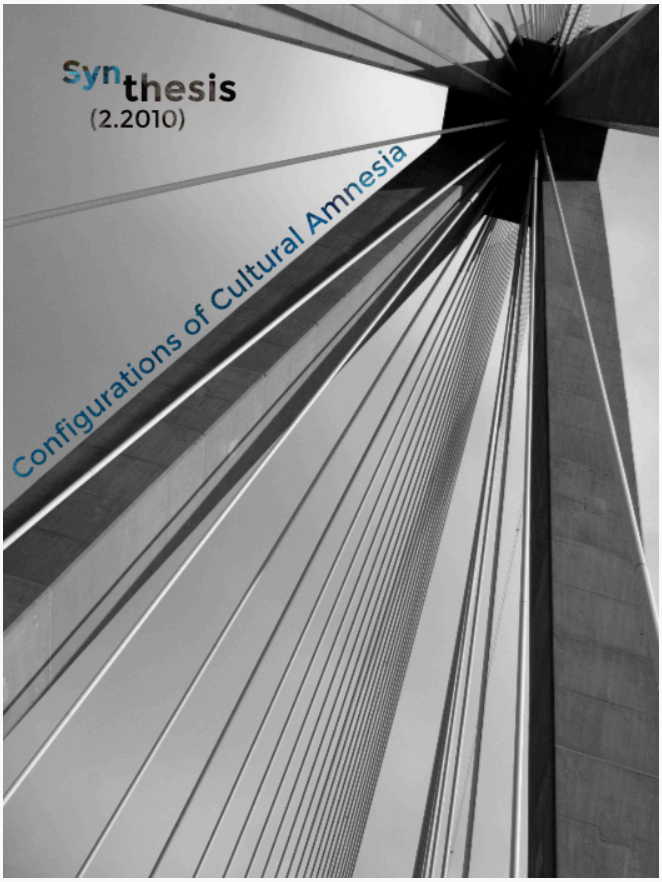
ePublishing

ΕΘΝΙΚΟ ΚΕΝΤΡΟ ΤΕΚΜΗΡΙΩΣΗΣ
EKT
NATIONAL DOCUMENTATION CENTRE

Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 2 (2010)

Configurations of Cultural Amnesia



Introduction: Configuring Cultural Amnesia

Apostolos Lampropoulos, Vassiliki Markidou

doi: 10.12681/syn.16485

Copyright © 2010, Apostolos Lampropoulos, Vassiliki Markidou

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0.

https://epublishing.ekt.gr | **e-Publisher:** EKT | **Downloaded at:** 09/09/2026 16:35:27

Introduction:
Configuring Cultural Amnesia

Apostolos Lampropoulos and Vassiliki Markidou

There is something both redundant and intriguing in any effort to address the issue of cultural amnesia. Any such attempt may be considered redundant since it is inextricably linked to the already delineated concept of memory, which over the last two decades has marked the humanities and has largely contributed to the establishment of various fields; these range from the theory of historiography to trauma studies and from translation to area studies, not to mention memory studies. On the other hand, focusing on the rather neglected issue of cultural amnesia may be intriguing: it would constitute by default a critique of the already existing scholarship as well as of the choices that it has made and, consequently, of the exclusions it has imposed. The awareness of this redundancy and intrigue might nourish the suspicion that exploring cultural amnesia presupposes both remaining within and going beyond memory studies, that is, extending its scope by taking a closer look at its lacunae and trying to resolve its impasses. It might also function as a means of destabilising, enriching and finally reorienting the interrelationship between some of the most basic concepts related to the issue of cultural amnesia, such as remembering, forgetting, *lethe*, *a-letheia* and, of course, amnesia itself.

