"Plunging into nothingness":
The politics of cultural memory

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We learn from neuro-scientists that there exists a part in the forebrain that is responsible for the transformation of short-term memories into long-term memories. This part is called the hippocampus. To put it more technically: due to a new chemical synthesis in this region of the brain, temporary alterations in synaptic transmission are transformed into persistent modifications of synaptic architecture. This process of forming long-term memories in the brain is called 'consolidation'.

In this essay, I will ask questions such as these: what is the equivalent of the hippocampus on the level of culture? What are the mechanisms of selection and consolidation in cultural memory? It is safe to assume that on the societal level, these mechanisms are at least as complex as in the brain. They involve difficult decisions which are always controversial and which are backed up by power relations but are also, to a certain extent, unforeseeable and contingent. Who makes his or her way into, and who remains outside the cultural memory? What are the principles of inclusion and exclusion? These questions are necessarily related to questions of acquiring and maintaining power; which means that a change in power relations will also produce a change in the structure of cultural memory. Equally important agents of change, however, are the long-term changes of consciousness and values. In order to better understand the cultural politics of memory, I will look at this problem from various angles, revisiting important turning points in the history of literature. My point of departure will be the theme of male ambition, fame and immortality and its manifestations in the writings of John Milton in the seventeenth century. From there I will move
to the shock of recognition among Romantic writers who discovered that the rural populations are categorically excluded from cultural memory, an insight that was repeated and politicized by women and black writers in the beginning and the middle of the twentieth century. I will end by describing their efforts to fight their way back from a state of exclusion and amnesia, from their “plunge into nothingness” back into cultural memory.

I Two kinds of immortality

In spite of its long history, fame is a late addition to the arts of cultural memory. The secular notion of an afterlife based on individual deeds and achievements was known already in Ancient Egypt and developed in Ancient Greece and Rome. While the claim to personal fame had been a privilege of rulers and the ruling class in earlier civilizations, this privilege was extended in Greece and Rome to non-political domains such as science, the arts or sports. Whereas the commemoration of the dead, the obligation to remember one’s deceased family members, seems to be a universal cultural institution, the cult of fame, the desire of the individual to gain secular immortality on the basis of a continued estimation of his or her life-time achievements, is certainly not. The cult of fame, for instance, has no root in Christianity but entered Western culture only in the Renaissance with the influx of classical texts and traditions. The Christian notion of religious immortality was based on faith; it was long considered incompatible with the notion of a secular immortality based on fame. In the process of secularization, the vision of a religious afterlife of souls redeemed after the last judgment was increasingly replaced by the vision of a secular afterlife in the memory of future generations. Shakespeare was among those who eagerly absorbed the Renaissance “poetics of immortality” (Curtius, 471-472): He repeatedly defined his sonnet in the Horatian manner as a ‘monument’ in which the fleeting moment of the beauty of the beloved is safely enshrined:

Your monument shall be my gentle verse,
Which eyes not yet created shall o’er-read;
And tongues-to-be your being shall rehearse,
When all the breathers of this world are dead:
You still shall live – such virtue hath my pen –
Where breath most breathes, even in the mouths of men. (Sonnet 81.9-14)

As breath is the fuel of life, flatus vocis, speech, communication is the fuel of an afterlife. To live on in memory means, for Shakespeare, to continue to be
talked about and recited. Immortality is thus the product of 'communicative memory'. In the couplet of another sonnet, Shakespeare brilliantly parallels the two conflicting visions of Christian and Classical afterlife, of faith and fame:

So, till the judgment that yourself arise,
You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes. (Sonnet 55.13-14)

A generation after Shakespeare, Sir Thomas Browne, the famous physician and religious prose writer of the seventeenth century, thought little of a secular afterlife. He believed that the world was soon coming to an end and that human aspirations towards fame were manifestations of vanitas in the double sense of the term: a foolish pride and an empty hope. He summed up the conflict between Christian eternity and secular afterlife with concise precision:

