

THE FRICTION BETWEEN MEMORY AND HISTORY: MNEMOHISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE IN CONTEMPORARY LATVIAN POETRY

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Abstract

Nowadays, in the creation of historical narratives, fiction texts are gaining increasing importance alongside historical research. It is attested by the topical trends in the early 21st century Latvian literary process manifested in the interpretation of historical topics. This article aims to highlight the significance of literature in the process of forming cultural memory and constructing historical perceptions, thereby soothing the existing friction between history and memory in historical research.

The article focuses on the interpretation of the events of the Second World War in contemporary Latvian women's poetry. As source texts the article uses poems by Andra Manfelde, Daina Sirmā and Gunta Šnipke. In the selected poetry examples, the trend of reviving historical memory and the application of a mnemohistorical perspective have been analysed. The theoretical and methodological base of the article comprises studies of mnemonic history and microhistory, research on postmemory and the ethics of memory, as well as cultural memory and trauma studies.

The examples of poetry texts by Manfelde, Sirmā and Šnipke analysed in the article reflect life writing tendencies and are highly auto/biographical. The biographical approach provides an artistic platform for the infusion of personal microhistory into the collective/nation's historical narrative. Literature thus offers a more comprehensive view of past events and their later impact and significance in a contemporary context. The poetic transformation of the wartime memories of

the postmemory generation into poetry outlines the mnemohistorical perspective, bringing to the forefront the relevance of current political events.

Keywords: *mnemohistorical perspective, postmemory generation, memory sites, war, women's poetry*

Introduction

The aim of the article is to highlight the importance of literature in the process of shaping cultural memory and constructing historical perceptions. Nowadays, in the creation of historical narratives, literary texts are gaining increasing importance alongside historical research. It is attested by the trends of the 21st century Latvian literary process, which is characterized by an active focus on the interpretation of significant events from various historical periods in different forms and genres of literature. This tendency reforms the historiographical principle of writing history by constructing a singular type of narrative rather than representing the past as it actually was. Literature offers the opportunity to soothe the existing friction in historical research between history and memory, thereby reducing “history’s perpetual suspicion of memory” [Nora 1989: 8]. The Second World War is still one of the *historical hot points* of the 20th century, not only for Latvia but for all of Europe; it has received particular attention in literature, inspiring ever new artistic interpretations in various forms and genres of literary texts, including poetry. This study focuses on the reception of the events of the Second World War and the tendency to revive historical memory in the poetry books of three contemporary Latvian poets: *Poēma ar mammu* [*The Poem with Mom*] by Andra Manfelde (2022), *Dievainies* [*The Days of the Spirits*] by Daina Sirmā (2017) and *Ceļi* [*Roads*] by Gunta Šnipke (2018). The poetry examples selected for analysis resonate with the tendency in writing history at the turn of the 20th/21st century to respect the *return of the event* and the *flourishing of memory* (Tamm). It relates to the insight of German philosopher Walter Benjamin who already in the mid-20th century stated that “history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance” [Assmann 2013: 20].

The theoretical and methodological focus of the study

The theoretical and methodological base of this article is comprises studies on issues of mnemohistory and microhistory by scholars such as Heather Murray (*Literary History as Microhistory*, 2017), Jan Assmann (*Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, 1992), Marek Tamm (*Beyond History and Memory: New Perspectives in Memory Studies*, 2013); cultural memory and trauma studies: Aleida Assman (*Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives*, 2012; *Theories of Cultural Memory and*

the Concept of "Afterlife"; 2015), Dominick LaCapra (*Trauma, History, Memory, Identity: What Remains?*, 2016), Pier Nora (*Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*; 1989); as well as studies on postmemory and the ethics of memory: Marianne Hirsch (*The Generation of Postmemory*, 2013), Paul Ricœur (*Memory, History, Forgetting*, 2004), Eelco Runia (*Presence*, 2006), Ruyu Hung (*Ethics of memory: Forgetfulness and forgiveness in the traumatic place*, 2020) etc.