Recent theorising on the question of forgetting dwells upon the compulsion, desire, effort, or demand to erase, avoid, and ultimately obliterate from memory what has already happened. Such theorising calls to mind the paradox of making the subject declare that which s/he forgets as already forgotten and therefore leading him/her to remember it. Similarly, the urge not to forget highlights both the danger of oblivion and the constant need to remind oneself to remember; this pattern can be discerned in numerous studies and remains productive in diverse contexts. Interestingly, amnesia is also embedded in the intricacy characterising the interface between past and present. Quite often it resembles intense or radical forgetting, but it can also be understood as a total or double forgetting (Karavanta)— that is to say, a forgetting even of the very act of forgetting. The symptoms of amnesia are primarily detected by those not suffering from it, and are related both to the amnesiac's total inability to trace the past and to an exigency to help him/her to remedy this state as soon as possible. Therefore, amnesia both manifests a relationship with the future as an ungraspable *à-venir* and refers to an involuntary and usually pathological condition that needs to be urgently addressed. It remains debatable, though, whether one can detach amnesia from a medical context and argue for an unpremeditated loss of cultural memory, especially in the light of currently formulated concepts such as prefabricated memory and the narcissistic overemphasis on the memory of the present at the expense of historical depth (Samoyault 12). Moreover, any treatment of cultural amnesia entails a twofold challenge: distinguishing amnesia from its kindred concepts and avoiding the trap of seeing amnesia everywhere, thus converting it into another convenient *passe-partout*. This ambivalence and the concomitant difficulty of its treatment might explain why memory and forgetting continue to be hot topics among theorists, while amnesia remains a fascinating, yet almost taboo, subject, and its systematic study a project still to be undertaken. Time and again, amnesia is invoked but its implications are to a large extent left unexplored.

Indeed, this crucial gap can be discerned in the scholarship that is related to the issue of amnesia. To give a few examples, in Andreas Huyssen's *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, amnesia is evoked in the title and reprised a handful of times in the opening chapters. In the same work, a couple of difficult questions are asked and some important statements are made. For instance, Huyssen wonders: "How does one reconcile the amnesia reproach, articulated already in the inter-war period by philosophers as different as Heidegger and Adorno, with the observation that simultaneously our culture is obsessed with the issue of memory?" He also contends that "the difficulty of the current conjuncture is to think memory and amnesia together rather than simply to oppose them. Thus our fever is [...] a mnemonic fever that is caused by the virus of amnesia that at

times threatens to consume memory itself" (7). Amnesia, therefore, is both central to and a menace against any thinking on memory. This may explain why after these remarks and a chapter dedicated to the museum as a mass medium and entitled "Escape from Amnesia," amnesia is imperceptibly identified with and translated into casual forgetting. A somehow similar pattern is repeated in Terry Eagleton's controversial *After Theory*. The initial chapter is entitled "The Politics of Amnesia" (1-22) and is devoted to the shift in the interests of the humanities in the aftermath of high theory. From cyber-feminism's ousting of Milton to the study of minority discourses which institutionalise "the cult of the Other" and smooth over "major conflicts or contradictions within the social majority" (21), what Eagleton describes as a symptom of amnesia—with almost no explicit references to the concept itself—amounts to little more than a series of substitutions according to which old reading habits are replaced by new critical trends. *After Theory* does not seem to be conscious of its own implications: it is an instance of cultural critique that calls attention to the current state of research in the humanities and works to remedy the very amnesia that plagues it. Moreover, in Nancy J. Peterson's *Against Amnesia: Contemporary Women Writers and the Crisis of Historical Memory*, it is clearly stated that "in [the] dystopian vision of a high-tech future, amnesia would no longer be part of the dialectic of memory and forgetting. It will be its radical other" (9). This potentially productive statement is, quite obviously, reminiscent of Huyssen's views. Nevertheless, amnesia soon becomes, once more, a convenient metonymy for rigorous or painful forgetting and here, too, a promising thesis remains rather unexplored. In short, amnesia looks like a chameleonic term or a magic image: while it covers the whole spectrum of forgetfulness, it is elusive and fails to become a priority for theoretical work on memory.

If these brief examples from Huyssen, Eagleton and Peterson do any justice to the aforementioned texts and serve as an indication of a more general tendency, cultural amnesia inevitably oscillates between the relative clarity of its medical connotations and a rather uncertain figurative use. In view of that, any attempt to discuss amnesia should both be cautious about and profit from the difficult passage from a neurological state to a multifaceted cultural phenomenon. What could be especially interesting in this case is the fact that, although discourses on memory point out techniques of forgetting as well as its usefulness, they seem incapable of avoiding a certain unrehearsed forgetting. Reflection on cultural amnesia could thus prove to be extremely useful in explaining how a crucial part of the broader issue of memory can itself be omitted; it could also shed light on the fact that not talking about amnesia means forgetting not only the obvious and the well known, but also the extreme, the inarticulate, the unintelligible and the non-manageable.

