Cultural Memory and the Communicational Criticism of Literature

Roger D. SELL
Emeritus H.W. Donner Research Professor of Literary Communication, Åbo Akademi University, FINLAND
rsell@abo.fi

Abstract: Communicational criticism focuses on the ethics of literary address. It tends to show that writers who try to send some particular message may thereby allow their addressees relatively little scope for their own perceptions and evaluations. Other writers, by contrast, offer their audiences an opportunity to compare notes about life from within more than one life-world, so agreeing, as it were, to dis-agree when necessary. By engaging in this more “genuine” kind of literary communication, such writers can promote the post-postmodern goal of a globalization that is non-hegemonic, and not least through their handling of cultural memory. When they loosen up one-to-one correlations between particular ranges of memory and particular communities, cultural memory becomes a polyvalent resource for both personal hybridities and rainbow coalitions. In the present article, I illustrate this process from Anglophone literature, paying special attention to a number of postmodern novelists and an early modern poet.

Keywords: literary-communicational theory, communicational criticism, cultural memory, post-postmodernity, negative capability
Mémoire culturelle et le criticisme communicationnel de la littérature

Résumé : Le criticisme communicationnel se focalise sur l’éthique du discours littéraire. Il tend à montrer que les écrivains qui essaient d’envoyer un certain message particulier laissent peu de possibilités aux destinataires de manifester leurs propres perceptions et évaluations. D’autres auteurs, en revanche, offrent à leur cible une occasion de comparer leurs perceptions sur la vie. En s’engageant dans ce type de communication littéraire plus « authentique », les écrivains peuvent favoriser l’objectif post-postmoderne d’une mondialisation qui n’est pas hégémonique en particulier par le traitement de la mémoire culturelle. Quand ils desserrent une par une les corrélations entre les spectres particuliers de mémoire et les communautés particulières, la mémoire culturelle devient une ressource polyvalente aussi bien pour les hybridités personnelles que pour les rainbow coalitions. Dans cet article, je vais illustrer ce processus à partir de la littérature anglophone, en accordant une attention particulière à un certain nombre de romanciers postmodernes et un poète pré-moderne.

Mots-clés : théorie communicationnelle de la littérature, criticisme communicationnel, mémoire culturelle, postmodernité

1. Communicational criticism

In one of its aspects, postmodernity was an ideological maelstrom which threw up changes so radical as to propel us into a new era. The so-called culture wars of the late twentieth century, to which literary theoreticians of post-Marxist, postcolonial, feminist, queer, ethnic and religious orientations all made their own distinctive kinds of input, were so effective in empowering previously underprivileged groupings that many large societies became a lot more democratic. This brought important long term benefits to the lives of countless individuals, and some exciting innovations in the field of cultural production as well.

Despite this formidable success, the postmodern politics of recognition could box individuals into identity scripts which were far too narrow (Sell 2000: 10-11), and which in post-postmodern times would ideally become a thing of the past. Yet even today, we are morally obliged to distinguish between groupings which “have” and groupings which “have not”. The world is still riven by systematic injustices, and by violence on a truly shameful scale. Even though political, economic,
environmental, and communication-technological developments now constantly remind us that we are all denizens of just a single planet, and even though we have already started to dream of a new, non-hegemonic kind of globalization, dream and reality are far apart.

So while many literary scholars are arguing that, in the early third millennium, Goethe’s notion of Weltliteratur is acquiring fresh relevance, most of them qualify their optimism with a note of caution. David Damrosch (2004) has shown that the old canonical classics can continue to attract a disproportionate amount of attention, becoming a “hypercanon” against which the new authors belonging to previously small literatures are mustered into a “countercanon” that is merely the hypercanon’s shadow. In order to remain factually accurate and politically just, literary scholarship does need to retain, as Sarika Chandra (2008) and Silvia Lopéz (2004) argue, some insistence on national and regional distinctions. And as emphasized by J. Hillis Miller (2007) and Ernst Grabovsky (2004), distinctivenesses also need to be maintained in the face of present-day communications technology. As channels for literary texts world-wide, the new digital media clearly have a huge potential. But their formats, and the culture of reading they encourage, could perhaps be too homogenizing.

