Remembering Oradour-sur-Glane

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Remembering Oradour-sur-Glane:

Collective Memory in Translation

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Memories of past events can be mediated at the level of the individual and of the group, with various degrees of immediacy, in multiple modes including the textual, the visual, and the oral, and to any number of (ethical, ideological, social, economic) ends. The selectivity and motivatedness on which memory is predicated often emerge as the focal points of what has come to be called ‘Memory Studies’, a discipline occupied largely with questions of, as Alon Confino succinctly puts it, ‘who wants whom to remember what, and why’.¹ Recent developments have also led to an increased interest in transcultural memory, emphasizing how ‘mnemonic processes unfold across and beyond cultures’,² as opposed to within the assumed boundaries of a given nation. But, despite acknowledging the phenomenon of ‘travelling memories’, and their journeys in which ‘elements may get lost, become repressed, silenced, and censored, and remain unfulfilled’, Astrid Erll makes only a cursory call for an examination of ‘how translocal mnemonic forms and practices are translated and integrated into local repertoires’.³ Nor is it clear whether translation is understood here in its literal or figurative sense. This is indicative of a general tendency across Memory Studies, where sufficient attention has yet to be dedicated to considering how translation functions as a verbal mode of mnemonic mediation, and to identifying specifically where, how, and why such losses and distortions might emerge.

For its part, Translation Studies has long recognized translation as an act of intercultural transmission, and remains acutely alert to what Wolf terms ‘the dynamic transformations resulting from continual confrontations of cultural formations’,⁴ as well as to the impact of those transformations on the reception of the original in a different time and
place. Work being carried out on the translation of Holocaust testimonies, poetry, and fiction has begun to engage with the concepts and issues of Memory Studies. Nevertheless, as I have argued elsewhere, scope remains for a much more concerted and conscientious dialogue between Memory Studies and Translation Studies; the former may be served by a more detailed, critical appreciation of the processes and potential consequences of translation as an intercultural carrier of memory, while the latter can benefit from a greater attentiveness to the available range of conceptual and theoretical approaches for exploring mnemonic modes of transmission.

The present essay aims to establish and develop such mutually informative dialogue through its consideration of how translation might impact the generation of what Alison Landsberg has termed ‘prosthetic memory’. This is a particular form of memory that emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theatre or museum. In this moment of contact, an experience occurs through which the person sutures himself or herself into a larger history … The person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live. The resulting prosthetic memory has the ability to shape that person’s subjectivity and politics.

The experiential conduits of prosthetic memory are ‘mass cultural technologies of memory’ such as films and interactive museum displays (Landsberg, p. 19). The technology used by the cinema-goer or the museum visitor allows that individual to establish a more keenly felt and immediate link to the past, one that engages the senses as well as the intellect to arrive at a greater bodily awareness of how it felt to be in a particular time and space. The memory of
the other is thus physically appended to the viewer or visitor in an act of adoption that closes
the distance between the perceiver and a past not directly experienced, and signals its own
prosthetic form. Consequently, ‘prosthetic memory creates the conditions for ethical thinking
precisely by encouraging people to feel connected to, while recognizing the alterity of, “the
other”’ (Landsberg, p. 9). The felt past and the lived present coexist in the technology user,
thus eliciting a more empathic and ethical response to, and attenuating the risk of
appropriation of, events encountered by another.

Landsberg recognizes that the prosthetic memories acquired by an individual are
‘inflected by the specificities of his or her other experiences and place in the world’
(Landsberg, p. 21). As such, no two prosthetic memories will be the same, frustrating any
efforts to predict the response of the individual to a given event. At the same time, however,
prosthetic memories originate from ‘an encounter with a mass cultural representation of the
past’ (Landsberg, p. 19), and it can reasonably be assumed that the nature of that
representation will go some way to influencing the suturing process that affixes the person to
the past, affectively and ethically. In turn, the reworking of that representation through
translation has the potential to impose its own inflection on prosthetic memory. For, as Maria
Tymoczko has observed,

translations are inevitably partial; meaning in a text is overdetermined, and the
information in and meaning of a source text is therefore always more extensive than a
translation can convey. Conversely, the receptor language and culture entail
obligatory features that limit the possibilities of the translation, as well as extending
the meanings of the translation in directions other than those inherent in the source
text ... As a result, translators must make choices, selecting aspects or parts of a text to
transpose and emphasize. Such choices in turn serve to create representations of their source texts, representations that are also partial.⁸

The intrinsic and unavoidable partiality of translation may then forge mass cultural representations that, in advance of any individual response to past events, can conceivably narrow or expand the dimensions of the prosthesis and determine how well the affective and ethical sutures will hold.

