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POLITICS OF FORGETTING AND COUNTER MEMORY IN CONTEMPORARY ICELANDIC LITERATURE: SJÓN AND RED MILK

ABSTRACT *This article discusses the trajectory of cultural memory in post-war Icelandic literature and culture. It draws on works from literary scholars and historians who have shown the difference between the memorialization of World War II in Iceland and elsewhere in Europe. It shows how the lack of social and cultural discussion of the war is influenced by different political and social forces and how it has been limited in scope and ambition. The article shows that there are, however, exceptions to this and takes as its case study the work of the Icelandic writer shown and in particular his novel Red Milk which tells the story of one young Icelandic man's fascination with Neo-Nazism in the aftermath of World War II.*

KEYWORDS: cultural memory; World War II; neo-Nazism; Icelandic fiction.

1. Introduction

The events in a country's history that are remembered and paid attention to, and the way in which this is done or not done, is one of the central concerns of the field of memory studies. Many examples in recent times also show how memory politics not only reflect but can have a considerable effect on our current political realities. This can be seen for instance in recent calls for removing statues of prominent historical figures who benefited from slavery or were instrumental in nineteenth century colonialism (Frow, 2019) or the way in which the Holocaust is evoked in the current Israeli aggression in Gaza. The way in which a society or nation remembers its past is thus part of daily reality, political discourse, and cultural practices. Ann Rigney emphasises the usefulness of 'a social-constructivist model that takes as its starting point the idea that memories of a shared past are collectively constructed and reconstructed in the present rather than resurrected from the past' (2005: 14). What this attention to memory – collective memory, cultural memory – clearly demonstrates is that such memory is under pressure from many different forces. Representations of the past in society are influenced by political expediency, economic considerations, calls for social cohesion, cultural traditions,

current aesthetic values, and local memory practices. Marita Sturken states in her seminal study of memory politics, *Tangled Memories* that: ‘Public commemoration is a form of history-making, yet it can also be a contested form of remembrance in which cultural memories slide through and into each other, creating a narrative tangle’ (1997: 44). One example of such narrative tangles is the way in which the Icelandic experience of the Second World War is remembered, or perhaps more to the point, forgotten. It offers an interesting insight into the complex politics of memory and the role of forgetting in public memorialization.

2. Cultural Memory and Fiction

Public and/or official commemoration of the Second World War in Iceland is in the main very limited in scope (Neijmann 2022); there are a very few public memorials, exhibits, events, or rituals dedicated to this period in Icelandic history. During and in the immediate aftermath of the war Icelandic literature was to a certain extent preoccupied with it (Neijmann 2012, 2016), and there is some evidence that there is a renewed interest in the war in fiction from the last decade or so (Helgason, 2011, Indriðason, 2013, 2015, 2016, Gunnarsson, 2017). The author Sjón (1962) is a prominent Icelandic novelist, poet, screenwriter, lyricist and more, whose works have been translated widely. In some of Sjón’s work there is a preoccupation with the Second World War, for instance in the examination of the highly significant and politicised issues and ideologies at stake in the run up to the conflict and in its aftermath. This is evident for instance in his trilogy *CoDex 1962* (2016, 2018), as well as in his novel *Korngult hár, grá augu* (2019, Red Milk, 2021), which will be the focus of this study. Among the issues addressed in these texts are the lives of ordinary people during the war, the fate of the Jewish immigrant in Iceland, and in the case of *Red Milk*, the rise of neo-Nazism in post-war Iceland (Gudmundsdottir, 2024).

Red Milk raises a subject in Iceland’s past that has been more or less silenced and/or forgotten, and the way in which the novel examines these issues provides a new way in which to address this complicated past. The concepts cultural memory and counter-memory will be helpful in analysing the particular uses of the past at play here. The concept of cultural memory proposed by Jan and Aleida Assman, has been further developed by Ann Rigney and Astrid Erll, not least the relationship between literature and memory (J. Assmann, 1992, A. Assmann, 1998, Erll and Rigney, 2006). Erll and Rigney propose that literature has a threefold relationship to memory: ‘literature as a medium of remembrance, as an object of remembrance, and as a mimesis of memory’ (2006: 113). Rigney has demonstrated that literature’s role in memorialisation can be described as a ‘portable monument’ (2004). Developing these ideas further, Rigney maintains that creative arts such as films and novels can create ‘memorability’ of forgotten or marginalized histories (2021: 12). This does

not only apply to works of realism, such as traditional historical novels, but experimental and self-aware works as well: ‘drawing attention to the medium, rather than making it invisible, is also a way to generate interest in unfamiliar experiences’ (15). This is highly relevant to Sjón’s writing, as he works consistently within the avant-garde, pushing boundaries of narrative and representation, while constantly referencing real historical events, as he does to great effect in *Red Milk*.