As a result of such continuing concerns, some scholars are beginning to see a need for a criticism which takes as its special focus the ethics of literary address, for instance by extending the insights of Habermas and Levinas (Sell 2011a: 18, 48-9; Wehrs and Haney 2009). Whereas earlier generations of critics have discussed literary texts as creating a special kind of artistic entity, as conveying some particular message or other, as exhibiting some particular manner of representation, as emanating from some particular ideological position, or as shaping some particular kind of identity, this new type of criticism is communicational, in that it sees writers treating their audiences as virtually partners in conversation (Sell 2000, 2002a, 2002b, 2007a, 2007b, 2011a, 2011b, 2012; Sell and Johnson 2009; Sell, Johnson and Wilcox forthcoming). More precisely, it asks whether the addressivity of a given writer in a given text is such as to recognise its readers’ human autonomy. One working hypothesis is that writers who, without trying to de-historicize or silence their own voice, are sufficiently open-minded to allow a certain leeway to their addressees can perhaps bring about communities of readers that are indefinitely large but also indefinitely heterogeneous, and therefore non-hegemonic in structure.

When the writing and reading of so-called literary texts is viewed as one among other kinds of communicational interchange, features which in Kantian, Romantic and literary-formalist accounts of literature were seen as contributing to a special otherworld of “Art” can be re-conceptualized. Literature’s beauties and pleasures; the fictionality of many literary texts; literature’s lack of an obvious feedback channel from readers to writers: all such characteristics come to be perceived as having their own kinds of communicational dimension.
Beauties and pleasures can arise from non-literary uses of language as well – conversation analysts have long been studying the “poetics of talk” (Tannen 1987, 1990). And although a work of art can have an attractiveness that is psychologically very real for us, so real, in fact, that we experience it as something positively “there” in the work, and although this impression will certainly not occur unless there are details in the work which give rise to it, a great deal also depends on our own prior conditioning – on what we ourselves bring to our appreciation. As explained by pragmatist aestheticians such as Richard Shusterman (1992), there are social contracts as to what shall count as agreeable. To a considerable extent, our enjoyment as readers of literature arises from our communicating membership of a reading circle within which matters of taste and value are under constant, albeit often tacit negotiation.

Fictionality, too, is an element in many everyday, non-literary uses of language whose communicational function nobody would question. Communication is not confined to the statement of hard-and-fast facts, opinions and feelings. Especially by making up stories, a communicant can explore general or moral truths that go beyond the detail of particular empirical cases, and can probe opinions and feelings that have yet to be socially stabilized into constant attitudes. This applies to the stories in literary texts at least as much as to any others (Sell 2011a: 195-221).

As for literature’s lack of an obvious feedback channel from reader to writer, genres with no such channel can still allow for a powerful dialogicality of spirit. Late-twentieth-century linguists in the fields of conversation-, discourse- and dialogue analysis demonstrated that all writing, no less than all speech, has addressivity (Sell 2000: 80-88; Weigand 2009), and this same insight was also developed by literary critics working under the inspiration of Bakhtin (1981). Still more to the point, the addressivity chosen by literary authors is not solipsistic. Even when they have written under the auspices of a formalist aestheticism, even when they have written drama, a mode in which all the communication may seem to be happening, less between the dramatist and the audience, than between the characters on stage, they have written with other people in mind: the people to whom they have been offering their work for contemplation. And just as the stipulations of a last will and testament, whose words so obviously prompt survivors to a conscientious reading, may need to be interpreted by expert lawyers, so the readers of a literary text will sometimes hone their responses to it with the help of, say, a literary historian, who thereby begins to serve as a mediating go-between. At best, readers’ sense of responsibility towards the fellow-humanity of a literary writer is very strong. Consciously or unconsciously, they inevitably sense that they themselves have been decently treated by the writer. The good will, in other words, is reciprocal.
In order to highlight this aspect of literary activity, literary-communicational theory has had to draw a distinction to which some earlier accounts of communication have seemed oblivious.