In order to explore these conceptual issues from a more empirical perspective, I will turn to a case study of the French and English audio guides to the Centre de la Mémoire at Oradour-sur-Glane.⁹ A total 642 inhabitants of this small Limousin village were massacred on 10 June 1944 by a unit of the Second Waffen SS Panzer Division ‘Das Reich’, and the charred, crumbling buildings remain today as an evocative trace of the atrocity. As awareness of the massacre grew in France, the ruins increasingly became a place of pilgrimage and contemplation, a ‘site of memory’,¹⁰ in Pierre Nora’s terms, that has come to attest to the suffering of the French nation at the hands of the Nazi occupiers. However, the steady erosion of the ruins over time led to the acknowledgement that they ‘could no longer continue to perpetuate a message of memory and of peace by and of themselves’,¹¹ while the passing of survivors further intensified the burden they carried. Part of this burden now belongs to the Centre de la Mémoire, which was the culmination of a project initiated by a local politician, Jean-Claude Peyronnet, and developed by the National Association of the Families of the Martyrs of Oradour-sur-Glane, the survivors, as well as various architects, exhibition designers, and historians. The memorial thrust of the centre is thus a collective one, having ‘originate[d] from shared communications about the meaning of the past that are anchored in the life-worlds of individuals who partake in the communal life of the respective collective’.¹²
Inaugurated in 1999 by Jacques Chirac, the Centre stands on the threshold of the ruins and serves as ‘an interpretative centre, which provides the tools for understanding’ by allowing visitors to contextualize the atrocity. More specifically, the permanent exhibition, ‘Comprendre Oradour’, has been designed as a ‘route of remembrance’, moving the visitor through five key thematic spaces: the rise of Nazism, the days immediately preceding the atrocity, the events of 10 June 1944, the national response and the process of reconstruction, and a reflective space with a universal message of peace. The textual displays are predominantly in French, but offer summaries of the salient content in English, while visits can also be supplemented by the audio guides that are available in French, English, and Dutch. These audio guides can be understood as technological vehicles of memory that provide the visitor with more than a historical understanding of the events, facilitating as they do a physical, emotional, and ethical orientation along the route of remembrance. However, it is expressly the synthesis between the non-French user of the audio guides and the collective memory of the centre that occasions prosthetic memory, enabling the visitor ‘to take on memories of events not “naturally” their own’ (Landsberg, p. 18). For, although the audio guide may bring about a greater bodily and ethical response in the French user to a past not experienced at first hand, the past into which they are sutured is nevertheless a priori their own. The connectedness between the individual and the collective already exists, so in this respect the audio guide becomes less a mode of prosthetic memory and mass cultural ownership, and more an intensifier of this ‘natural’ bond.

As a translation of the French original, the transcript of the English audio guide can be read as a repository of collective memory. The form, content, and function of this repository will necessarily shape the interface between the collective and the individual, and the dimensions of the prosthetic memory that materializes. Furthermore, as Maurice Halbwachs has shown, collective memory is forged within a particular social framework and for a
particular purpose. The names attributed to the Centre itself and to the permanent exhibition clearly articulate the two fundamental goals of those involved in the project: to remember and to understand. To use the words of Confino, such goals are the ‘common denominators that overcome on the symbolic level real social and political differences to create an imagined community’. What I am concerned with in the following comparative analysis is how the original pedagogical and ethical cornerstones of collective memory are reconstructed in the English audio guide transcript, and how this reworking might be brought to bear on the potential for prosthetic memory to emerge and take hold in the individual user.

One of the first mechanisms through which the exhibition establishes a relationship with the French audio guide user is situated on the level of the interpersonal. The transcript initiates an interaction between a narrative ‘we’, representing the collective voice of the Centre, and a ‘you’ which directly addresses the visitor. The immediacy of the connection draws the French visitor closer to their shared past, thereby establishing the conditions necessary for both a deeper understanding of the events and the act of remembrance. The English audio guide mirrors these lines of negotiation, generating in turn the proximity on which prosthetic memory can be predicated. However, since there is an even wider gap to bridge between the individual and the past to which they have no ‘natural’ affinity, any restructuring of the relationship risks modifying the potential for prosthetic memory to be forged. The connectedness between the English audio guide user and the past is clearly discernible in all but one of the translated directions; whereas the French-speaking visitor is explicitly instructed that ‘Quelques-unes des exactions nazies vous sont présentées dans ce couloir’, the English-speaking user is omitted from the now impersonal statement that ‘Some of the Nazis’ barbaric acts are presented in the hallway’ (English audio guide, p. 31). This single example has little effect on the overall realization of the centre’s pedagogical and memorial goals, but it does still distance the visitor somewhat from the past. To return to the
trope of suturing, a stitch is dropped, and consequently, the possibility for an empathic response to the victims of such barbarity is diminished. Here, the incomplete, partial nature of translation emphasized by Tymoczko threatens to produce an unengaged, impartial reaction from the visitor. The objective contextual facts may be conveyed, but understanding is restricted to the intellectual, thereby curtailing the morally emotive dimensions of prosthetic memory.