The greater part must be content
to be as though they had not been,
to be found in the Register of God,
not in the record of man. (Browne, 282)

2 Monuments and Memory

2.1 Nietzsche's concept of monumental history

The term 'monument' usually refers to architecture, texts or works of art that have achieved an eminence that elevates them beyond their historical contexts. I want to take here a slightly different approach to the topic by following Nietzsche's theory of 'monumental history'. In his reflections on uses and abuses of the past, he presents three types of historiography that manage to set limits to the overpowering multiplicity of historical data by creating a meaningful narrative. One of these is what he calls 'monumental history'. For Nietzsche, the term 'monument' is not confined to concrete objects such as buildings, statues, museums and memorials. He conceives of the 'monumental' in a much wider sense, taking it as a manner of framing, as a specific format that is retrospectively applied to works of art, ideas, human beings and events of the past. He looks at monuments less from the standpoint of production, asking who created them and with what intention, but rather from the perspective of reception, asking why they are selected, accepted and needed. His interest is in the construction of the
monument, focusing not on those who left something behind but on those who pick it up.

For Nietzsche, ‘monument’ is first and foremost a memory format that stands for techniques of elevating and enlarging objects, events and persons. He is clearly aware of the constructed character of the monument and investigates the strategies which are used to transform a transitory historical moment into a lasting monument. For Nietzsche, however, the analysis of the constructedness of this format does not automatically entail its ‘deconstruction’. Although he is himself a revolutionary thinker, subversion is not his one and only concern. He points to various operations that are involved in the process of transforming a moment into a monument.

2.1.1 Selection and extraction of the event from its context
Selection is the first and foremost step, and it always implies a paradoxical act of forgetting: “Whole tracts of it are forgotten and despised; they flow away like a dark, unbroken river, with only a few gaily coloured islands of fact rising above it. There is something beyond nature in the rare figures that become visible; like the golden hips his disciples attributed to Pythagoras” (Nietzsche, 16). A monument, according to Nietzsche, is an event cut off from its cause; it is taken out of the “real historical nexus of cause and effect” by focusing on the event (or text) as an “effect in itself” (15). An acute perception of the differences in historical settings and consequences would necessarily weaken its normative impact.

2.1.2 Translation from a small scale to a large scale
The monument, according to Nietzsche, is created not only by selecting an event of the past and disconnecting it from its context, but also by rendering it on a larger than life scale. ‘Greatness’ is the enduring quality of the monument which is achieved by altering an event and touching it up, thus taking away some of its factual authenticity and bringing it ‘nearer to fiction’. Events that are memorized in the format of a ‘monument’ are compared by Nietzsche to ‘myth’; both bring the past to life, both create meaning and exert a normative or motivational power on the present.

2.1.3 Translation from the particular to the general
The ‘monument’ in monumental history is singled out from the uniform chains of events as an encouraging example, as an inspiring model to be imitated and emulated. To raise an event or deed of the past to the status of a lasting example, it must be generalized to become a compelling match for various upcoming occasions. In this process, “many differences must be neglected, the individuality of the past is forced into a general formula and
all the sharp angles broken off for the sake of correspondence” (Nietzsche, 14). Only if a striking similarity can be detected between past event and present occasion, will it exert a motivating influence on the present. In this process, the past event (or text) is ‘assimilated’ (in the literal sense of the word) to the situation of the present.

While the ‘moment’ is embedded in historical time, the ‘monument’ is embedded in the timeless zone of immortality, which is the product of the construction of fame. Nietzsche closely connects the construction of ‘the monument’ with the ‘construction of fama’. For him, the production and reception of greatness in cultural memory are intimately related because it is by “gazing on past greatness” that the gazer hopes to become great himself (13). Creative imitation is for Nietzsche the only viable strategy available to the artist to achieve fame. He who imitates greatness “has no hope of reward except fame, which means the expectation of a niche in the temple of history” (13). After having secured for himself a safe place in this temple, he will exert a similar influence on posterity, which will in turn hopefully imitate his example. The constructions of fame and immortality are backed up by his credo that monuments “form a chain, a highroad for humanity through the ages, and [that] the highest points of those vanished moments are yet great and living for men” (Nietzsche, 13). According to Nietzsche, this “highroad for humanity through the ages” is upheld and maintained by only a few great minds.