On the one hand, in semiotics, linguistics and communicational theory, as well as in the narratological, literary and more widely cultural and social criticisms which have drawn on them, the main model of communication has involved an A sending a message to a B within a single, unitary context, which is also set by A, and by reference to which the message can be interpreted. This model exactly corresponds to a very great deal of the communication which actually takes place in the real world. Much communication is decidedly transitive – it communicates something – and decidedly unidirectional, making one participant, and that participant’s life-world, more influential in what is going on than the other participant and that other participant’s life-world. Not that communication of this kind is necessarily sinister or ethically reprehensible. Especially when we find ourselves in positions of responsibility, there may be very little point in trying to avoid it. But certainly there are also countless cases, and not only in the form of giving orders or of making a strongly coercive argument, where the human autonomy of the person in the B-position is merely latent, passivized or completely overlooked.

On the other hand, communication can also be more fully human than this, by conforming with the main principle of Kantian ethics, the principle which, despite the datedness of Kantian aesthetics, is still fundamental to our sense of justice: the idea of the universal human right to respect and fair treatment (Kant 1998 [1785]). Whereas communication in the form of an A sending a message to a B within a unitary context typically seeks to establish a consensus, more fully human, or genuine communication, as I have called it (Sell 2007b, 2009b, 2011a), is altogether more intransitive. It is more a matter of an A and a B comparing notes about something, each of them from within their own life-world, so that what takes place still leaves room for differences of perception and evaluation. Even if what happens here is communicational in the term’s etymological sense of making or consolidating a community, and even if that resultant community is perfectly hospitable to strong agreements, it will also always entail an agreement to disagree if necessary. This kind of community-making, then, is neither a power struggle nor a sympathetic bonding, but fundamentally a matter of empathy, mutual understanding, and respect.

One can indeed argue that the reason why some texts attract very large audiences over very long periods of time whereas others do not is precisely that they are communicationally genuine (Sell 2011a). This claim does not represent a new kind of literary essentialism. Genuineness can never be a sufficient precondition for high literary status, and it frequently occurs in many other kinds of communication as well, the vast majority of them not only non-literary but actually quite unrecorded. Also, readers have always applied additional, more exclusively “literary” criteria
which have been specific to their own particular phase of culture. Genuineness, rather, is merely a necessary precondition. Even in the innumerable cases where it is not one of the features explicitly praised by reviewers or literary critics, it is simply a sine qua non if a text is to meet with widespread and lasting admiration.

So a post-postmodern communicational criticism draws particular attention to literary modes of address which acknowledge the human autonomy of each and every reader (Sell 2011a: 1-50). For critics drawn to this task, the goal will partly recall an assumption already at work in the rhetorical treatises of the ancient world: the idea that some texts are more suitable than others as models to be emulated in language use more widely. But whereas the rhetoricians of earlier ages were often mainly looking for models of style and persuasiveness, the phenomenon examined by post-postmodern communicational critics is communicational ethics: a writer’s way of entering into human relationships, both with individual readers and with readers in larger groupings. Because this type of criticism seeks to foster a new self-consciousness about the connections between language use and human relationships, it is one of the discourses which could perhaps improve the chances for peaceful coexistence and fruitful cooperation in the world at large. And among other things, a communicational critic is particularly interested in how any given literary writer draws on, and contributes to, the resources of cultural memory.