A further factor which may determine how far visitors are immersed in their journey through the exhibition is the narrative tense adopted. According to Paul Williams, ‘memorial museums are particularly evocative because they usually exist in settings where we can imagine lives otherwise being lived out’. The Centre is undeniably located in a setting where the shells of the buildings and the remnants of everyday objects such as sewing machines, bedsteads, and bicycles are hauntingly redolent of the way of life of the inhabitants. In order to deepen understanding of the events, the exhibition presents the visitor with a vision of Oradour-sur-Glane before the massacre, which is counterpointed, through the spatial design of the exhibition, against the movements of the Waffen SS. The French audio guide forewarns that ‘Ces deux mondes vont brutalement se rencontrer lors du massacre’ (French audio guide, p. 15), employing the periphrastic future tense to reframe the temporal aspect of the visitor into a moment of tragic inevitability preceding the arrival of the Nazi troops. Similarly, the ensuing descriptions of the village before the war are also situated by means of the present historic aspect. For example: ‘Oradour est pour les habitants de Limoges … un lieu d’approvisionnement, mais aussi de détente sur les bords de la rivière Glane. Le village, situé à une vingtaine de kilomètres de la ville, est desservie par une ligne de tramway’ (French audio guide, p. 16). In the same way as ‘the concept of a physical movement back in time … suggests a shift in the visitor’s subject position from observer to actor in the museum experience’, so too can the mental, aspectual relocation of the visitor
encourage a more active engagement with the past and stimulate a more vivid imagining of how the inhabitants lived.

In contrast, English audio guide users remain fixed in their own present, from where they learn that the ‘two worlds brutally met during the massacre of Oradour’, that ‘for the people of Limoges, Oradour was a neighbouring county town’, that it ‘was a place of supply, but also a place to relax’, that it ‘was situated around 20 kilometres away from Limoges, and was a stop on the departmental tramway line’ (English audio guide, pp. 15-16). The position of anglophone visitors thus becomes one of passive observation; they are temporally more remote from the depiction of a pre-war Oradour, and are consequently further removed from the terrible imminence of the SS onslaught. The route of remembrance along which the English-speaking visitors are guided does not make the same operative move into the past, and their access to the experience of the inhabitants becomes less immediate. The content of the audio guide, including the comment that ‘the clash between the two worlds is mirrored in the design of the room’ (English audio guide, p. 15), means that the visitor is exposed to an informative depiction of events, as well as to a certain sensory (spatial) experience of the brutal rupture that the clash brought forth. And yet, by detaching the visitor from the events as they unfolded, translation has in this instance circumscribed the potential inherent in the original narration for the development of a more sustained and ethically meaningful form of prosthetic memory.

Although translation can often be marked by acts of selectivity that contract or suppress clauses, sentences, and even lengthier stretches of text, it is important to note that the user of the English audio guide is, by and large, provided with the same pedagogically motivated facts and physical directions as the user of the French version. Such comprehensiveness notwithstanding, there is one omission which effectively silences the commentary contributed by Jean-Claude Peyronnet, the local politician who was the key
figure in the establishment of the Centre. His exposition comes at the start of the French audio guide, where the visitor is invited to learn more about the Centre and its origins before progressing through the exhibition. In his contribution, Peyronnet underscores the fundamental aim of ‘simultaneously creating a hitherto non-existent gateway to the ruins, as well as a centre which, by means of its understated architecture, would be explanatory’. He then goes on to emphasize the uniqueness of Oradour: ‘unique, because it has forcibly marked the memory of France’, and original because ‘the ruins have been conserved ... are highly evocative and no one can visit them without experiencing a shock’ (French audio guide, p. 3, my translation). I can only speculate as to the reasons why this contribution is omitted from the English audio guide: perhaps no permission was obtained for the reproduction of the contribution, or perhaps its focus on issues of specifically French national memory was deemed exclusionary to other visitors. As a result, the English audio guide user is less cognizant of the constitutive tenets of the Centre and of the prominent, focalizing role of the ruins in French discourses of the past.

