

**Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation**

**REMEMBERING IN THE BRITISH FICTION OF  
THE 1930S**

Tamás Tukacs

Supervisor: Dr. Tamás Bényei



UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN

Doctoral School of Literature

Debrecen, 2010.

## **Focus and Objectives**

The aim of the present dissertation is to examine the role, the significance and the controversies of remembering in the British novels of the 1930s. The focus of the dissertation is not primarily of theoretical (psychological, psychoanalytical or philosophical) nature, and its aim is not to scrutinise the forms of remembering appearing in literature generally, narrowing the problem down to one era, but rather of literary historical character: its primary goal is the analysis of a chosen period of British (or more precisely, English) literary history from a given perspective. As such a broad topic is difficult to be treated within the framework of a dissertation, some necessary constraints had to be introduced. By the term “the novels of the nineteen-thirties” I mean novels written by members of a group of writers (more generally known as the Auden generation), born roughly between 1900 and 1910, making their *début* after the first significant generation of modernists. Thus this critical construction includes neither the works written in the 1930s by authors born a generation earlier (Woolf, Joyce, Maugham, etc), nor the novels produced by authors who, though writing in the thirties, can hardly be integrated into its mainstream literature and are rarely considered as “thirties writers” (Samuel Beckett, Malcolm Lowry, Lawrence Durrell, Flann O’Brien). Naturally, the present dissertation is not able to deal with all the authors belonging to, to a greater or lesser extent, the Auden generation, thus this group also had to be narrowed down: the study is mainly about male novelists born in the given period, educated in prestigious public schools, but not necessarily the members of the group of writers centering around W. H. Auden. In my dissertation, I analyse three authors, Henry Green, Christopher Isherwood and James Hilton in detail, out of whom Green can only be superficially associated with the Auden group, Hilton, although he does not even appear in most critical evaluations of the period as belonging to “thirties writing,” must be included in a study dealing with remembering (while Isherwood, as a friend and co-author of Auden was a central member of the group). Besides these authors, shorter analyses are devoted to Anthony Powell, George Orwell, J. B. Priestley, Graham Greene and Daphne du Maurier.

The second constraint regarding the theme of the study concerns the significance of remembering: it would be more precise to say that the dissertation discusses the various aspects of the problematic relationship with the past and the defects of remembering, and scrutinises the above-mentioned authors in this context, analysing Henry Green’s 1930s novels with the help of the theoretical framework of trauma, those of Isherwood in the context

of melancholia and the writings of Hilton as pertaining to nostalgia. The common characteristic feature of these problems of remembering is that – although with various emphases – all the three of them stress the “presence of the past,” its painful unwillingness to become past, thus breaking the chronological order of present following the past. Through raising this dilemma, the dissertation leads to a problem of more general nature: the question of how the basically (though not exclusively) Proustian strategies of remembering of classical or “high” modernism, stressing the possibility of aesthetic totalisation, depth and the coexistence of the past and the present in one single, epiphanic moment, changed by the era of secondary or late modernism into modes emphasising the pathological nature of memory and the impossibility, or at least the problematic nature, of remembering. Thus the study, indirectly, gives an answer pertaining to the status and changes of English modernism through these three authors and three malfunctions of remembering.