Moreover, it seems crucial for any discussion of cultural amnesia to distinguish between the critical subject talking about amnesia and the historical subject of amnesia itself, as well as to revisit and question amnesia as a feature inherent in or parasitic to various developments in the field of ideas. This perspective could allow one to examine not only the ways in which cultural amnesia has either prevented or contributed to the articulation of the link between the cultural and the political across centuries, but also the historical eras, literary movements and philosophical trends in which one can discern its symptoms (for example, Roscoe 448-53). Likewise, one could also consider another kind of amnesia produced by the "overabundance of souvenirs" emerging from our effort both "to maintain the remains of our social existence [and] to classify its essential archives, and save in our memory and keep alive the events that are still important to us" (Méchoulan 8). In sum, among the multiple archives, sources, memos, reminders, mnemotechnic devices, inclusions and exclusions, cultural amnesia may become a challenge to our understanding of the process of historicisation as well as to the very notion of the historicisable.

Amnesia thus emerges as the object of a complex configuration. Discourses on amnesia, rather than confining themselves to remarks about the powerless subject of amnesia, inevitably enable us to define, describe, and conceptualise the phenomenon itself. At the same time, they automatically draw one's attention to the particular place that amnesia occupies (or, according to the hypothesis advanced earlier, does not occupy) in the field of memory studies. In that sense each configuration of amnesia might also be thought of as a call for revisiting a field of study and, perhaps paradoxically so, as a project of study in the process of being formulated. How is amnesia to be taken into account, both epistemologically and methodologically? Is it possible to achieve a clear-cut distinction between

cultural amnesia and *lethe* or forgetting, perhaps through the fact that the amnesiac is susceptible to forgetting everything, even everything about forgetting itself? How can one treat the idea (or, perhaps, the illusion) that amnesia exempts its subject from any links to a past providing him/her with some kind of unconditionality and how can one describe a discourse on amnesia, if not through the lack of access to amnesia itself? Would some kind of impossibility be inherent in amnesia, for instance the impossibility to totally forget even when this might be helpful or the impossibility to achieve a complete understanding of amnesia? Would different regimes of amnesia, perhaps comparable to regimes of memory (Radstone and Hodgkin 1-3), be conceivable? What kind of concession could rid amnesia of some of its negative implications and turn it into a political tool comparable yet not identical to selective amnesia (Cohen 243) or chosen amnesia—like the amnesia following ethnic or social conflicts, that is "less a public denial than a coping mechanism to avoid antagonisms and to be able to live peacefully" (Buckley-Zistel 134)? What would then be amnesia's return to possibility, and thus to politics? Last but not least: given the eventual impossibility of amnesia, what is the specific status of a discourse on cultural amnesia?

The articles featuring in the second issue of *Synthesis* address, either directly or indirectly, the above perplexing questions. In the process of doing so, multiple critical theories such as aesthetics, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, structuralism and post-structuralism are applied within the framework of memory studies. In addition, the essays analyse cultural products such as plays, novels, life-writing narratives and films that span from the Renaissance to the early twenty-first century in an effort to underline the ways in which amnesia, and in particular cultural amnesia, has not only been registered in as well as problematised culture throughout the centuries but also shaped it.

In the opening essay, '"Though it be not written down, yet forget not": Cultural Amnesia in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*,' Alison Findlay focuses on the double cultural amnesia that is displayed in Act 5, Scene 1 and reads it "as a form of misogyny, as an expression of shame, and as a form of theatrical practice." Findlay draws primarily upon Richard Shusterman's theory of aesthetics to highlight the fact that ceremony on stage is a fictional representation of an already framed act that reminds both actors and audiences of its old as well as its new theatrical context. Consequently, she reads the wedding and mourning ceremonies in the play as a means through which both characters and audiences are awakened from their cultural amnesia concerning the female sex—namely, a "misogynist amnesia" that fails to listen to women and accept them as they are—while concurrently a communal acknowledgement of shame in misrepresenting and abusing the female by treating her as guilty, deceptive, and a commodified object occurs. Finally, she argues that the audience's awareness of the young boy's impersonation of the woman-as-bride has a twofold effect: it enables the cultural amnesia that earlier on banished the female character from the stage to be conceded in theatrical terms while it concurrently marks the recurrence of both misogynist cultural amnesia and the misrepresentation of the female sex.