In this novel, the author unearths stories that have been silenced or forgotten, or at least kept out of mainstream discourse for the main part. The forgotten therefore plays a prominent part in this work, where it creates ‘memorability’ in a silenced story. The relationship between remembering and forgetting is not a stable one, or one that can be easily defined. The closest theorists get to classifying the connection between these terms is to say that they are not mutually exclusive, as memory encompasses both remembering and forgetting. Or as Erll posits: ‘Remembering and forgetting are two sides – or different processes of the same coin, that is memory’ (2011: 8). In order to ‘re’member one must have forgotten; the forgotten is always already an integral part of memory (Gudmundsdottir, 2017). In Andreas Hyussen’s words: ‘Inevitably, every act of memory carries with it a dimension of betrayal, forgetting, and absence’ (2003: 4). It is therefore hardly feasible to attempt to disentangle these two concepts and place them in separate categories, but rather pay attention to the way in which the forgotten is a constant presence in all memory work. Rigney suggests that the traditional mode of thinking about memory as one of plenitude and subsequent loss is not necessarily helpful, instead she prefers to consider it in terms of scarcity. Recollection ‘is an active and constantly shifting relationship to the past, in which the past is changed retrospectively in the sense that its meaning is changed’ (2005: 17). One of the principal ways in which we approach the past is through narrative, as storytelling is an act of memory (Erll, 2009), but one which always entails both remembering and forgetting. When examining memory politics, however, the notion of forgetting is a more complex phenomenon than the more natural progression of the slow erosion of the past we all experience. Jay Winter has suggested that ‘silence’ is a more appropriate term to employ, not least to describe the histories of war and violence (2010). In his famous study of forgetting Paul Connerton analysis the many different modes of forgetting at play in the uses of the past, such as forgetting as planned obsolescence or as humiliated silence (2008). These terms are helpful when considering how a society or a nation faces its past.

Literature is one of the ways in which societal forgetting or silencing, or planned obsolescence can be counteracted, reversed, and challenged. Fiction can bring to the fore events from the past that have been ignored or have for one reason or another been marginalised in the dominant discourse. The term counter-memory is useful in describing the memory processes at work. Initially conceptualized by Michel Foucault in 1971 as ‘contre-mémoire,’ counter-memory has been developed further in recent decades in memory studies.

It has been used to describe marginalized memory or suppressed and silenced memory and José Medina maintains that this approach: ‘places practices of remembering and forgetting in the context of power relations in such a way that possibilities of resistance and subversion are brought to the fore’ (2011: 10). Subverting national narratives, dominant and prevailing conception of the past, is in itself an act of resistance, a way of pointing out the dangers of ignoring transnational influences, that can lead to blindness on particular issues, such as Iceland’s long and complex relationship with other nations, hence the importance of emphasising transnational memory’s possibility as counter-memory (De Cesari and Rigney, 2014).

Examining pasts that have lain outside dominant discourses and common understanding of the past is a counter-memorial practice, according to Jarula Wegner: ‘Any memory can be contested by countless counter-memories that remember this past differently, in contradicting ways and create dynamic antagonisms that continuously question and disrupt the authoritative, canonized order of remembrance’ (2020: 1222). This understanding of counter-memory echoes Walter Benjamin’s view of the possibilities of history writing. According to Esther Leslie: ‘Historical construction is Benjamin’s term for history-writing that can account for the experience of the nameless’ (2010: 133). Thus, fiction can unite these strands of transnational and counter-memorial practices, subverting or challenging common notions of the past, offering a different insight into historical event, by paying attention to the figures on the margins.