The novelty of the study is provided by the fact that, in a certain sense, the English literature of the 1930s still seems a “no-man’s land” in literary history and, more importantly, in teaching literary history that serves as the primary field of canonisation, since the main literary foci of the history of the English novel in the first half of the twentieth century still appear to be the careers of certain “high modernist” authors (Joyce, Woolf, Lawrence, Eliot), who thus appear to cast a shadow over the next generation. Naturally, it cannot be stated that the 1930s is a totally neglected era, for over the past decades, important critical evaluations of the decade have been written. A part of these studies emphasises the unavoidable theme of generational consciousness and the political nature of 30s writing, narrowing down the decade’s fiction to the activity of the Auden group (Hynes, Bergonzi, Lucas). Another group of studies (especially from the 1980s and 1990s) undertake the rewriting of the critical construction called “the thirties novels” (see, for instance, Gindin, Montefiore, Paxandale and Pawling, Quinn, Williams and Matthews, etc.), attempting to integrate into the canon certain “forgotten” authors marginalised on a gender or a national basis. Not debating the validity of these attempts (although pointing out that, in several cases, many studies or collections of studies do not come up with a clear criterion of selection, apart from the intention of “rehabilitation” or “rewriting”), I would like to place certain chosen authors of the 1930s in a perspective different from these in many respects. It is remarkable that, while most of the studies dealing with the period discuss the generation’s problematic relationship with the past, such analysis, focusing on the problems of remembering, has not yet been produced (Victoria Stewart’s book, published in 2006 [*Narratives of Memory: British Writing of the 1940s*], deals with the next decade), thus it is justifiable to analyse the period from this aspect.

## **Methods**

To unravel the problematic nature of remembering in the nineteen-thirties, the most applicable framework is provided by Freudian psychoanalytic literary criticism (mainly its theories concerning trauma and melancholia).

Outlining the theoretical framework of trauma, I mostly stress its narrative, ontological and epistemological aspects, relying on the relevant writings of Cathy Caruth and Ruth Leys. I mainly emphasise, with special attention to the significance of repetition, the question as to what extent does the narrative treatment of trauma mean a problem for the subject, regarding the fact that the traumatic event breaks the narrative order of self-history and temporality. Discussing this problem, I also touch upon the epistemological aspect of trauma, with special attention to the fact that the event causing a damage in the subject does not immediately become conscious, for the victim survives trauma “apparently unhurt” and only later does he or she make cognisance of the fact that he or she was the sufferer of a traumatic event, or, more precisely, interprets the original event as traumatic only retrospectively. A relevant part of the theoretical framework is the treatment of the consequences of being a victim: whether the subsequent narrativisation of the event aids the healing of injury, or rather, on the contrary, deepens the wound caused by trauma.

In the discussion of melancholia, besides the “classical” Freudian theory (the difference between mourning and melancholia), theories of Melanie Klein, Julia Kristeva, Walter Benjamin and László Földényi serve as points of orientation. The latter critic’s work treats melancholia as a phenomenon of cultural history, which, regarding the proliferation of symptoms, appears to be an almost indefinable illness, assuming a different shape in each age, whereas Klein and Kristeva – with various emphases – discuss the loss and its unmanageable nature experienced by the ego. From our perspective, the key movement is the phenomenon in which the melancholic subject attempts to retrieve the lost object with a kind of language always already alien to him or her, which, as a result of this, is not suitable for the production of signification (of which the ego is conscious); the subject tries to retrieve the lost object through signifiers metonymically connected to each other, but to no avail. A related theory is that of Walter Benjamin about the world constructed of fragmented objects and allegoresis, also discussed in the study. In the dissertation I also refer to the connections between melancholia and travel writing (Levin) and photography (Barthes, Sontag).

As regards the nostalgic discourse, relying on the theories of Susan Stewart and Nicholas Dames, I differentiate between two different meanings of nostalgia: a “normal” or a

“healthy” one that favours practical goals, condensing, miniaturising the past, thus rendering it manageable, and another one which expresses its original, pathological meaning, according to which the subject, similarly to the melancholic one, experiences a present based on the emptiness of signifiers and longs back to an idealised past, characterised by the plenitude of signifiers. The pathological nostalgic feels that the ideally imagined past is corrupted by the present, thus his or her strategy may be described by the operation of subtraction: he or she wants to clean the past from the sedimentations caused by the passage of time. These strategies, based on temporal travel (that is, remembering) or spatial travel, are inherently bound to fail, for places are inevitably corrupted by the passage of time and return, by force of remembering, is strictly impossible in this case, which leads to an even deeper pathological nostalgic state. I examine certain texts of 1930s English fiction on the basis of these theoretical backgrounds, on the level of their plots and (traumatised, melancholic or nostalgic) characters on the one hand, and on textual organisation on the other.