While Findlay reads *Much Ado About Nothing* as a play that both challenges and reinforces the cultural amnesia deeply rooted in the context of early modern anti-feminist discourse, Josh Cohen appropriates Sigmund Freud's theory of infantile sexuality and Maurice Blanchot's interrogations of literature in his article "Amnesiac Passages: Melville's *Pierre*, Blanchot and the Question of Psychoanalytic Reading" to suggest that Melville's *Pierre or The Ambiguities* reveals that American literature may be considered an advantageous locus associated with the amnesia of writing. By utilising the particular theoretical underpinnings, Cohen points out that analysing a work of art requires more ignorance than knowledge and contends that the literary text can function as the means through which psychoanalysis rediscovers the logic of its own amnesia. He adds that a psychoanalytic reading of literature should expunge referentiality and meaning, and uses Jean Laplanche's explanation of transference to tease out what "the implications of this amnesiac construal of psychoanalysis" might yield to the theory as well as the practice of literary reading. Cohen uncovers the novel's ambiguity by emphasising the dual "itineraries" of a psychoanalytic reading. First, by retrieving memory and knowledge the reader can regain the effaced reading; and second, by submitting to and exploring the receptacle of memory, s/he can discover the emptiness that haunts both the text and the nineteenth-century American novelists' attempt to re-invent themselves and thus obliterate European modes and histories.

As Cohen's reading of Melville's *Pierre* demonstrates how literature can return psychoanalysis to "its own amnesiac logic," Patrick ffrench's analysis of Hervé Guibert's *Le Paradis* reassesses the relationship between theory and fiction by outlining the manner by which the novel fictionalises the theories of writing that emerged in France in the 1960s. ffrench illustrates that in the intellectual history of post-war France what emerged as theory subsequently appeared as fiction. He notes that Jacques Derrida's interrogations of writing and Maurice Blanchot's view that literature was on its way to disappearance and had no choice but to search for its essence in death, influenced the novels written by the *Tel Quel* writers in the 1960s and 1970s culminating in Phillipe Sollers's novel *Paradis* which highlights writing both as an end in itself and as a break with literary history. After reading intertextually Guibert and Sollers, ffrench points out that the former deals with "motifs of amnesia and effacement" both as themes and literary devices in order to emphasise amnesia as the force which incites the narrative since the failure to remember requires a ceaseless motion toward displacement from one mistaken memory to another. Therefore amnesia becomes a writing strategy that presupposes perusing the sentences which propel the narrative towards the erasure of structure, and eventually towards Blanchot's "disappearance." Ffrench also points out that Roman Jakobson's principle of aphasia is fantasised in *Le Paradis* and is perceived as a kind of death, a liberation from individual limits as well as a shift from "discontinuity into continuity." Guibert's *Le Paradis* as such, suggests a reading that moves towards the inevitable conclusion/effacement of the text, which is implicitly connected to the death of the narrator/author, while simultaneously it indicates that writing is both a source of pleasure and a means of survival.

