

## Conference Paper

# Resisting 'Recumbency on The Past ': Literary Strategies for Overcoming Retromania in Maria Stepanova's Novel *In Memory of Memory*, (2017)

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## Abstract

This article discusses the philosophical semi-documentary novel *In Memory of Memory* by Maria Stepanova (2017). The narrative about the past can be interpreted as a strategy of dealing with the dominant retro-utopian sentiments in Russian society. The history of several generations of Stepanova's own family is depicted against the backdrop of tragic twentieth-century Russian upheavals which are transformed into a meta-novel focusing on the workings of memory and ways of articulating it. The article identifies two strategies used in Stepanova's novel to counter retro-utopianism. The first strategy is the choice of a hybrid genre – documentary fiction – to recount the events of family and national history. The second strategy relies on the concept of memory as a catalogue used to complete the 'work of grief' in Russian literature and to help it escape its fixation on the past. These strategies in Stepanova's novel appear to be closely connected with her reception of W.G. Sebald's (1944-2001) works, in particular his documentary fiction.

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## 1. Introduction

This article discusses counter-strategies against retro-utopianism in Maria Stepanova's debut novel *In Memory of Memory* (2017). Maria Stepanova (born in 1972) is a renowned Russian poet, essay writer and editor of the popular online portal about culture *Colta.ru*. This novel has won a universal acclaim and received a number of prestigious literary awards in Russia such as *Bolshaya kniga* and *NOS*. *In Memory of Memory* can be seen as the author's attempt to find a way out of the ideological deadlock in which Russian culture and in particular Russian literature have found themselves – their fixation on the past. The attempt to overcome this fixation in Maria Stepanova's prose is related to her reception of Winfried Georg Sebald's (1944-2001) writing and his documentary fiction exploring the tragic episodes of German and world history in the twentieth century.

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As M. Yampolsky puts it, Sebald is a literary doppelganger of Stepanova and she actively uses his creative methods [1]. In Stepanova's eyes, Sebald is the author who will help Russian literature overcome its fixation on the past. The article aims to trace the 'Sebaldian text' in the novel *In Memory of Memory* in the context of resistance to retro-mania. The intertextual references to Sebald's work in Stepanova's prose have not previously been explored in research literature.

## 2. Materials and Methods

Our methodology relies on intertextual and intratextual analysis. M. Stepanova's novel is interpreted in the context of Sebald's works, especially his novel *Austerlitz*, crucial for understanding *In Memory of Memory*. The intertextual analysis focuses on the complex system of references to Sebald's works in Stepanova's novel and shows how Sebaldian principles of writing are reproduced and transformed in Stepanova's narrative. The intratextual analysis of Stepanova's novel is conducted on different levels: analysis of the meta-narrative, text structure and plot schemes. Stepanova's views on Sebald's work are made explicit in her essays, in particular her essay about Sebald's poetics *From the Other Side* (2013) [2].

## 3. Results

Our study revealed two narrative strategies aimed at counteracting retro-utopianism in the novel. These strategies can be explained, in our view, by Stepanova's relation to and reception of Sebald's prose: the first strategy is to use a documentary fiction narrative and the other is based on the concept of memory as a catalogue.

## 4. Discussion

The theme of retromania, a persistent and pervasive presence of the Soviet past in the current Russian public and cultural agenda, is pivotal to Maria Stepanova's essay writing. Her book *Three Articles on the Subject of* is devoted entirely to this topic (2015). In these essays Stepanova looks into reasons behind retromania, which she vividly describes as "wild, patchy archaization" [3]; "avoidance of reality" [3], "not being able to tell oneself from one's grandfather" [3], a form of "extreme tourism into the past" [3]. (All quotations from Maria Stepanova's texts were translated into English by the author of this article)

In her view, it is the optics of resentment that makes the retro-utopian program so attractive for the contemporary Russian public:

The past provides us with the optical tools which enable everyone to feel real: an actor, an agent of the unfolding events. In the political sense, the Russians are now completely deprived of this feeling but this loss is more than generously compensated through the settling of scores with the past-in-the-present [3].