## **Results**

The research carried out in the dissertation has led to the following results.

1. For most members of the Auden generation, the primary reason for the appearance of certain defects of memory is that the (male) members of this generation, due to their age, were not able to participate in the Great War, which has been constituted as a major trauma in the nation’s life and as one of its myth-generating forces in history. Several instances of the generation’s anxieties, inferiority complex, uncertainty of their position in literary history and real or alleged fears originated from this special historical situation, which, at the same time, provided a strong generational coherence. This was the first generation born with a strong historical consciousness, and clearly saw that they were encapsulated, or (to borrow the title of one of David Jones’s novels) “parenthesised” by two major wars. Several of the novels of the Auden generation are permeated by the desire to make up for the absence of an experience providing a sense of identity and group cohesion, but at the same time, they wanted to evade the burden of remembering the dead relatives, fellow countrymen and the older generation in general. The majority of the novels belonging to the examined period is determined by the strange mixture of longing and rejection, which led to certain supplementary gestures characteristic of the generation. On the one hand, they were strongly preoccupied by various themes and motifs, like the burden of remembering, betrayal, spying, a sense of guilt and shame, travel, frontier crossing, transgression, “the Test” guaranteeing masculinity (see

Isherwood), as a result of which, several subsequent events were also conceived of as parts of this war metaphor. On the other hand, during the decade, there opened a chance for them to compensate for the missing war experience at the time of the Spanish Civil War. Thirdly, since most male members of this generation were educated in public schools, these experiences grew to almost mythic sizes in their later writings. They assigned a function of generational unifying force to the sufferings lived through in these schools, and the statement may indeed be risked that these quasi-mythic experiences can be regarded as the vicarious repetitions of the sufferings gone through by the older generations, which were retrospectively traumatised – especially in Graham Greene’s texts.

2. The connections between the melancholic defects of remembering and certain novels of the decade may be best described with the help of the notion of metonymy. With Julia Kristeva, it is a crucial notion that the ego attempts to find and re-cathect its lost object, but since this is impossible, the ego tries to identify with objects metonymically linked to each other, whose failure deepens the original melancholia even more. It is remarkable that David Lodge attempts to characterise the difference between 1920s high modernism and the late modernist writing of the 1930s with the help of the dichotomy of metaphor and metonymy, respectively. The similarity is not accidental. A group of novelists appearing after the first, classic generation of modernism (notably, Anthony Powell, Evelyn Waugh and Christopher Isherwood), taking into consideration the limitations of modernism’s cult of depth and aesthetic considerations pertaining to it, created a purposefully emptied, reserved, surface-bound, “melancholic” language that seems to be particularly apt to represent the pathological movements of the cathexis damming up in the ego after the loss experienced by the subject and the necessary withdrawal of cathexes. The melancholic mood of seeing, conceiving of the world as a set of objects metonymically connected to each other and as a collection of “ruins” suitable for allegorical transformation, heavily resembles the above-mentioned authors’ episodically structured writings which use an intentionally reduced language, replete with black humour and, in many cases, seemingly gratuitously violent actions.

3. The dichotomy of nostalgic discourse is powerfully present in most of the novels of the period. The “healthy” concept of nostalgia, at least from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, is connected in English literature to the idealisation of an organically conceived countryside, seen as a repository of tradition, and it is encoded in this way in most writings of the 1920s and 1930s, particularly in those by Stanley Baldwin, G. K. Chesterton and J. B. Priestley. It is noticeable, though, that this kind of rhetoric does not only characterise certain representatives of the conservative side but surfaces just as powerfully with several politically-committed, left-wing

