disaster of the Berezina as a symbol of the destruction of the ties to the past, the closing off of the familiar, and the despair of being set adrift in the present. By restaging this traumatic moment, Philippe and Balzac would be attempting to effect a cure for Stéphanie and for the post-Revolutionary society (Shuh 2004: 48).

The cure backfires, however. Instead of being cured, Stéphanie dies − and France, for its part, will explode in yet another revolution. Obviously, an unproblematized depiction of history cannot cure problems in the present. So how could it have been depicted instead? How can the re-presentation in *Adieu*, which only smooths over the differences between now and then by trying to be as "similar" as possible, become a more dynamic representation that can be *different* as well as make a *difference*?

I want to stress the fact that *Adieu* speaks of the importance of remembering history, but not without questioning its representations. The passivizing panorama and the uncomplicating re-presentation are criticized in the story, but with no suggestion that Stéphanie's experience should be passed over in silence. In contrast to the Restoration, the July Monarchy wanted to integrate the present with the revolutionary and the imperial past. For instance, during the Restoration it was forbidden even to mention the name of Napoleon, which led to a frantic interest in him after 1830 (cf. Samuel's 2004: appendix cataloguing Napoleon plays in Paris theatres 1830-31).

Balzac, for his part, stopped writing historical novels altogether after 1830. Instead he went on to write contemporaneous novels into which he would weave the consequences of historical events. It was all about "a consciously historical conception of the present", as Georg Lukács writes in his book on the development of the historical novel (quoted in Samuels 2004: 196). After the French revolution in 1789, new ways of expressing historical memories were established, as illustrated by the historical novel, the panorama and realism, and here the main point was to integrate the past with the present by putting silenced traumas into words.

Stéphanie dies when Philippe creates an exact replica of Berezina, because she is no longer the woman she used to be. After their heartbreaking farewell seven years earlier, she became a sex slave to a retiring French army dehumanized during the hard Russian campaign, an experience that also dehumanized her. This Philippe refuses to acknowledge, since he wants to get back the woman he knew. That can of course never happen, but in insisting on it, I would claim that he actually renders Stéphanies life after the trauma impossible. Instead of emphasizing the distinction between past and present, Philippe overlooks it. Thus, historical events appear to be similar to events in the present, or to resemble them, even though they hold a traumatic abyss between past and present.

If it is even possible to listen to the eloquent silence of cultural memories, then the abyss between now and then, in all its senses, must be met with an ethically responsible respect for difference. The abyss of memory is a necessary link to the past, and in spite of all the burnt bridges we must still try to build the rickety plank of historizing across to the other side, because only then do we have a possibility to reach it – and to come back. Thus this frail link may break at any time during our unsteady trip over the precipice of memory, but that is exactly why it is essential to hold on to the conviction that the balancing act is worth while.

Silence must get an opportunity to speak.

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Notes

[1] Cf. Erll & Nünning 2010; Olick et al. 2011. However, some mentioning or even inclusion of a gender perspective is seen in Whitehead 2009: 13; Radstone & Schwartz 2010; Hodgkin & Radstone 2003.

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