While ffrench underlines amnesia as a "writing strategy," Anna Hunter contends that contemporary Holocaust novels employ amnesia as a means of ensuring the future of cultural memory. In her article "The Amnesiac Consciousness of the Contemporary Holocaust Novel: Lily Brett's *Too Many Men* and Jonathan Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*," Hunter delineates the difficulty in memorialising an event of which there is minimal or no direct memory and focuses on contemporary cultural memory of the Holocaust in relation to the "amnesiac consciousness" that contemporary Holocaust novels grapple with. She argues that, although we talk of the need to preserve the cultural memory of the Holocaust in order to prevent amnesia, the dialectical relationship between memory and forgetfulness is challenged because the Holocaust experience *per se* is presently inaccessible. Moreover, while Paul Ricœur argues that history and memory are not clearly distinct, Hunter counter argues that in order to understand cultural memory as well as cultural amnesia one has to distinguish between them. Concurring with Pierra Norra, she claims that history is objective and deals with the past while memory is subjective, evolves incessantly, is connected to the present, has the ability to explain the past and is thus open to numerous negotiations. Hunter also notes that while Susan Sontag postulates that creating a collective memory involves selecting which memories to remember and which to forget, Oran Baruch Stier declares that forgetting is a crucial means to memorialise the Holocaust because it helps us forget each failed attempt at commemoration. In this light, Hunter underlines the fact that "the paradigm of cultural amnesia," adopted by contemporary fictional narratives of the Holocaust, entails a preoccupation not with memory but with amnesia, and explores the ways in which an amnesiac consciousness is manifested within two contemporary fictional representations of the Holocaust, Lily Brett's *Too Many Men* and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*.

If Hunter views contemporary Holocaust fiction promulgating cultural amnesia as the precondition for cultural memory, Debra Kelly reads "life-writing narratives" of the French Occupation as markers of a shift from cultural amnesia to "anamnesia." In her article, "From Cultural Amnesia to 'Anamnesia' in Reading Life-Writing Narratives of the French Occupation: The Lost Manuscript, the 'Handwritingness' of History and the Broken Narrative," Kelly considers Agnès Humbert's *Résistance: Memoirs of Occupied France* and Hélène Berr's *Journal* in order to shed light on their production as well as on their reception in the context of memory studies. Kelly points out that both Humbert and Berr create representations of reality by posing as "witnesses" to actual experience. Moreover, she reads the recurrent tropes of life-writing narratives: "the story of the lost manuscript," the "handwritingness" of history, and the breakage of the narrative due to tragic or violent events. In addition, Kelly argues that the recent success of Humbert's and Berr's texts may be indicative of contemporary cultural amnesia or rather of the effort to heal it by passing from amnesia to the

Aristotelian "anamnesis" or, as has recently been termed, "anamnesia," wherein recollection is viewed as an intense creative process encompassing remembering and forgetting, and points out that life-writing narratives can help the reader make this shift. By quoting Damlé, Kelly also debates whether memory is the means by which one can define identity and if so, then, anamnesia provides "a kaleidoscopic lens" through which the fragmentation of remembering as well as identity can be viewed. Lastly, she follows Susanna Radstone and warns of the danger of viewing war-time life-writing narratives lightly. Instead, she advises scrutiny in the hope that light will be shed not only on these writers' identity but also on our own.

Furthermore, in the afterword entitled "Spelling out amnesia, or 'forgetting me on the pretext of understanding me'," Apostolos Lampropoulos undertakes a reading of selected scenes from three films that deal overtly with amnesia (namely Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Un long dimanche de fiançailles*, Gabriel Le Bomin's *Les fragments d'Antonin* and Christopher Nolan's *Memento*) as he juxtaposes them with remarks made by Jacques Derrida in "Following Theory," *Archive Fever*, *Monolingualism of the Other* and "Circumfession." Lampropoulos's argument revolves around three axes: First, the attempt to explain the paradox that the very thinkability of amnesia is subject to an injunction against forgetting, and as such needs to be avoided. Second, exploring the relationship between amnesia and the archive wherein the latter "points, always *a posteriori*, to an ex-amnesia which has to be thought of" allowing us as such to discover amnesia only after it has been cured. Third, the departure from both Leonard Shelby's obsessive attempt to reconstruct his memory in *Memento* and Derrida's description of amnesia as an "unleashed, surging wave" (*déferlement*) in order to underscore the various ways by which the discussion of amnesia touches upon the question of finitude as well as upon the development of an almost unmanageable historiography. Consequently, Lampropoulos notes that amnesia "can only be healed by a totally unpredictable and entirely alternative interpretive counter-discourse that will achieve what the initial discourse was longing for." He thus identifies the discourse on amnesia with the particularly demanding critical task of discovering enclaves of amnesia but also with its unpredictable results which will prove both startling and illuminating.