politicians and writers of the time as well (see Ramsay MacDonald, Cecil Day Lewis or George Orwell; although Orwell's categorisation here is not that obvious). During the 1930s, however, a mode of writing grabbing the original, pathological meaning of nostalgia gradually came to the front, represented in the dissertation by the works of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938) and Orwell's *Coming Up for Air* (1939) (both discussed in the introduction). Both of these novels emphasise a futile longing for a lost place, and either the impossibility of return or recovering the place's original state, positing a basic ontological difference between the past and the present. The desire directed towards the past usually reveals that this past (most often the last years of peace before the Great War, the Edwardian age), conceived of as rich and pleasant, is revealed as already falsely constructed. It might be asserted that these novels project a typical feeling of the 1930s, which proves to be doubly pathological: the duplicity of a present, regarded as empty, fragmented and without narratives and of a past, seen as false and traumatising led to a sentiment of being enclosed and entrapped. The dominant motif of this feeling is the impossibility of recapturing the past, stuck in an ontologically inferior present that the remnants of the past invade in the forms of traumatic repetitions. In several cases, this duplicity, that of the desire to go back to the past and at the same time the intention to break away from it characterises the episodes describing public school experiences in the autobiographical writings of Isherwood, Graham Greene, Stephen Spender, Henry Green and W. H. Auden.

4. The novels of Henry Green discussed in the dissertation (*Party Going*, *Caught*) represent, on the one hand, the defects of remembering involved in the traumatic discourse on a thematic level, and on the other hand, enact, on a performative level, the episodes of being engaged in the present and those of the traumatic repetitions of past experiences, creating a sort of "traumatised" language, which might explain the often-noted linguistic unorthodoxy and innovation of Green's novels. According to several critics (for instance, Gorra, Mengham, Victoria Stewart), Green denies the form and myth generating gestures of modernism, aiming at the ordering of impressions, and investing past memories with aesthetic totality. He rather concentrates on the intrusion of past events into the present or on the uneasy co-existence of past and present in his novels. Both works feature characters who are unable to break out (or do so only seemingly) from the trap of the present, existing in a sort of temporal suspension, and at pains to grab a nostalgically imagined past, which, however, does not redeem the present from being flooded by fragments of past memories traumatically repeated. In *Party Going* (1939) this situation is represented through some hours spent by a group of young people, heading for a holiday resort in the south of France, stuck on a London railway station

because of the heavy fog; while in *Caught* (1943), partly based on Green's own experiences as a voluntary firefighter, we can follow certain episodes of Richard Roe, member of the AFS, during the 1940 London Blitz. The central motif of both novels is waiting (in the first one for the lifting of the fog, in the second one, for the start of air-raids), during which certain fragments, without contexts, surfacing from the characters' past, are repeated, contributing to the fundamental epistemological scepticism of the novels (in *Party Going*, a key phrase is "everything unexplained"). On the level of motifs, in the former novel, water, and in the latter one, fire symbolises the unstable barrier between the past and the present and the importance of transgressions, while on the level of text organisation, the unexpected occurrence of certain phrases (for instance, "temple," "pick") and characters (the hotel detective) in various contexts, flowing through paragraphs, enact the traumatised state.