All these theoretical works reflect the mnemonic perspective so topical in contemporary historical research, capturing and analysing the dynamic interaction between memory and history. Since the rise of cultural memory theories in the 1970s–80s, a critical attitude towards official historical narratives has crystallized. Less prominent, suppressed, or dismissed memories are gradually being restored, and new sources of knowledge are being discovered and created. It is linked to the growing interest in genealogy and family studies, which has given rise to the perspective of life writing in literature. In line with this trend, the individual life story is formed and exists in correlation with the memories of the person's contemporaries, with social memory ensuring the functioning of the individual narrative in intergenerational communication. On the other hand, the timelessness of the phenomenon of cultural memory ensures intergenerational communication, transforming the transient into the eternal and marking the mnemohistorical perspective. As noted by Estonian historian Marek Tamm, there has been a change in the regime of historicity in research [Tamm 2013: 1], and thus the historian's perspective has also changed. It expands the scope of historiography from the study of past events to that of the later impact and significance of these events. The recognition of this new situation has led to a new approach to historical research which is named mnemohistory (*Gedächtnisgeschichte*). The term was coined by Jan Assman in 1997 in the broader context of the cultural memory studies. He emphasised:

"Unlike history proper, mnemohistory is concerned not with the past as such, but only with the past as it is remembered. It surveys the story-lines of tradition, the webs of intertextuality, the diachronic continuities and discontinuities of reading the past. (...) It concentrates exclusively on those aspects of significance and relevance which are the product of memory – that is, of a recourse to a past – and which appear only in the light of later readings." [Assmann 1998: 9]

Mnemohistory is not so much concerned with factuality, which involve abstraction and is subjected to stereotypes over time, but rather the fact itself and its possible interpretations, namely, the energy, by which the past influences the present and the present re-invents and reconstructs the past. In this context, M. Tamms' proposed connection between the event and mnemohistory becomes relevant again, which highlights the concept of *Nachleben*, first introduced in the 1910s by

the German cultural theorist Moritz Warburg. It is a concept that is difficult to translate accurately into English; it does not apply to an afterlife in the sense of another existence beyond this one, but rather should be understood as a continued life, a past that becomes relevant in the present, or a past that haunts the present. Therefore, a more suitable translation than the traditional *afterlife* could be *survival* or even *revival* [Tamm 2013: 9].

These terms most accurately describe the mnemohistorical perspective offered by the poetic examples analysed in the article, revealing the complexity of historical time and showing that “the past is woven from many pasts” [Didi-Huberman 2002: 55]. What is most important in the research of history is “to focus not on the past but on the present, not on history as what is irremediably gone, but on history as ongoing process” [Runia 2006: 8].

The method of researching the history of the work of cultural memory is characterized by a *slanted approach* to writing history, accessing the past through the present, which is essential for the process of survival or revival (*Nachleben*). The main question that it raises is: how do we remember history and how is the past interpreted? In searching for answers, microhistorical narratives are productive as they strive to redefine the goals and parameters of history so that it can fully realize its potential.

Based on the above, the concept of memory/remembrance sites (*Les lieux de mémoire*) defined by French theorist Pierre Nora is essential to the study. Nora emphasizes the idea that history is about events, while memory is about places, encompassing three essential aspects: the material, the symbolic, and the functional. In this way, a historical research direction is marked that emphasizes influence rather than determining factors; signs and commemorative signs rather than actions that are remembered or commemorated; in other words, research focuses not on the tradition itself, but the way it is created and passed on [Nora 1989: 24]. Nora’s position resonates with the concept of the embodiment and emplacement of memory proposed by memory theorist Aleida Assmann in the context of memorial culture research [Assmann 2013], highlighting the significance of models of remembrance/commemoration in overcoming historical trauma, which in turn brings to the foreground questions about the ethics and responsibility of memory emphasized by Paul Ricoeur [Ricoeur 2004]. P. Nora underlines:

“Our interest in lieux de memoire where memory crystallizes and secretes itself has occurred at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn - but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists. There are lieux de memoire, sites of memory, because there are no longer milieux de memoire, real environments of memory.” [Nora 1989: 7]

According to A. Asmann, it is important to break away from *the superficial dichotomy between history and memory* [Asmann 2013: 21], recognizing and utilizing the possibilities of the diverse connections and interactions of these two forms, redefining identity (individual and collective), and reviving one's personal history. The task of remembering makes everyone the historian of their lives. And literature, including poetry, offers such an opportunity, namely, a way to reduce the tension between history and memory.

The poetic transformation of the wartime memories into poetry

The examples of poetry texts by Manfelde, Sirmā and Šnipke analysed in this article reflect the life writing tendencies characteristic of the 21st century Latvian poetry, with a sufficiently high level of auto/biographical nature. Such biographical approach reveals the artistic platform shaped by the dimension of individual memory for the unveiling of personal microhistory, which in turn becomes an essential contribution to the collective/nation's history narrative. All three poets represent the post-war, so-called postmemory generation [Hirsch 2012], namely, they are the children of the "traumatised parents' generation" [Schwab 2010] and experience of the Second World War indirectly, through the memories shared by their loved ones. Memory, including traumatic memory, plays a crucial role in the formation of individual and collective identity [LaCapra 2016]. The original poetic intention is deeply personal, yet talented art, as we know, always encompasses broader contexts, resonating with current geopolitical processes (such as Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine, etc.). Thus, the mnemohistorical perspective of wartime memories gains much broader significance in understanding the current situation, thereby affirming the insight expressed by American historian Arthur Danto that "to know what made an event historically important (...) would require knowing the interests of future generations" [Tamm 2013: 7].

In the analysed poetry texts by Manfelde, Sirmā and Šnipke, the starting point for the emergence of such memory-generated poetic impulse is always the "here and now" principle, as Šnipke puts it: "(...)everything is now and here and now and here and now and here (...)." [Šnipke 2018: 56] The goal of the memory policy expressed in the poets' texts of markedly lyrico-epic form is to reach the memory/remembrance sites (*lieu de mémoire*), where they can personally experience and process the experiences of their predecessors, thus preserving a sense of historical continuity and themselves becoming equal writers of history.

Andra Manfelde's *The Poem with Mom*: transfer of intergenerational experience

By touching the pains caused to her parents' and grandparents' generation by the wartime and post-war period *from below and at an angle*, A. Manfelde in her poetry book *The Poem with Mom* poetically lives through the traumatic experience inscribed in postmemory in order to learn and understand, but primarily to redefine her identity. To remember in order to heal herself. The starting point of this process is *Kalnīeši* farmstead in Valtaiķi civil parish of Aizpute district – it is a memory/remembrance site (*lieu de mémoire*), where the author can return to the memory-past in order to experience the present. At the same time, it is also a site of the poet's personal childhood memories, which can be re-experienced in her own recollections.

In search of her soul's experiences and the voice of her blood, Manfelde has already walked this path in her autobiographical family memoir *Zemņīcas bērni* [*Children of a Dugout*] (2010), attempting to illuminate the silences surrounding her family's deportation traumas and memories. In an interview with poet Ingmāre Balode, Manfelde comments on the postmemory focus asserted in the long poem (*I have not seen it/ or perhaps I have* [Manfelde 2022: 17]), professing her personal urge to react to and live through an inherited trauma in order to become the last link in the chain of the traumatic experiences.