According to Stepanova as an essayist, the totality of the retro-utopian agenda in Russia acquires a terrifying scale of a full-blown ideological crisis. What seems particularly alarming to her is the complete absence of a futurological vision of any kind. In stark contrast to the Soviet twentieth century, which pursued the utopian modernist vision of a glorious future, the twenty-first century is completely devoid of such pursuit.

*In Memory of Memory* continues the topic of retromania:

Russia, where the whirlpool of violence never ends, – forming a kind of traumatic enfilade the society passes through, from one disaster to another, from a war to a revolution, from famine to massacres, then to a new war and new persecutions – had turned into a territory of shifted memory slightly earlier than other countries. The versions of what happened to us in the last hundred years double and treble, ripple and distort, as if the past is seen through a layer of opaque paper and conceals the present time from the light [4].

The history of several generations of the author's own family in the context of the tragic upheavals of the Russian twentieth century (Revolution, Civil War, the disaster of collectivization, World War II) acquires a form of a meta-novel focused on the mechanisms of memory work and ways of speaking about it. Metafiction, according to the classical definition of Patricia Waugh, "self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" [5].

The narrator in Stepanova's novel believes that retromania stems from postmemory. She calls the book by Marianne Hirsch (*The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, 2012) a 'guidebook across my own mind', emphasizing the relevance of the problematique discussed in this work [4]. The term proposed by M. Hirsch is understood in a wider sense by Stepanova: as a memory of a person not in the aftermath of a disaster but after living through a whole string of historical

catastrophes. Thus, whether they like it or not, everybody who lived in the twentieth century become the bearers of postmemory. From Stepanova's perspective, retromania is grounded in postmemory as a 'religion of the past': "The plasticity of memory makes it an easy substitution for religion – thus memory entails recumbency on the past" [4]. This religious cult originates in the craving of the public consciousness for equilibrium. The subjectivity and selectivity of memory carry a hidden threat as any part of history can be idealized and thus for some people, the years of the Great Purge in Russia can easily turn into a paradise lost.

Stepanova writes in her essay on Sebald:

Sebald occupies a unique position in Russia: here he is an *underground classic* because he is literally absent from the surface but is being referred to as a buried treasure. It is the grotesque backside of his global fame, which has become firmly established in the twenty years after his death <...> In Russia he still is untranslated, unknown and unread <...> Sebald remains something of a secret knowledge: he is not written of but mentioned, he is not discussed but implied. This situation is even more bizarre because it is in Russia that his way of literary existence should become a prime necessity [2]

One of the most significant German writers of the second half of the twentieth century, a literary historian, professor at the University of East Anglia and the author of four major novels *Vertigo* (*Schwindel, Gefühle*, 1990), *The Emigrants* (*Die Ausgewanderten*, 1992), *The Rings of Saturn* (*Die Ringe des Saturn*, 1995), and *Austerlitz* (*Austerlitz*, 2001), Sebald dealt with a distinct range of topics. In the words of Sebald's biographer and student Uwe Schütte, Sebald's prose is determined by "trauma and memory, melancholy, travel literature, intertextuality, motherland, the Holocaust" [6]. Sebald was named by influential literary critics of *The New York Times* "the prime speaker of the Holocaust". The scope of his work, however, according to Schütte, goes beyond what N.Finkelstein cynically described as the academic 'Holocaust industry' [7]. Sebald the writer was more interested in human violence as such. Sebald's works are rightfully described as documentary fiction as they blur the boundary between fact and fiction. Another distinctive feature of Sebald's poetics is its exceptional visuality: his novels are abundant in photographic images, which, instead of illustrating the narrative, act as points of departure for the narrative.

M.Stepanova seeks to popularise Sebald and lead him out of the literary 'underground' by citing his works in her articles, public lectures and interviews. Although Sebald's popularity in Russia still cannot be compared to his success in the German-

and English-speaking world, Stepanova's efforts played a role in making Sebald popular among the intellectual audience. This trend is supported by new translations (*Vertigo* was published in 2019 by Moscow publishing house 'Novoe izdatelstvo') and theatrical productions (*Austerlitz* was put on stage in 2019 by Tovstonogov Bolshoi Drama Theater in St.Petersburg under the direction of E. Safonova).