One thing will live, the sign manual of their inmost being, the rare flash of light, the deed, the creation; because posterity cannot do without it. In this spiritualized form, fame is ... the belief in the oneness and continuity of the great in every age, and a protest against the change and decay of generations. (14)

Nietzsche knew very well, however, that in spite of this oneness and continuity, immortality was not the product of cooperation but of competition. He emphasized that “the fiercest battle is fought round the demand for greatness to be eternal”. The battle is so fierce because the secular religion of fama is extremely exclusive. Nietzsche’s pantheon holds “No more than a hundred men” of an age and it requires no more to keep up the tradition (13).

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1 Harold Bloom has absorbed Nietzsche’s ideas in his concept of the Western Canon. He emphasized the principle of creative imitation and combined it with the agonistic principle: the texts within a Canon are “struggling with one another for survival” because “in Western history the creative imagination has conceived of itself as the most competitive of modes, akin to the solitary runner, who races for his own glory” (14).
2.2 Milton’s will to fame

Let us look more closely at one of these “hundred men” who fought the fierce battle for fame and greatness. I will focus on Sir Thomas Browne’s contemporary, the poet John Milton, who became a supporter of Cromwell and the Puritan revolution at the time of the civil war. The poet grew up in a sheltered home, which provided him with a room of his own, with a great supply of books and ample time for reading. He profited from an excellent education including ancient languages, theology and history. As a staunch Puritan, Milton was clearly a Christian writer, but he was also a Renaissance humanist who could not suppress a strong yearning for greatness and secular fame. On the eve of his twenty-third birthday, he wrote a sonnet in which he expressed his anxiety about the tardiness of his expected career:

My hasting days fly on with full career,
But my late spring no bud or blossom shew’th. (29)

He described his yearning for great achievements and fame in more general terms as

an inward prompting which now grew daily upon me, that by labour and intent study (which I take to be my portion in this life) joyn’d with the strong propensity of nature, I might perhaps leave something so written to aftertimes, as they should not willingly let die. These thoughts at once possesst me, and these other. That if I were certain to write as men buy Leases, for three lives and downward, there ought no regard be sooner had, than to God’s glory by the honour and instruction of my country. (236, my italics)

Both Browne and Milton were eminent Christian men of letters of the seventeenth century; the one, however, fashioned himself as a private, the other as a public man. Milton, the public man, aspired to a place in cultural memory and dedicated his whole life to that goal. His vocation was built on specific prerequisites (such as inclination and special talents) and required a specific sacrifice (“labour and intent study”). Milton hoped for something that until then had been possible only through legal contracts: to create a lasting impact for three or more generations after his death. He countered the hubris of intellectual pride (superbia), which lurks in the pagan project of self-immortalization by bowing to higher values and dedicating himself and his achievements to the service of God and country.

But, as Browne soberly reminds us: very few people can strive for fame, and still fewer achieve it. There are always two sides to fame, the
production side and the reception side, which can be compared to a message in a bottle. Something has to be sent off aiming at the future as 'prospective remembrance', and something has to be taken up in the future as 'retrospective memory', looking back into the past. The problem is: How can one exert an influence, let alone pressure on the generations to come? How can one make them accept the offer of one's work and prevent them from willingly letting it die? Nietzsche was rather confident on this point; he was convinced that posterity would accept the gift because it “cannot do without it” (14). Virginia Woolf was much more skeptical and even diffident. What can you do, she asked, against “the world's notorious indifference?” (60).