The war experience captured in the long poem and transformed by imagination acquires new significance in the current context when war is raging again right next door, in Ukraine.¹ Manfelde says that it “feels (...) uncomfortable to reflect on war, when right next to you there are people who experience it first-hand” [Balode 2024: 35], at the same time maintaining that “(...) we are still not done thinking about and addressing everything related to the previous war” [Balode 2024: 35]. Manfelde herself features in the poem as “a girl with a memory notebook” [Manfelde 2022: 21]², and for this reason it is so important that the poet, who was born 18 years after the war, returns to *Kalnīeši* farmstead built by her mother Lidiya Feldmane's (née Manfelde; 1946–2024) grandfather, in order to continue writing something what somebody else has started long time ago. It is a place where the memory of the wartime past becomes a useful tool for understanding the present and for the process of finding out a woman's identity. The experienced legacy of the war is the central vantage point for writing a woman's history: “(...) war carries away on its shoulders not only bodies / but also a maimed gender / daughters are born timid, as if wounded by frozen snow-crust, robust, with stone vests on naked silky flesh / a man takes off his clothes, but only time can remove his armour / just as do the healing...” [Manfelde 2022: 19]

¹ The full-scale war launched by Russia against Ukraine on 23 February, 2022.

² Here and henceforth the original poetry texts have been translated by Eva Eihmane.

For the fictional autobiographical author's character this process begins *on a white road*, from where her homestead behind the hills can be seen through the tallows. It is a path that must be walked alone in all seriousness, gradually revealing itself *like a river's roots in the desert*, demanding more and more information about what has happened and what has been experienced at the same time. Manfelde depicts a time when the ordinary person – a woman, a child, the one frail in mind and body, the old and feeble one – dragged into the war machinery against their will, rips open the controversial logic of historical factuality, which, as we know, always is the truth of the victors – "(...) what kind of soldiers are there in Kalnieši? / meine liebe Augustin, au...au. / the Germans are accommodated in the guest room / schon and danke from morning to night / (...) then the Russian comes and does away with the fascistka" [Manfelde 2022: 15]. Memory gives back the colour to the poet and puts everything in its place, "it rises to the surface like a fish and breathes into her face, memory is everything" [Manfelde 2022: 91]. In this way, with the awareness of the duty thus invoked, the poet patiently and attentively mends the wounds of shattered memories and the gaps torn in intergenerational communication [Assmann 2013], redrawing the time-fractured family tree and herself within it: "when I have seen everything / and called it by name / I will get back / to that house, at the table, in the garden." [Manfelde 2022: 91]

Daina Sirmā's *Dievainies*: bringing back the burnt memories

D. Sirmā's poetry collection *Dievainies* forms an expressive epic composite, fusing together the past and the present, intertwined with myth and born from fantasy, yet simultaneously grounded in history. The synergy of private and collective histories takes on the contours of a mythical dimension. Using precise lexical and era-characterizing details, topographically specific place fixations (highlighting the environs of her native Dikļi and Valmiera), and the infusion of biographical elements (personal names, years, facts, etc.), as well as emphasized phonetic instrumentation (bright alliterations and assonances) the poet gradually brings to life significant events from various periods of Latvia's history, weaving them into the poetically rich narrative of her family's story.

One of the most powerful episodes of the Second World War featured in the book is related to a site of special importance in the poet's life: it is the tragic burning of Valmiera on the fateful night from 22 to 23 September 1944, when the historic centre of Valmiera was devastated by widespread fires, which miraculously stopped at the Orthodox Church of St. Sergius of Radonezh in the western part of the town and at the Evangelical Lutheran Church of St. Simon in the east, sparing both churches: "(...)Sergius and Simon look on / with a foot they tap the rhythm, clap their hands / the fire will not catch the temple / the walls are saturated with