In her novel *In Memory of Memory* Stepanova inscribes Sebald into the Russian literary canon, along with the names of Nabokov and Mandelstam. Sebald is mentioned in Stepanova's novel over thirty times, the narrative is imbued with allusions to his novels and interviews. In addition to a separate chapter on Sebald and Mandelstam and multiple passages about Sebaldian poetics, the reader often quite unexpectedly stumbles upon references to Sebald scattered across the text [4]. These references create within the novel a certain rhythm similar to 'Austerlitz', the work that is central to Stepanova's perception of Sebald's work, where the narrative is rhythmically organized by constant repetitions of the phrase *sagte Austerlitz* ('Austerlitz said'), pointing to the narrator's doppelganger. Unlike Stepanova's text, however, Sebaldian prose also engages in a play with indirect speech and overlapping first-person narratives, which can make it confusing for the reader to decide whom this or that phrase belongs to. The whole sum of references to Sebald evenly woven into the text of Stepanova's novel can be interpreted as her homage to Sebaldian 'periscopic' (U.Schütte) form of narrative [7] or narration-at-a-distance – the narrative based on hearsay, echoing the voices of the people from the past. For Stepanova's narrator Sebald is a kind of eternal interlocutor, the same kind of interlocutor as Austerlitz is to the narrator in the novel of the same name.

In our view, Stepanova associates with the figure of Sebald the need to resist the 'religion of the past' generated by postmemory.

The cover of *In Memory of Memory* features a delicate figurine of a 'frozen Charlotte', seen from the back. These figurines were mass produced in Germany in the second half of the nineteenth century, and, if what the author says is true, were often used as buffering materials for transporting fragile things. This symbolic image, which evokes multiple meanings, constitutes the conceptual core of the novel. On the one hand, a 'frozen Charlotte' – a tiny figure with an inventory number on its back, a mass product "meant to be damaged" [4] – can be seen as an allegory of the frailty of human life in the twentieth century. On the other hand, this broken doll (along with other associations, it may refer to the figure of a boy in a fancy dress on the cover of the first edition of Sebald's *Austerlitz*) can be an allegory of the fragmentary and elusive qualities of

memory: memory of family members and your own memory – the situation in which the whole novel originates.

The concept of a disrupted narrative becomes a part of the novel's storyline. The narrator buys a doll in a flea market, choosing the best-preserved figurine out of many, carries it with her and then accidentally breaks it: 'What in one way or another illustrated the continuity of family history and my personal history at once became an allegory: of the impossibility to tell it and the impossibility to preserve it and my total failure to put myself together out of the pieces of somebody else's past or at least to convincingly appropriate it' [4]. The interrupted, fragmentary nature of the narrative about the past is emphasized on the meta-narrative level: the narrator often points to the fragmentary character of her notes. Two types of novelistic narrative are contrasted – one orientated towards imitation of life-course coherence and the other, towards rejecting these attempts to imitate and it is the latter that the narrator mostly gives her preference to [4]. The narrative structure of the text at times seems disrupted and incoherent: chapters often take the form of disconnected fragments rather than parts of a chronological sequence of family history.

Insistence upon the fragmentary character of the narrative may stem from the modernist skepticism towards a story and narration or, quoting Austrian literary scholar Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler, the context of "polemics with narration" [6, 233]. The latter is particularly obvious in works of Austrian writers and originates from Rilke's (1875–1926) *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (*Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, 1910), Musil's (1880–1942) *The Man Without Qualities* (*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, 1930–1942), and Hermann Broch's novels (1886–1951). This context is based on the belief that the chronological pattern of a narrative creates a certain sense of order which distorts our perception of reality. It is the context of this polemics, the conviction that any attempts to build an accurate chronological narrative about real events are I and deluded, that creates a foundation for the development of Sebaldian documentary fiction. It is obviously impossible to speak of historical catastrophes from the perspective of a witness. The urgent need to come to grips with the tragic experience of the previous generations leads Sebald to invent an 'indirect' way of speaking about history. He does not intend to provide an accurately documented account of historical events: instead, his narrator gives word to other characters, reproduces passages from other books, retells the stories told by witnesses, thus creating a rich literary texture consisting of an ambivalent mixture of fragments, factual and fictional.