Finally, Jean-Michel Rabaté's interview with Apostolos Lampropoulos, entitled "Forgetting, Amnesia, Theory," addresses the heated topic of the future of theory in conjunction with the issues of amnesia, memory, pedagogy of/in theory and history. Responding to the question whether theory as a ghost could answer the end-of-theory discourses as well as defend itself against the accusation that it is anti-historical or a-historical, Rabaté refers to Jacques Derrida's notion that theory has been transformed into a specter that retains a dual relationship with temporality since it witnesses "a living past or a living future," and claims that theory has assumed the role of a ghost, "not by forgetting history, but by reinventing it." Like Geoffrey Bennington, he believes that theory is neither dead nor buried, and consequently, does not belong to a museum. Rabaté and Lampropoulos reflect on the former's use of non-canonical literary texts in teaching Theory and Stathis Gourgouris' project of reading literature as theory and detect two similarities: First, the tendency to establish a new kind of theory that will deal not only with philosophical or critical texts, but also with literary writings as "*topoi* of theoretical thought." Second, the conviction that adopting the idea of literature as theory, will ultimately, lead to questioning both the literary and theoretical canons. Undoubtedly, Rabaté notes, this process presupposes *lethe*, that is, remembering to forget what literature and theory are expected to be doing, and not total amnesia since all the previous methods of reading cannot be presumed non-existent. Yet, although *lethe* is associated with erasing the past and amnesia falls short in recovering it, nothing is fully forgotten in the unconscious. Thus, Rabaté proclaims that the Socratic pedagogical strategy in the teaching of/in theory can yield positive results. Furthermore, he notes that anthologies and readers of Theory are collections of fragments but at the same time, the writings of most theoreticians are fragmentary as well and contends that revealing this fragmentariness constitutes "the project of Theory." Finally, Rabaté touches upon the similarities between theory and history only to underline the fact that when theory suggests an archive, it proves that it has forgotten neither the past nor the future.

In sum, the second volume of *Synthesis* delineates the multiple configurations of amnesia and especially cultural amnesia and articulates the difficulty one encounters in studying it systematically. In particular, it explores amnesia as a theme; as a literary device; as a motif; as the essential condition

and destination of the literary text; as a break with literary history; and as narrative substituting experience. Concurrently, the volume underlines cultural amnesia's function as "a form of misogyny, an expression of shame and a form of theatrical practice;" as a "writing strategy;" as a means through which literature can return psychoanalysis to "its own amnesiac logic;" as the precondition for cultural memory; as a means for American literature to liberate itself from the European modes and histories and establish its own national identity; as a sore lesion to potentially be remedied by shifting from amnesia to "anamnesia;" as a prerequisite for showing *how* literary texts think; and as a means of prompting "the eruption of a new and hitherto unpredictable discourse." By shedding light on the diversity and pervasiveness of cultural amnesia in both literature and culture, this volume endeavors to declare the pertinent and imperative need for its systematic study.

Works Cited

Buckley-Zistel, Susanne. "Remembering to Forget: Chose Amnesia as a Strategy for Local Coexistence in Post-Genocide Rwanda." *Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute* 76.2 (2006): 131-50.

Cohen, Stanley. *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*. Cambridge-Oxford-Malden MA: Polity Press, 2001.

Eagleton, Terry. *After Theory*. New York: Basic Books, 2003.

Huyssen, Andreas. *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. New York-London: Routledge, 1995.

Karavanta, Mina. "The Postnational Novel and the Question of Community : Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*." Forthcoming.

Méchoulan, Eric. *La culture de la mémoire, ou comment se débarrasser du passé ?* Montréal : Presses universitaires de Montréal, 2008.

Peterson, Nancy J. *Against Amnesia: Contemporary Women Writers and the Crisis of Historical Memory*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press ("Penn Studies in Contemporary American Fiction"), 2001.

Radstone, Susannah and Katharine Hodgkin. "Regimes of Memory: An Introduction." *Regimes of Memory*. Eds. Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin. London-New York: Routledge, 2003.

Roscoe, Will. "Strange Craft, Strange History, Strange Folks: Cultural Amnesia and the Case for Lesbian and Gay Studies." *American Anthropologist* 97.3 (New Series, 1995): 448-53.