prayers full to overflowing” [Sirmā 2017: 65]. In a way, D. Sirmā contributes to the discussion about the interpretations of the mentioned historical event, which is affected by the changes of the political paradigm – “The fire-god greedily drinks the sacrificial smoke / having drunk his full, he makes a row / rearranging the constructs of the great powers” [Sirmā 2017: 66]; “blame for the arson shifts along with the change of the great powers.” [Sirmā 2017: 68] The reality outlined in the epic poem *Burning of Valmiera* – “the residents of Valmiera, like forest beasts, crawl out from the bushes / after the dreadful night when in the black skies / a burning city has risen like a red sun / the streets have collapsed into heaps / no longer distinguishing the sites of houses” – enters into the focus of postmemory in the present day, which is “(...) now / our eyes – ash-covered / our features – petrified” [Sirmā 2017: 68], strongly highlighting the contemporary context. In the autumn of 2024, 80 years expired since the tragic for Valmiera event, which irrevocably changed the town’s face and deformed the memories of its residents about the historic pre-war town. The still persisting tension between memory and history raises questions about a more complete picture of the truth regarding this historical event, which took place under the influence of various factors: coincidental circumstances, deliberate malice, or strategies of political games/plots, etc. An important contribution to the research of this historical fact is the traveling exhibition *1944: The War-Caused Fractures in Latvian Urban Landscape* prepared by history researchers within the framework of the State Research Programme project *Navigating the Latvian History of the 20th–21st Century: Social Morphogenesis, Legacy and Challenges*.³

Gunta Šnipke’s *Roads*: quest for the wartime truths

G. Šnipke’s poetry collection *Roads* is the poet’s attempt by feeling to find the truth about history, both the public and private one, raising a rhetoric question about *the blame laid on history*, about what has been attributed to history and written as history, about myths and legends that have grown around history, and probing the dead ends of history and the still unresolved issues. The poet explains very specifically the overarching task she has set for herself: “to weed out hatred

³ In Valmiera, the exhibition was opened in Hanza Square on 17 September 2024. The exhibition tells about war-caused destruction and its consequences in several Latvian towns, including Valmiera. The open-air exhibition tells the story of the destruction of the Latvian cities that suffered the most from Soviet air raids and the German-USSR war in April–October 1944 – Rēzekne, Gulbene, Jelgava, Bauska, Valmiera and Riga. It shows how the architecture of cities and their appearance were often changed almost beyond recognition as a result of the war. At the same time, especially in the context of Russia’s aggression in Ukraine, the exhibition reminds us of the devastating impact of war on all areas of society, emphasizing the need to protect Latvia’s cultural and historical heritage and to recognize the importance of comprehensive national defense.

from my memories” [Šnipke 2018: 26]. By restoring with poetic means the memory versions of wartime events of her family (from both the paternal and maternal sides), a strong awareness of the past is created, yet it is not dramatized or presented in overly tragic terms. From this vantage point, in poem *Kurzeme / Noontime* Šnipke speaks about her father’s mother whose “husband and son have lead under their ribs / and the mishmash between them / is the front line” [Šnipke 2018: 12]. On the other hand, her mother’s⁴ most cherished wartime memory is embodied in her velvet student’s cap, which is the only tangible evidence surviving from her time at Jelgava Teacher Training Institute, where her studies were interrupted by the war. Her mother’s wartime memories have been transferred also to Šnipke’s poetry book *Kā [How]*, which was published in 2024. There she again asks her mother: “how was it / when the frontline was rolling away and back again / and right over your head” [Šnipke 2024: 59]. The words of comfort: “a person gets used to everything” [Šnipke 2024: 59] crystallized in an improvised dialogue between the poet and her mother who passed away already ten years ago, do not provide assurance that one can and should ever get accustomed to war. The poet emphasizes that wartime poetry [Šnipke 2024] is written in the name of a better tomorrow.

Two poetry examples should be singled out in Šnipke’s collection *Roads*: they form a dialogue, tensely strained by wartime historical memories, resonating with the model of dialogical memory defined by A. Asmann, asserting the necessity of maintaining significant symbols of memorial culture (such as burial sites, commemorative signs, monuments, etc.) as an essential fact of memory ethics, an instrument for overcoming traumatic memories, while simultaneously strengthening the national identity of the memory bearer and transcending the boundaries of national memory. Thus, the poet offers a perspective of transnational memory that is so significant in the modern context. As Asmann emphasizes, the traumatic legacy of the history of the violence of the world war “can no longer be processed through the limited grammar of traditional national memory constructs” [Assmann 2013: 155].