5. In the dissertation I examine Christopher Isherwood's autobiographically-inspired Berlin novels (*Mr Norris Changes Trains* [1935] and *Goodbye to Berlin* [1939]) as examples of melancholic remembering. It is significant about these novels that Isherwood celebrates the pre-1933 Berlin as a site of licentiousness, joy of life and free (homosexual) love; almost imperceptibly, however, pathological melancholia, sloth, depression and *acedia* permeate this world. It is not only that the narrator describes Berlin as a sick, alienated town, dominated by loneliness, neurosis, hysteria, hallucination and persecution (see Izzo 144, Hynes 354), but also that the protagonist attempts to identify with certain melancholic characters. Besides, these novels, declaratively written as acts of remembrance, revoke Berlin and its inhabitants in a melancholic way. In both novels, the faculty of seeing, watching and observation is of utmost importance (thus making a link with narcissism): the first novel begins when the eyes of the narrator-protagonist and those of his later object of desire, Norris, meet; *Goodbye to Berlin* opens with one of Isherwood's most famous sentences: "I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking." Referring to Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes, I analyse the melancholic aspects of photography, namely, the fundamental paradox that while the photograph would like to preserve the past, redeeming it from mortality, it creates, to borrow Walter Benjamin's notion, "ruins" that, according to Barthes, do not remind, and thus create in the observer an incapacity to mourn, that is, melancholia. I read Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin* as a "photo album" and, following Susan Sontag's logic, consequently as a melancholic collection, in which the images, placed next to each other, relate to one another metonymically, denying the observer any kind of depth, immersion and constantly relegate him back to the surface. (This technique also appears in Anthony Powell's 1930s film-like novels, based on a montage technique, and which, for this reason, might also be evaluated as

basically melancholic.) The opening scenes of each chapter represent the characteristic melancholic attitude of the narrator-protagonist, exhibiting a strange mixture of *curiositas* and *fastidium* (discussed by, among others, László F. Földényi). The narrator takes the position of an outsider, a spectator (both politically and emotionally) that he maintains up until the end of the novel. These opening scenes, without exception, enact the dynamics of the conflict between the maintenance of the outsider state and the desire-driven impulses arriving from the outside world, during which the narrator, who almost gets involved, is thrust back by the external world into his observer position (as it has been alluded to in the connection between photography and melancholy). Both novels might be interpreted as monuments erected to characters with whom the narrator gets into contact (Norris, Sally and Clive, Otto and Peter, Bernhard Landauer), which finally confirms their loss. (It is important to note here that Isherwood had planned a *monumental*, epic-like work about pre-Hitler Berlin with the title “The Lost,” but only these two novels were completed.) Isherwood’s novels, however, are not exclusively the representatives of the melancholy of loss in general, but are also relevant with reference to the private mythology of the Auden group, for certain characters (Arthur Norris, Peter Wilkinson, Bernhard Landauer) bear a striking resemblance to neurotic heroes, educated in public schools, fighting with an inferiority complex, so often staged by the generation. In this sense, the Berlin novels do not only raise a monument to the characters mention above, but to certain popular myths of the Auden generation as well.

6. James Hilton’s 1930s and early 1940s novels are organised along the lines of the dichotomy of nostalgia, outlined above in the discussion of the methods of the dissertation. His *Random Harvest* (1941) follows the logic of depathologised, “healthy,” Victorian nostalgia, while his earlier novels (*Lost Horizon* [1933], *Good-bye Mr Chips* [1934] and *We Are Not Alone* [1937]) contrast two generations, the one born in the 1880s and another, practically identical with the Auden generation, through the modes of pathological and healthy nostalgia: those belonging to the older generation (Conway, Chips, Newcome) are victims of pathological nostalgia, while they are remembered by members of a later generation with the mode of “healthy” nostalgia. Conway, the protagonist of *Lost Horizon*, attempts to find an idyllic, paradise-like state, untainted by the passage of time, in a lamasery called Shangri-La. When the impossibility of his attempt turns out, he leaves the place and wanders in the world, making random appearances at diverse points, experiencing the longing generated by an emptied present without directions. The close reading of certain passages and their comparison with earlier texts (for instance, *Pride and Prejudice*) reveals that the lamasery may be regarded as the allegorised version of an ideal, pastoral and idyllic England,