By invoking the model of a legal contract, Milton connected the present and the future in a bond of mutual obligation. In doing so, he gave his written work the status of a testament. Amazingly enough, Milton's ambitious hopes were not defeated, and the degree of his canonization is quite remarkable. He was himself a despised and discarded relic of the Puritan Revolution, suffering contempt, negligence and forgetting when he wrote his ambitious epic *Paradise Lost* at the time of the Restoration. Only one generation later, however, at the dawn of a new secular era of political and aesthetic emancipation from religious authority, was his 'message in the bottle' recovered and the manuscript translated into a new cultural context. His text, which had been designed as 'monumental' to begin with, was fashioned by later generations as a monument by lifting it from its context and transforming its message to make it resonate with new issues, values and discourses. Most of all, Milton's text served enlightened and Romantic generations in formulating their own poetic agendas. In the course of the nineteenth century, Milton's text was introduced into the channel of the English school system through which he reached a wide reading public. His poems and epics became canonical texts for social and moral education and a common point of reference (an important *lieu de mémoire* of *Bildung*) for English culture in the British Empire.

A later stage of Milton's fame is reflected in one of James Joyce's short stories, written at the beginning of the twentieth century. Gabriel Conroy, the protagonist of the story “The Dead”, is a literary scholar who gives a dinner speech which forms the climax of a New Year's party organized traditionally by his aunts in Dublin. In this speech, Gabriel quotes Milton's words about fame and afterlife; in doing so, he presents himself as a rather introverted

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2 Milton's canonical status lasted through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when he was also deployed not only in the homeland but also in the cultural politics of the British Empire, until T.S. Eliot dumped his shares at the literary stock market in the early twentieth century.
and erudite man who airs his somewhat antiquated Bildung. This Bildung is just above the level of that of his audience, but, what is worse, Gabriel highlights an icon of English culture, thereby proving his estrangement from Irish cultural traditions. He does so in a rather melancholic way, however, aware that “the shadows lengthen in our evening land” and that this English tradition is already declining (Bloom, 16). It has lost its invigorating energy for the future and become a faint afterthought, a pure retrospection. Gabriel’s speech is steeped in nostalgia when he describes himself as the last adherent of a great but fading tradition. At a moment and in a place where the world is more than willing to let this tradition die, he is the last one to reaffirm it once more. Milton had once pondered the risks and possibilities of time-travel for his own writing, wondering who would receive his manuscript in the bottle; Gabriel Conroy speaks from the other end, 250 years later, as one who has received the message but notices that it is fading and vanishing. In Gabriel’s speech, the notion of fame and immortality is turning more and more into a retrospective memory of the dead. He looks back to days which might, without exaggeration, be called spacious days: and if they are gone: beyond recall, let us hope, at least, that in gatherings such as this we shall still speak of them with pride and affection, still cherish in our hearts the memory of those dead and gone great ones whose fame the world will not willingly let die. (Joyce, 201)

3 OUTSIDE THE GROOVE OF HISTORY

3.1 “The short and simple annals of the poor”: Thomas Gray

By selecting and highlighting a particular work or event, the monument automatically creates a halo of forgetting. Nietzsche already emphasized this effect on our perception of history: “Whole tracts of it are forgotten and despised; they flow away like a dark, unbroken river” (15). I will shift my focus now from the monumental to the momentary and gaze for a while at the dark unbroken flow of the river Lethe. What about those who are not selected and forgotten? While Milton’s question: “How can I create for myself a lasting memory?” is a very old one, the complementary question: “Who can aspire to a place in cultural memory?” is a rather recent one. In an early version it was asked by the English poet Thomas Gray in the middle of the eighteenth century in his poem “An Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1751). When the persona contemplates the inscriptions on the tombstones, he becomes conscious of the fact that none of those buried there could lay claim to an afterlife in the cultural memory of the living.
Death is of course the great leveler, a common destiny for the rich and the poor, but some are more dead than others. Apart from their names and dates, nothing is known of these “unhonour’d dead:”

- Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
  The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear:
  Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
  And waste its sweetness on the desert air. (Gray, 61-66, ll. 49-53)