3. Memory and World War II in Iceland

As mentioned above, memory of the Second World War in Iceland has been particularly prone to forgetting and/or silencing and does not share many communalities with narratives established elsewhere in Europe, as the country profited considerably from the war and did not suffer the devastating effects so many other nations endured. The country was occupied by Allied forces from 1940 onwards, an occupation resented by many but tolerated by most, with its concomitant incursion of modernity, urbanization, and creation of wealth in what had historically been a very poor country. These factors have greatly influenced how the war is memorialised, or not memorialised in Iceland. In her examination and analysis of literature of the Second World War and the Allied occupation in Iceland, often in works that had thus far garnered little academic attention, Daisy Neijmann has discussed the limits of the response in Iceland to these events, despite the social, economic and cultural change they brought to the country (2016). She describes how little public commemoration of the war there is and how it is portrayed as an event that took place elsewhere and ‘of which Icelanders are entirely innocent, while any discussion of Iceland during the Second World War focuses on the economic boom, modernization of Icelandic society, and the relations between soldiers and Icelandic women’ (2016:

98).

One of main reasons for this was that it was a country without a military of its own, whose leaders echoed constantly an almost mythical idealisation of its enduring neutrality. It was sovereign state from 1918, but under the Danish crown until 1944. Remaining neutral after the occupation of the Allied forces brought with it its own complexities. On the one hand, with the occupation Iceland was placed in the Allied camp, but as Guðmundur Hálfðanarson explains: ‘Although this did not happen through the conscious policy of the Icelandic government, it freed the Icelandic political and cultural elite from any implications of collaboration or active cooperation with Nazi Germany during the war years’ (2011: 80). This means the country is in the unusual, albeit in some ways privileged, situation of being both neutral and aligned with the Allies, of being a participant (for instance by selling fish to Britain), but without a military. Neijmann has claimed that the implications of this can be found in some of the Icelandic war fiction she studies, where characters suffer from ‘bystander syndrome’ as the Icelandic neutrality the character believed in was compromised during the occupation when nearly everyone went to work for the occupying forces, thereby profiting from the war. The feelings expose ‘the ethically dubious stance of neutrality, neutrality which is rarely real neutrality’ (Neijmann, 2012: 135). Thus, the neutral stance is shown to be heavily compromised, or even impossible, as the country is already implicated, ideologically, politically, and/or socially. Michael Rothberg’s concept of the ‘implicated subject’ is useful here, as it occupies positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes. An implicated subject is neither a victim nor a perpetrator, but rather a participant in histories and social formations that generate the position of victim and perpetrator, and yet in which most people do not occupy such clear-cut roles. (2019: 14)

The concept of the implicated subject can, *mutatis mutandum*, be applied to Iceland’s position in the war, as it fulfils the criteria of prospering from the war, being neutral in name, but a participant, nevertheless. And not only is the nation already implicated in the conflict, it was already part of the larger world and transnational currents. John Brannigan shows in his analysis of W.H. Auden’s and Louis MacNeice’s expedition to Iceland on the eve of the war how for them Iceland was ‘an otherworld outside of the violent inequalities, repressions and subjectivations of European society.’ What they encounter instead is a place ‘deeply mythologised by the Nazis as “Das Land,” already tied to the global economies of tourism, and already weighted, however slightly, within the geo-political distribution of power. Iceland was peripheral, but it was neither outside of, nor alternative to, the ideologies and economies of Europe’ (2022: 95). The emphasis in Icelandic political discourse on isolation – and thereby exemption – from the outside world, and on the idealised neutrality of the nation, does not reflect the economic or cultural, transnational realities.

Both Neijmann and Hálfðanarson draw attention to how foreign influences are viewed in Icelandic

cultural memory and political discourse as a pollutant (Neijmann, 2012, Hálfdanarson, 2011), but just as neutrality is an impossible stance, as we learn from Brannigan and Rothberg, isolation from world is not the reality either.