This in itself does not impinge substantially on the potential formation of prosthetic memory, detracting only slightly from the visitor’s contextual knowledge of the Centre’s inception. However, the elision of the emphasis placed by Peyronnet on the uniqueness and affective power of the ruins may have a bearing on the durability of that memory. As a guardian of collective memory, the Centre seeks to speak for the ruins whose own voice is becoming lost to time; by articulating the shock of the visit prior to its realization, the French audio guide thus tacitly encourages a greater degree of emotional self-awareness in the individual, while pointing towards a duty to remember in the face of such uniqueness. Since these particular visceral and ethical markers of orientation are absent from the English audio guide, the user is less primed to enter the ruins in an introspective, subjective state of mind, and less alert to the desired act of remembrance. The formation of prosthetic memory
consequently rests on weaker foundations, translation having precluded one possibility for a more attentive engagement with the past and an ethical response thereto.

The duty to remember is also accentuated in the very first words of the French audio guide which admonish the listener as follows: ‘Oradour... souvenez-vous’ (French audio guide, p. 2). However, this moral imperative to remember is conspicuously absent from the English version which merely suggests: ‘Oradour... let’s take a look back’ (English audio guide, p. 1). A return to the past is certainly invoked, but the idea of ‘looking back’ is not quite endowed with the same sense of ethical urgency as the injunction to remember. By the same token, although the English audio guide draws the user into a collective act of remembrance, it does so without the emphasis on individual responsibility that is inherent in the French commentary. As opposed to enabling the confluence of individual and collective that is fundamental to the creation of prosthetic memory, the English audio guide repositions the interaction on an exclusively collective level. Despite this being a valuable undertaking in itself, it might impede the formation of an essentially personal, ethically binding response to the past.

Moreover, the above example is tied to considerations of cohesion between the Centre and the ruins. On a semiotic level, the audio guide imperative to ‘souvenez-vous’ has a direct resonance with the original sign positioned at the entrance to the ruins which pre-dates the Centre and also entreats the visitor (arguably on an even more direct level) to ‘Souviens-toi’. Not only is this sign reproduced photographically and displayed prominently at the beginning of the exhibition visit, but it further contains the ethically charged English entreaty to ‘remember’. Whereas the French visitor is in a position to recognize the synthesis between the auditory and the visual injunctions, the reinforcing device is less discernible to the English audio guide user, with the consequence that the ethical bonding process, and the sutures on which it relies, unravel slightly where the level of cohesion is diminished.
Nevertheless, the semantic cohesion of the French audio guide, realized through lexical repetition, remains intact in translation. The original invariably frames the events as a ‘massacre’ and a ‘drame’, and to the town as a ‘village martyr’. Such cohesion ostensibly attests to the constructedness of collective memory, but it further anchors these weighted words in the minds of visitors as ethical mainstays which constantly draw them back to the horrors of that day. Likewise, the human cost of suffering resounds in the English version, where the haunting repetition of ‘massacre’, ‘tragedy’, and ‘martyred village’ also compels the visitor to remember.

As James E. Young has noted, ‘Holocaust memory is always “contested” as long as more than one group or individual remembers’, and the remembering on which the Centre is posited does not escape this dilemma either. The ruins may have come to serve as a symbol of Nazi barbarity, but the apparent homogeneity of the collective memory made manifest in the exhibition conceals any latent controversy over the inception and form of the Centre itself. The original project leader, Jean-Jacques Fouché, has commented on the ambiguity surrounding the question ‘Which memory ought the nascent Centre give voice to?’ The choice was effectively between the inclusion of a multitude of personal memories and the establishment of a unified, collective one, as was ultimately to be the case. The French audio guide gives no indication as to the debates which surrounded the enterprise and what to include, noting simply that ‘en 1992, fort du constat que les ruines ne peuvent se visiter comme un simple monument, le Conseil Général de Haute-Vienne lance le projet de créer un centre d’interprétation’ (French audio guide, p. 2). Conversely, the English audio guide user is given to understand that ‘it was largely agreed that the ruins could not be visited as a simple monument’ (English audio guide, p. 1), intimating a degree of dissent. In this instance, translation initiates a move away from the ideal of a collective memory based on commonly held narratives, and towards a more complex, fragmented picture of the past.
From one perspective, translation may be viewed here as introducing contention, inadvertently or otherwise, into a context where such variance is deliberately eschewed in favour and in the service of the overarching and unifying goals of collective memory. In turn, any fissures in the unity of the collective memory may well frustrate the formation of prosthetic memory as visitors must suture themselves onto a past that is riven, rather than onto a consolidated whole. From another perspective, however, it is possible to frame this act of translation as more revelatory than restrictive, more accurate than partial, and thus to press it into the service of vocalizing otherwise silenced individual approaches to the past. In this instance, the prosthetic memory of the visitor may be enhanced by the (albeit subtle) incorporation of more exact, circumstantial information.