inasmuch as its basic principles are avoidance of extremes, moderation, lack of passions (which, of course, looked at in a different angle, may also be seen as repression and inhibition), but the flexibility of the place's constitution or the ritual of drinking tea also refers to this similarity. In this respect, Conway is in search of the eternal, idealised England, whose loss, as well as longing for it, must have been a central preoccupation at the time of the political and economic crises of the 1930s. His other novels, written in the nineteen-thirties, are organised along similar lines. The prime era of Chips's nostalgia is the late-Victorian age, that of Newcome is his love relationship with the German refugee Leni. In these novels, due to the appearance of history's temporality, more precisely, the outbreak of the First World War, both of them are bound to give up the period and object of their nostalgic longing and become pathological nostalgics (what is more, Newcome becomes a victim), which makes them appropriate for being remembered a generation later in practical nostalgic ways. Hilton's *Random Harvest*, as opposed to these novels, is a fundamentally optimistic novel: the protagonist, Charles Rainier loses his faculty of memory in 1917, and only recovers from his amnesia two years later. Meanwhile, he joins a theatrical troupe. His amnesia, in a slightly Proustian manner, ceases when he is watching a patriotic play, during which his earlier memories come back, thus he is able to bridge the gap between his past and present. From that time on, he is capable of remembering phases of his earlier life in a "healthy" and practically nostalgic way in an ordered form.

Based on the above, the following generalisations may be made:

1. Certain English novels of the 1930s show a marked shift as compared to the strategies of remembering of the 1920s "high modernism," inasmuch as they call into question the latter's demands for totalisation concerning memory.
2. The result of the pathological work of memory in the examined novels of the decade is that the self-enclosed, aesthetically-motivated presence, aiming at totality and depth is rendered impossible, since it is highly threatened either by the intrusion of the past (trauma), or the deflation of the present (melancholia), or the futile longing for the past (nostalgia).
3. These texts of the 1930s, examined from the point of view of strategies of remembering, may also serve as points of orientation in the comparison of classic and late-modernist novels.

## **Publications of the Author within the Theme of the Dissertation**

- “The Interminable Reel’: Melancholia and Anthony Powell’s 1930s Novels.” *Endeavours II: Occasional Papers in Linguistics, Literature, Civilisation and Methodology*. Tamás Vraukó, ed. Nyíregyháza: Bessenyei György Könyvkiadó, 2009: 81-103.
- “Being Engaged: Trauma in Henry Green’s *Party Going*.” *Eger Journal of English Studies* IX. (2009): 3-19.
- “Nosztalgia a 30-as évek angol irodalmában: James Hilton.” [“Nostalgia in the English Literature of the 30s: James Hilton”] *A II. Nyíregyházi Doktorandusz (PhD/DLA)-konferencia kiadványa*. [Publications of the Second PhD/DLA Conference in Nyíregyháza] Nyíregyháza: Bessenyei György Könyvkiadó, 2009: 155-60.
- Re-reading Eliot: Landscapes in W. H. Auden’s Early Poetry. *Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg Megyei Tudományos Közalapítvány Füzetek 21*. Nyíregyháza, 2005: 94-97.
- “Remembering” and Narrative in Orwell’s *Coming Up for Air*. *Romanian Journal of English Studies*. Vol. 1. Editura Mirton, Timisoara, 2004: 326-333.

## **Other Publications of the Author**

- Uniótól Unióig: Skócia az Egyesült Királyságban és az egyesült Európában*. [From Union to Union: Scotland in the United Kingdom and in the united Europe] Nyíregyháza, Bessenyei György Könyvkiadó, 2009. (88 pages) (College coursebook)
- Review of “What, Then, is Time?” Responses in English and American Literature. *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*. Spring, 2003: Vol. 9, No. 1: 213-215.
- “Close, But Not Touching”: Readings and Misreadings in John Fowles’s *The Collector*. *The AnaChronisT*. 2002: 228-49.
- Donald E. Morse: „Sylvia Plath és a sebezhetőség költői képe.” [Sylvia Plath and the Trope of Vulnerability] *Modern sorsok és késő modern poétikák. Tanulmányok Sylvia Plathról és Ted Hughesról*. [Modern Fates and Late-Modern Poetics] Ed. István Rácz and Antal Bókay. Budapest: Janus/Gondolat, 2002: 39-58. (Translation)

\*\*\*