4. Sjón's Red Milk

Red Milk can be read through the prism of the cultural memory and dominant narrative in Iceland of the Second World War. It tells the story of Gunnar Kampen, a young Icelander of Norwegian descent who turns to neo-Nazism in the aftermath of the war. It is a disturbing read, not least because the protagonist is a very ordinary young man, and his conversion to this destructive and utterly bankrupt ideology is described as somehow inevitable. The novel starts with the body of Gunnar found on a train in the UK, and we learn that he had been suffering from an incurable disease. Death is thus a starting point and a constant companion throughout the text. It shapes both Gunnar's own life, and is a prominent force in the ideology he espouses. This is a brief text, 117 pages long in the original edition, and is made up of a collection of letters and childhood memories, fragmented and almost fragile in its sparsity.

A focus on international and transnational currents and consistently placing Icelandic culture and society in a broader setting, is a prominent feature of Sjón's work. His interest in the war, however, as he explains in an interview, relates to his own story: 'My parents were born in 1936 and 1939 and in my search for what I am made of I have always placed ground zero there. The world I am born into begins' (Ormarsson 2019). This is where the origins of the protagonist of Red Milk also lie. The war here is the backdrop of the story, but very much in the background, as we only learn of it through Gunnar's viewpoint, and he was a child at the time. He has very vague ideas of what is happening, and he is not told very much about this as his father, living in fear of what is happening in his home country of Nazi-occupied Norway, locks himself away, listening to the news of the war on longwave radio in foreign tongues. It is thus beyond Gunnar's understanding, yet later becomes central to his attraction to far-right views.

Sjón's works are in the main not preoccupied with the same themes as Neijmann (2016) has identified in post-war Icelandic fiction, such as the occupation and modernisation, but there are interesting cross-overs. The figure of the Icelandic woman with the Allied soldier, a common trope in Icelandic war fiction, is echoed here in one of the most poignant episodes when Gunnar's paternal aunt, Kirsten, comes to visit from Norway shortly after the war. The reader has only Gunnar's adolescent perspective, but certain facts can be gleaned from the sparse text. When the family come to meet her in the harbour as she gets off the ship, they see how she stumbles and drops her belongings, but no one comes to her aid: 'The few onlookers who noticed her

made no attempt to come to her aid and her hurried movements suggested that she hadn't been expecting them to either' (Sjón, 2021, p. 24). When the family greets her, the tension between the brother and sister is palpable; they do not hug and barely say hello to each other, and when they get home 'there was more shouting than weeping' (p. 25). We learn that Kirsten is waiting for her hair to grow back. In the morning, Gunnar, who shares her room, 'measures how much her hair had grown in the night' (p. 26) indicating that she was punished, as were many women from former Nazi-occupied territories for having relations with a German soldier, by having her head shaved. The patriarchal assumptions of ownership in the treatment of women who fraternised with soldiers was also a feature in Iceland's experience of war, although the response was more violent in Nazi-occupied territories. Kirsten returns to Norway when her hair has grown back and leaves behind a man's suit which Gunnar later wears. The suit has a mark 'where something had previously been sewn onto it' (p. 39) indicating that he is in fact inheriting a Nazi uniform.

Although this is never stated overtly in the text, we are reminded time and again that part of Nazi ideology – in particular nationalism – was a strong feature of politics in newly independent Iceland – which makes Gunnar's story all the more chilling. The notion of 'foreign pollution,' mentioned above, was a feature in both left- and right-wing Icelandic politics. As Hálfðanarson explains, the occupation 'challenged the alleged purity of both Icelandic blood and culture' and thus 'undermined what Icelanders held most dear – and the defenders of the Icelandic moral order could do little more than pledge their allegiance to the Icelandic Blut und Boden' (2011: 86). The text draws attention to that the Nazi rhetoric Gunnar espouses and advocates is not something utterly alien to Icelandic politics either during the war or in the post-war years. The closer this ideology and rhetoric is brought to the everyday and further away from the depiction of Nazi ideology as completely unfamiliar or the figure of the Nazi as a monster, the more difficult it becomes to reckon with.

Hálfðanarson's reference to Blut und Boden emphasises the racist element in Icelandic political discourse at the time. Gunnar gets ever more obsessed with the existence of Jews in Iceland, but his antisemitism had its counterpart in the Icelandic ruling classes, and the text refers to the role played by a member of the government at the time in preventing Jewish refugees from settling in Iceland: The Icelandic nationalists had fallen asleep on their watch, placing their trust in the Minister of Justice, Hermann Jónasson, leader of the Progressive Party and a well-known enthusiast for the purity of his nation. Yet, although the minister had done all in his power to halt the tide, evidently a sizeable group had made it to the white island, sinking their claws into Icelandic soil (p. 96).