One final issue to be addressed is that the English commentary very evidently adopts a literal translation strategy, more often than not mirroring the lexical and syntactic choices of the French original. In various places, this strategy leads to non-English phrasing such as ‘The goal of the SS was first and foremost to create a terror capable to keep the population frightened and to show what would be the consequence of any act of resistance’ (English audio guide, p. 25). The resultant effect may be labelled, to borrow Venuti’s term, ‘foreignizing’. Although the non-fluency is likely to be symptomatic of the practical conditions of translation (in this instance, carried out perhaps by a non-native English speaker), rather than the result of a specific agenda, literal moments such as these can nevertheless be read as exerting ‘an ethnodeviant pressure ... to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text’.22 By extension, the literal strategy can also register the cultural difference of the other, that is, of those who suffered and perished at the hands of the Waffen SS. The unnaturalness of expression alerts the visitor to the distance that must be travelled into a past that is not naturally their own, and in this sense, translation paves the
way for the visitor to move across this gap in a manner which acknowledges alterity and encourages empathy, as opposed to over-identification.

Through her work on prosthetic memory, Landsberg ‘asks scholars and intellectuals to take seriously the popularity of new cultural surfaces, such as experiential museums, and demands their recognition of the power of these media to affect people and shape their politics’ (Landsberg, p. 21). This discussion has, in turn, attempted to draw attention to translation as an additional medium of memory transmission, and to clarify how the interlingual and intercultural re-mediation of collective memory has the power to influence the formation of prosthetic memory. The meaning any visitor takes away ultimately hinges on individual differences in attentiveness, receptiveness, and empathy, among other cognitive and emotional states. While it is not possible to predict with any degree of precision how a given visitor will respond to the site of memory and the Centre which precedes it, the notion of prosthetic memory does serve as a useful lens in thinking about how translation retains, restricts, or extends the potential for the visitor to engage with the past, as built into the original discursive content of the audio guide. In its capacity as both a mode of retelling the past and a mechanism of suturing the individual to the collective, translation proves to be implicated in a range of epistemological and ethical manoeuvres which may shape the response of the English audio guide user.

On the whole, translation recreates the proximity of the interpersonal relationship between guiding voice and listener, thus drawing the visitor to the events, while the physical orientation through the space and the emotive lexical framing of the events are similarly preserved. In this respect, the process of suturing is expedited and the emergence of prosthetic memory becomes a real possibility. At the same time, however, translation opens up a breach in the interaction between the individual and the collective as they move along the route of remembrance by fixing the narrative in the present of the user, as opposed to that
of the victims. Similarly, the need to remember is impressed on the English audio guide user in a less explicit, personally engaging, and cohesive manner, with the result that the ethical burden of memory is perhaps less forcefully felt and the empathic splicing together of visitor and past becomes more vexed. The equivocality of translation comes to light in respect of the contentious aspect of memory, with its potential to either disturb or augment the depth of prosthetic memory realized. Lastly, translation also possesses the power to inscribe additional layers of meaning into a given narrative; by marking the commentary with a certain linguistic alterity, translation simultaneously allows for a more direct experience of the alterity of the past and brings forth a more empathic encounter with the other that promotes the development of prosthetic memory.

In short, how the collective past is re-experienced and remembered across languages and cultures is fundamentally contingent on translation as a mode of remediation, with its attendant mechanisms of loss, partiality, and gain. This case study has been better able to identify the specific moments when these mechanisms come into play and illustrate their impact by drawing on the interpretative tools of both Translation Studies and Memory Studies, a coupling which might be further exploited in future.

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3 Erll, p. 14-15, my emphasis.


9 I am very grateful to the Centre de la Mémoire, not least Richard Jezierski and Sandra Gibouin, for allowing me access to their documentation centre and to the audio guide transcripts in particular.


16 Confino (n. 1), pp. 1,399-400.

17 Centre de la Mémoire d’Oradour: Visite audioguidée (unpublished transcript, Centre de documentation du Centre de la Mémoire d’Oradour, 2008), p. 28. Further references to the guide and to its unattributed English translation will be made in the main body of the text as French audio guide and English audio guide respectively. All italics for emphasis are my own.