M. Stepanova's recourse to the documentary fiction (or Sebaldian style of writing) about the past is emphasized in her meta-narrative. Furthermore, the narrator on numerous occasions admits that she has amended some of the episodes from her family history by adding her own speculations and invented details. The episode describing the narrator's trip to Saratov is particularly illustrative in this respect. A friend shows her her great-grandfather's house and she immediately, 'unmistakably' recognizes the house she knows from the stories she heard as a child in all its materiality. The narrator remembers, with 'the natural precision of an instinct', what her great-grandparents' life was like. However, a week later her friend sheepishly informs her that he mixed up the address and showed her the wrong house. This is how ends the trip to Saratov and one of the chapters: "And this is just about everything I know about memory" [4].

Sebald is a writer who considered photography as one of the greatest sources of a narrative. He took interest in photographs not as historical documents but as triggers or as points of departure for his train of reminiscences and work of imagination. The documents included in his novels are not actual documents but rather their representations in the form of photographs [8]. The role of a document is to create a confusion, to express what Marie-Jeanne Zenetti refers to as Sebaldian 'poetics of obfuscation' [9]: on the one hand, the document connects the narrative with reality, on the other, it is often unclear what people and places are depicted in the photographs and where these photographs come from, that is, the status of the document is ambiguous, which highlights the fictitious side of the narrative.

In one of her interviews Stepanova describes her own novel as 'iconoclastic', aimed at dispelling the power of the visual [10]. The book indeed contains a whole range of fragments in which she exposes the inadequacies and limitations of photography similar to the way it is done by Susan Sontag (1933-2004) in her collection of essays *On Photography*. Stepanova reveals the photographer's biased view and the ambiguous, unreliable nature of a photograph as a document. *In Memory of Memory* mentions a photograph only once, in the very end, as a homage or tribute to Stepanova's favorite author. It is a photograph in a Sebaldian interpretation that brings the narrative to a close. The author makes no comment on the picture of people relaxing outdoors which the book ends with. It is, however, easy to see the connection between this picture and the photograph from the family archive previously described in the text:

Among those who are strolling there under the low sky there is a woman who is keeping her back very erect. She is standing alone, turning away from the camera, her narrow back in a light summer jacket is the axis of the photograph, the central pole in its merry-go-round, suddenly frozen still. The



head in a woman's hat is tilted back, her hands are holding a dishevelled bouquet. I can't see her face but I like to think that it is my great-grandmother Sarra [4].

The photo which closes the narrative echoes the photo on the book cover – both the woman and the doll are shown with their backs to the reader – and thus acts as a manifesto. Not only is it impossible to tell the true story of your own or somebody else's life (the main character in the family history functions as the narrator's alter-ego), but it is also impossible to capture it with a photo camera. It remains unclear whether the photograph depicts the narrator's relative or a total stranger: like a letter, a photograph is unable to tell the truth about the past.

It is through the choice of the–genre of documentary fiction, through exposure of the narrative strategies and techniques used to speak about the past, and through unveiling of the documentary truth that Stepanova's text engages in a deep internal polemic with the official historical narrative, which dogmatically affirms only one version of history, presented as the only correct and right account of events. In her interview given to the novel's translator into German O. Radetskaya (the novel was published by Suhrkamp Verlag in 2018 under the title *Nach dem Gedächtnis*), Stepanova admits that the novel has a hidden political context: the narrative appropriates past events and thus poses a threat to those who strive to rewrite history, to manipulate historical memory [11].

Another strategy of countering retro-utopianism, which seems paradoxical in many ways, is the idea of memory as a catalogue inspired by Sebald's prose.