This is very much in line with historical events; Jónasson indeed played a leading role in turning away Jewish refugees from Iceland in the run-up to the war. We are reminded in this text of an inglorious past which warrants re-examination, as it has largely remained forgotten and silenced, although there have been some signs of a revival of this discussion in recent years (Bergsson, 2017).

Racism has featured regularly in Sjón's work, antisemitism in particular, and Nordic 'Arianism,' which plays a crucial part in his novel *Argóarflís* (2005, *The Whispering Muse* 2012). In the second volume of *CoDex 1962*, which in part takes place during the war, we first come across Nazis in Iceland, and this is represented as a most natural and unremarkable fact. It is one of the hidden pasts these texts unearth and thereby attempt to remedy that omission. There are of course, several reasons for on the one hand the prevalence of nationalistic discourse, and on the other the denial of the existence of Nazism in Iceland, the most obvious being that no one wanted to be associated with Nazism or admit their family's association with Nazism, despite its foothold in Iceland in the pre-war years, the role Iceland played in Nazi mythology, and neo-Nazism links to the country on the post-war years. But the avoidance of the subject and the refusal to address Iceland's role in that is also very much influenced by how the war shaped the country and the Cold War politics that dominated Icelandic political discourse in the decades after the war (Ingimundarson, 2013).

In *Red Milk* this hidden and silenced presence of the Nationalist movement in Iceland in the 1930s and the history of the growth of the neo-Nazis in the post-war years is unearthed and brought to the surface. It shows clearly how this was conveniently forgotten in the prosperous war years, where such allegiances became uncomfortable. When in the office of his boss being fired from his job in the bank, most likely because of his politics, Gunnar looks out the window: 'A famous photograph of the old Nazi party had been taken from this angle on 1 May 1936, when a hundred men in brown shirts had marched through the centre of town. He happened to know that the managing director, now escorting him to the door, had been one of the flag-bearers that day' (pp. 114-15).

As mentioned above, foreign influences were often viewed with suspicion in Icelandic discourse, but paradoxically, attention from abroad could offer validation and legitimation. Gunnar writes letters to leaders of neo-Nazis around the world (real life characters such as the US neo-Nazi George Lincoln Rockwell, who had ties to Iceland) and developed connections to the international movement of neo-Nazis – indeed, Gunnar dies on his way to a world gathering of neo-Nazis in the UK. The newspapers in Iceland notice that Rockwell has visited Iceland and in a news item on the issue, a reporter refers to Gunnar as the "Führer" and described the party as a "small group". Gunnar didn't let it get to him. What mattered was the information provided at the beginning of the piece: That there was "an international neo-Nazi movement". That its representatives were "travelling openly between countries" and that Iceland was one of their stopping-off points. And that they had a representative here in Gunnar Kampen. People would notice. (p. 117)

This not only confers legitimacy on Gunnar's activities, but also in some sense on the novel itself. Gunnar's experience and the subject matter of the novel is part of a larger picture, not limited to parochial issues in Iceland, but have their ongoing, larger, cross-border, histories.

Iceland and Icelanders are 'implicated subjects' in Sjón's works. They are part of a world at war,

showing the same leanings toward racism and nationalism as elsewhere in Europe at the time. In *Red Milk* Nazism is treated in a more serious manner than in *Codex 1962*, artifice is suspended with, and playful fables are nowhere to be seen. Instead, we get a glimpse of the inner life of a young person in the post-war years turning to this destructive ideology. Thus, Sjón's work introduces a new perspective on a rather stagnant discourse on the Second World War in Iceland, ensuring the 'memorability' of events. The novel becomes a 'medium of remembrance' while also enacting a 'mimesis of memory' in the childhood reminiscences of Gunnar Kampen. It thus takes part in the formation of cultural memory, by challenging the dominant national narrative, offering a counter-memorial representation of the forgotten or hidden past.

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