The dead of the churchyard must indeed – in Thomas Browne’s words – “be content to be as though they had not been, to be found in the Register of God, not in the record of man” (Hydrotaphia, ch. 5). The poet goes on to imagine the life stories of these peasants, which were narrowly constrained by their basic needs. He realizes that none of them had the privilege of an education, which might have developed their talents and given them a chance to launch a career in science, arts, or politics. Gray muses that “some mute inglorious Milton here may rest” (59). According to his Romantic view, the peasants of the village in their rustic simplicity belong to nature and not to history. Time in nature is circular; its rhythms are determined by the cycles of life and their eternal repetition. Nature leaves no traces and thus no evidence for story, history or memory. History, by contrast, is a form of memory that is based on traces and records. There are, of course, oral memories tied to the country churchyard, but these do not exceed the narrow circle of the community. In his “Essay upon Epitaphs,” the Romantic poet William Wordsworth wrote a generation later, a country churchyard “in the stillness of the country, is a visible center of a community of the living and the dead” (117). The living memory, which Wordsworth encountered in the graveyard, is based on ties of family piety within a neighborhood community. The dead of the village live on for a while in the memories of two or three generations, but these social bonds are narrowly circumscribed; they remain enclosed within the ‘communicative memory’ of the village and are not transferred into the public domain of cultural memory.

Gray’s poem provides an acute critical reflection on the shadow-line that separates the “honoured dead” that achieve fame and become part of cultural memory from the “unhonoured dead” of the village community. Without great works or deeds there is no claim to honor and fame; both were, for Gray, still exclusively male privileges. While the simple rustics were cut off from these privileges, they were sanctified and compensated for this lack in the vision of the Romantic poet with the values of nature and innocence.
3.2 Female invisibility and anonymity: Virginia Woolf

It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that Gray's question was asked from a female point of view. Women became interested in the invisible boundary between the honoured and the unhonoured dead, which, for them, separates not only the elite from the lower classes, but also the men from the women. Similar to Gray's vision of the ancestors of the village population, the lives of women had long been considered to be cyclical, ordinary, and close to nature, thus cutting them off from history. The feminist project was therefore to restore at least some of them to the canons of art and to re-inscribe them into the "records of man." 3

The invisibility of women is an immediate consequence of patrilineal genealogy. The privilege to be remembered is anchored in the family name, which is what a woman has to give up when getting married. Although biologically, there is no generating without women, their part in this process is systematically elided, as for instance in the long genealogical lists in the Hebrew Bible, where men regularly generate men. In a patriarchal culture, women are not entitled to retain and perpetuate their name across generations. By giving up their name, they abandon a significant part of their identity. We can refer to this unquestioned relinquishing of female identity as a process of structural forgetting. An English legal text from the first half of the seventeenth century gives a precise description of it, making use of an image:

It is true that man and wife are one person, but understand in what manner. When a small brook or little river incorporateth with Rhodanus, Humber or Thames, the poor rivulet loseth her name: it is carried with the new associate; it beareth no sway ... I may more truly, far away, say to a married woman, her new self is her superior, her companion, her master. ("The Lawe's Resolution of Women's Rights" [1632] in Rippl, 53)

Just as the trace of a small river is lost as soon as it flows into a larger one, so the name and identity of the spouse are lost in marital union. Her identity is 'sublated' (aufgehoben) in that of her husband very much in the Hegelian

3 Where Virginia Woolf detected empty spaces in the libraries she consulted there are now whole libraries filled with historical research about women. A few random examples of publications of the year 2005 are: Bonnie Smith, ed., Women's History in Global Perspective. 3 vols. (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2005); Tanya Evans, "Unfortunate Objects": Lone Mothers in Eighteenth-Century London (London: Palgrave, 2005); Andrew Shill and Gillian Howie, eds., Menstruation: A Cultural History (London: Palgrave, 2005).
sense: She can attain a higher level in the hierarchy, but only at the cost of surrendering her own identity to the name and status of her husband.