*In Memory of Memory* fits well into the line of Russian literary texts grieving for the victims of the Russian twentieth-century history – this 'grief work' in Russian literature is described by A. Etkind in his book *Warped Grief* [12]. In regard with J. Derrida's hauntology and 'posthumous justice to the dead', Etkind observes: "Posthumous justice does not need judicial power; what it needs is writers and historians the same way as Hamlet needed Horatio" [12]. In the secular world, in the absence of the divine savior, the task to save people from oblivion falls onto the shoulders of the writer. The narrator quotes Canadian writer Anne Carson, who said that "a poet is someone who saves the dead" [4]. Stepanova considers Sebald's prose as an infinite catalogue: "The logic of Sebaldian enumeration, whatever is at stake here, leaves no place for theodicy: it has no space where one could turn to God in order to question or reproach Him – this whole space is filled to the brim, like a sunk ark or a mass grave, filled with the unsaved" [4]. According to Stepanova, Sebald intentionally eliminates the hierarchy 'interesting – uninteresting' because the history of the humanity interests him in all its entirety



and materiality. His prose asserts the metaphysical equality of all people in the face of non-existence.

The chapter *Mandelstam casts away, Sebald gathers* discusses the ways of dealing with the past in Osip Mandelstam's *Noise of Time* (1925) and in Sebald's prose. While Mandelstam in his memoir, as Stepanova sees it, urges us to cast away the past, Sebald does completely the opposite: he is trying to bring back from oblivion everybody who has ever lived. *In Memory of Memory* contains multiple allusions to Sebald's 'catalogues', for instance, the page-long list of goods confiscated by the Nazis from the flat of Prague Jews: "everything comes in handy, down to jars of strawberry jam with the summer light conserved inside them" [4]. It is this strategy of fighting non-existence that, according to Stepanova, places Sebald's books somewhere between the 'great literature' and 'metaphysical activism' [2]. The 'instinct of catalogization' she sees in Sebaldian prose is for her a 'good thing' [2]. The task undertaken by the German writer as well as the way he chooses to accomplish it, in Stepanova's mind, equals the commemoration prayer following the Proskomedia in the Orthodox service (the names of the living and the departed are recited as a long list and it is important to commemorate everybody in the Eucharistic prayer). The only difference is that this absurd task is performed by an atheist [2].

In Stepanova's novel, memory is presented as a catalogue, the only way available to the secular society of imparting immortality to all the victims of the twentieth-century disasters. The idea of memory as a catalogue ascribed to Sebald is exponentially reinforced, sometimes to the point of exaggeration, finding reflection on the textual as well on the architectonic level. Stepanova's narrator admits that she thought of this book as a catalogue or as an item-by-item list of objects from the past when she was ten years old. The novel swarms with various lists of things found in the flats of deceased relatives and multitudes of documents and letters rigorously cited on the pages of the book. *The third chapter, a certain number of photographs* is made entirely out of descriptions of photographs from the family archive. The narrator cites lengthy passages from the catalogues of OBERIU writers, the lists of the most interesting things and phenomena compiled by Nikolay Oleynikov (1898-1937), Nikolay Zabolotsky (1903-1958), Daniil Kharms (1905-1942), she describes the things brought from Elabuga by Georgy, nicknamed Mur, after the suicide of his mother, Marina Tsvetaeva (1892-1941). Stepanova's text bears a clear imprint of extremely complex and sophisticated Sebaldian syntax (the longest sentence in *Austerlitz* is known to occupy about ten pages) with its lengthy enumerations. In pursuit of a paradoxically impossible task – to do the 'grief work', achieve closure and move on, *In Memory of Memory* serves as a kind

of commemorative catalogue. Metaphysical problematique, which is overtly postulated in the novel, and *In Memory of Memory*'s foundational aspiration for salvation, which, though, Stepanova imputes to Sebald, create a stark contrast between Stepanova's prose and 'impassionate' prose of Sebald.

## 5. Conclusion

In her essays, Stepanova makes it clear that staying within the realm of postmemory is a dangerous situation for the Russian public. In her novel *In Memory of Memory*, it is a crisis which the author tries to overcome with certain narrative techniques and strategies to write about the past. These narrative strategies include, on the one hand, the choice of the genre of documentary fiction and the emphasis on the fact that human memory is fickle and easy to manipulate. On the other hand, Stepanova attempts to complete the work of grief by envisioning memory as a catalogue which can store the evidence about all those who fell victim to the catastrophes of the twentieth century.

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