The first example is the fate of Smuidris, the older brother of the poet’s father, embodied in poem *Lestene/Brother Smuidris*, which bespeaks of the fallen under both flags (Russian and German). In 1943, at the age of 18, father’s older brother Smuidris Šnipkis (1925–1945) was drafted into the legion⁵, was killed soon thereafter and is buried in Lestene cemetery. The legionnaires’ cemetery in Lestene has become a site of memory/ remembrance (*lieu de mémoire*), which in a condensed form captures tragic and traumatic turning points of both private and larger 20th century history

⁴ Poet’s mother Elena Šnipke (1927–2013) was a long-time lecturer at Liepāja Teachers’ Institute.

⁵ A formation of the Nazi German Waffen-SS during the Second World War (1939–1945)

that significantly influenced the course of future events. In the poem, the wartime event associatively evokes a series of other tragic occurrences in the family's history – the enlistment of the poet's half-brother, Marts Šnipke (born in 1967), in the Afghanistan war in 1985, which in turn leads to the death of his grandmother (mother of the poet's father) Olga Šnipke (1898–1985) who died from anguish over her grandson's fate. The poet's daughter Alma (1990) and grandson little Jānis (2013) are also inscribed in the poem, to some extent as heirs of the traumatic wartime memories: "(...) my daughter in England is raising a son, almost happily / but / here all around, an army of the unborn under the piles of stones is too large to count / (...) I remember an old soldier saying that there were the right goals on both sides, just under wrong flags" [Šnipke 2018: 28].

The second example – poem *Daugavpils* captures Šnipke's personal experience from her job as a guide and interpreter for the German and Latvian youth camps organised by *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge* society⁶ based in the German Federal Republic, the participants of which spent two weeks, clearing/ restoring/ polishing concrete crosses and sometimes tidying up graves literally lost in the forest. In the poem, one such occurrence develops into a process of the purification and polishing of transnational memory. The rhetoric that the poet applies: – "what did you come here for, little boy" – and her promise – "little boy, let me give you back for the sake of your far-far-away mother's peace of mind, may she rest in peace" [Šnipke 2018: 27] – again and again forces memory to make the past a part of the present, which is the most important task of mnemohistory.

Conclusions

It is a topical trend in the contemporary Latvian poetry process, including women's poetry, to write history by synthesizing private and public historical experiences, thereby contributing to the process of shaping cultural memory and constructing historical narratives. In poetry by D. Sirmā, A. Manfelde, and G. Šnipke, the memory sites singled out in intergenerational communication acquires the functions and significance of the keepers of memory archive. The analysed poetry examples testify that in the poetry language, too, it is possible to assert one's identity and place in the history of one's family, which in turn becomes part of the historical narrative shaped by collective experiences. It is a way to uphold the idea of the continuity

⁶ Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge – an organisation similar to the Latvian Fraternal Cemetery Committee, which takes care of the German soldiers' burials in other countries, organises organizes the search for the remains of deutsche soldiers, their reburial, the identification and cleaning of existing graves. The Volksbund supports relatives and advises public and private institutions, and promotes the education of young people on issues of memorial culture internationally.

and permanence of cultural memory. In poetry, the fictionalism of memory comes to the forefront, the boundaries between the past and the present become blurred. The poetic (re)construction of the past responds to the topical aspects of the present and to the eternal existential questions, triggering a process of identity redefinition and a discussion about the role of history in understanding contemporary events, while highlighting the moral and ethical aspects of complex geopolitical conflicts. This trend in poetry writing marks a mnemonichistorical perspective, where the actualization of past events gains new interpretative possibilities in the context of contemporary global developments.

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