This description of the seventeenth century still captures the situation of women in the nineteenth century. When we turn to the last pages of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, a writer who has preferred to use a male pseudonym for her writing, we can find an interesting variation of the topos of the river. Throughout the book, the reader has gotten to know the remarkable qualities of the heroine Dorothea and therefore knows that she has more potential in her than she is entitled to develop according to her limited gender role as a helpmate to her husband. To quote from the novel: “Many who knew her, thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother” (694).

Dorothea fulfills her genealogical obligations by giving birth to a son. But this happy ending cannot cover up her lack of visibility, which is the theme of the famous last paragraph of the novel. Here, Eliot adapts the image of the river in an interesting way:

Her finely-touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels, which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and lie in unvisited tombs. (696)

Eliot’s mind was not rebellious. She acquiesced in her lot and refrained from aspirations to name and fame. She accepted Dorothea Brooke’s invisibility by turning the defect into a virtue. The invisible, she argues, are known not for themselves but for their diffuse effects; the good that they do reaches many lives and destinations like a river that disperses into many streams. This argument allows her to end her novel on a consoling note.

Virginia Woolf broke with this acquiescence. She was no longer ready to put up with the structural invisibility of women as prescribed by the laws of patriarchy. She embarked on a search – not for lost time, as Proust did, but for those lost in time. She documented her search for women in history in her seminal essay “A Room of One’s Own” (1928). In this search, she became acutely aware of women’s conspicuous absence from written records; their lives, deeds and works, she noticed, had indeed flown “away like a dark, unbroken river” (Nietzsche, 15). Woolf critically analyzed the ways in which the constructions of fame and cultural memory are determined by male authority within patriarchal, national, or imperial frameworks of power.
Writing half a century after Nietzsche, Woolf could no longer accept the principle that it takes "no more than a hundred men" to maintain greatness and to fill up the temple of fame.

Trying to imagine the life of an Elizabethan woman, Woolf was "held up by the scarcity of facts. One knows nothing detailed, nothing perfectly true and substantial about her. History scarcely mentions her" (53). And she continues: "All these facts lie somewhere, presumably, in parish registers and account books; the life of the average Elizabethan woman must be scattered about somewhere." As she detected thematic empty spaces in the bookshelves, Woolf considered the project of rewriting history or at least writing a supplement to history, which was connected with the profession of her father Leslie Steven and thus an exclusively male domain. Instead of calling it 'history' it had to be called "by some inconspicuous name so that women might figure there without impropriety" (52-53). For the exclusion of woman from the annals of history, Woolf did not only blame men but also the mechanisms of silent complicity. In Western culture, the urge to make a name for oneself is not explicitly forbidden for women but checked by a powerful social taboo, which is even more effective because it is deeply internalized. Woolf brilliantly analyzes this mechanism of female self-censorship by connecting the prolonged desire for anonymity with a deeper, hidden concern for chastity. "It was a relic of the sense of chastity that dictated anonymity to women even so late in the nineteenth century ... Publicity in women is detestable. Anonymity runs in their blood. The desire to be veiled still possesses them" (58).

3.3 “Faceless faces, soundless voices”: Ralph Ellison

While Nietzsche gazed on the temple of fame and the few immortalized great ones enshrined in it, Virginia Woolf looked for the ones who were neglected and forgotten, gazing on the "dark, unbroken river" (Nietzsche, 4 |

Woolf notices that she left no plays or poems, but probably had a number of children. She writes: "Nothing is known about women before the eighteenth century" (53).

5 | Ruth Klüger, when dealing with her dead family members who were murdered in the Holocaust, had to learn that women do not figure in Jewish religious rituals of memory. She also had to learn that women do not figure as interpreters of history either. In her autobiography she describes how difficult it was to participate in the discourse of male historians or to have her encounter with 'history' listened to at all. Her husband, a professional historian and American war veteran, would become "furious because I dished up memories that competed with his. That's when I learned that wars belong to the men" (534; my re-translation from the German).
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15) of Lethe. Let us look at this river through the eyes of yet another writer who pondered over the abyss between moment and monument, trying to remember those that are forever lost and forgotten. In one chapter of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, the protagonist tells the story of Tod Clifton, who for a short time had been a co-member in a Harlem group of communist activists called the "Brotherhood". Like the protagonist, Tod Clifton is black, but unlike him, he drops out of the group after a short time. The narrator sees him again by chance in the streets of New York, where he sells paper-puppets at a corner. As Clifton is not equipped with a license to sell these toys, the police try to arrest him. There is a short physical attack in which Clifton tries to escape but is gunned down by another policeman. The narrator involuntarily becomes a witness to this scene, but is so numbed by the shock that at first he has only one impulse: to forget what he has seen: “walking away in the sun I tried to erase the scene from my mind” (353).

He is tormented, however, by his thoughts, puzzled by the behavior of his friend:

Why should he choose to disarm himself, give up his voice and leave the only organization offering him a chance to ‘define’ himself? ... Why did he choose to plunge into nothingness, into the void of faceless faces, of soundless voices, lying outside history? (353)

What then follows in Ellison’s novel is a meditation of the protagonist on the construction of history and the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in cultural memory:

All things, it is said, are duly recorded – all things of importance, that is. But not quite, for actually it is only the known, the seen, the heard and only those events that the recorder regards as important that are put down, those lies his keepers keep their power by. (353)

He then realizes that “the cop would be Clifton’s historian, his judge, his witness, and his executioner, and I was the only brother in the watching crowd” (353). It dawns on him that people “who write no novels, histories or other books” will forever remain outside history. Oral life is lost to literal culture and so is the group of three young African Americans who enter the subway. He stares at them in wonder with exactly the same thoughts on which Gray pondered on his round in the country churchyard. Ellison’s protagonist speaks of them as “men of transition”, of “men out of time who would soon be gone and forgotten ... But who knew but that they were the saviors, the true leaders, the bearers of something precious?” Living outside the realm of history, “there was no one to applaud their value and
they themselves failed to understand it” (355). The narrator condenses the epiphany of this moment, a revelation that will change his life, into the following insight: “They were outside the groove of history and it was my job to get them in, all of them” (357).

**Conclusion**

In my essay, I have looked at the ways in which cultural memories are produced and at some of the reasons why they are not produced. My aim was to look at cultural memory both from the inside and from the outside and to find literary texts that tell us something about the still rather occult mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. In the first part, I dealt with the secular immortality of fame. Following Nietzsche, I examined some of the operations by which a moment is transformed into a monument. Following Milton and his desire for immortality, I showed how literary fame is produced and received across time, undergoing historical changes. In the second part, I looked at the borderline of cultural memory from the outside, that is, from the point of view of those who are doomed to remain outside. Cultural, just as individual memory is an extremely narrow space regulated by rigid principles of selection and forgetting. Those who examined the borderline – Gray speaking for the poor peasants, Woolf speaking for women, Ellison speaking for African Americans – were for the first time calling attention to the structural mechanisms that exclude whole groups of the population from active participation in the cultural memory. They examined the deeply internalized and habitualized logic of cultural exclusion, focusing on anonymity and invisibility as an immediate effect of power structures. By critically examining patriarchal, sexist and racist strategies of remembering and forgetting, both Woolf and Ellison inaugurated important changes in our perception of social and cultural reality. While Gray and Eliot mused on questions of inequality still in a rather nostalgic and subdued way, Woolf’s and Ellison’s (and in their wake, many other writers’) anger opened our eyes and ushered in a new awareness and sensibility. By rendering visible the social and political economy of cultural remembering and forgetting, they were already engaged in the process of challenging, changing and renegotiating it. From them we have learned that if “no more than a hundred” are needed to fill up the temple of fame, they need not be either all men or all white.
REFERENCES