2. Cultural memory

What is remembered within a culture or subculture relates to every single thing for which its members have a conscious or unconscious concept. As a result, cultural memory has several different modes: knowledge, history, belief, myth, value, institution, practice, skill, image, artefact, and probably several more as well. In all its different modes, it is passed on from human being to human being, since it is fundamentally a communicational phenomenon, which explains how it outlives the death of particular individuals. In the case of a literary work, the writer’s range of cultural memory can enter into seminal communication with those of addressees in at least three ways: through mimesis, because the work can reflect items of cultural memory within its own world of imitated reality; through subjectivity, because perceptions, evaluations, and sensibilities which are culturally specific may colour the writer’s own assessment of the narratives and/or topics offered for the communicational comparing of notes; and through genre, because culturally pre-existent models of style and form will underpin the work’s own artistry.

Now ever since memory came to be seen as not merely an attribute of the single individual but as a dimension of the individual’s entire sociohistorical habitus (Bourdieu 1984: 6), it has also been taken to involve a greater or lesser degree of ideological regimentation. Although Maurice Halbwachs (1950 [1989]) claimed that cultural memory, as compared with written history’s unifying single-mindedness, is more spontaneously multiple, even he emphasized its connection to the milieu and
tradition of a particular grouping at a particular time and place, and in the view of Pierre Nora (1989) there was a real danger that cultural memory’s natural and ancient vitality would deteriorate into the cultivation of just a certain limited range of lieux de mémoire: certain privileged recollections which, if not vigilantly commemorated, could all too easily disappear without a trace. People use these special lieux, Nora continued, to buttress their sense of identity against all manner of hegemonic threats to it. In a similar vein, Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith (2002) have claimed that cultural memory can operate as an “act of transfer” (cf. Connerton 1989: 39), through which individuals and groups constitute their identities by recalling a shared past on the basis of common, and therefore often contested norms, conventions, and practices. Hirsch and Smith themselves are particularly interested in cultural memory as a support to forms of female identity, whereas scholars such as Étienne Balibar (2002) have traced its connection with identities of race or nation, and Avtar Brah (1996) and others have seen it as a sustaining thread in the experience of peoples undergoing diaspora. But in all such analyses, cultural memory is seen to function more or less polemically, as a kind of rallying call.

This, as my own discussion will show, is a fair enough assessment. But what I shall also be stressing is that cultural memory, thanks to its close relationship with communication, is far from static. For some reason or other, a chain of communication may actually break down, so that something which was once widely accessible and widely applied as an item of current cultural memory simply falls into obscurity. Conversely, something which has been forgotten within our culture can subsequently re-surface there, and something which has either been forgotten or is still remembered within some alien culture can be taken over, and from then onwards be remembered (or later forgotten) as part of our own culture.

Both our own culture’s forgotten items of cultural memory, and forgotten or remembered items of alien cultural memory, can be thought of as potential cultural memory. A melody can be unsung, unplayed, unknown for centuries, until rediscovered in some old manuscript. Ancient ceramic or architectural forms can lie buried until, unearthed by archaeologists, they come to be emulated by the potters or builders of some quite different age and in very different places. Alternatively, the potential memory can be much closer to the surface, and in one sense even remembered already, though with less than full attention. The Gothic revival in England, for instance, was not a consequence of archaeological excavations. In spite of despoliation by puritan iconoclasts, many mediaeval churches had remained physically standing all along. But in the eighteenth century they had been held at a certain mental distance, because of their alleged barbarity. Under the influence of Ruskin and Pugin, it was as if they now became visible again, mentally foregrounded for their alleged spirituality. In the same way many books, in all their extant copies, have sat on shelves for decade after decade, perhaps century after century, without actually being read, or at least not read with care, delight and profit. Then quite suddenly, literary taste or intellectual orientation can change, as with the
Anglo-American Modernists’ rehabilitation of the seventeenth century’s Metaphysical poets.

This alone is enough to suggest that the distinction I have just drawn between “our own” culture and “alien” culture is an oversimplification, and that cultural memory is not a historically deterministic straitjacket. As its very name suggests, it is a matter of memories which are not genetically inborn, but which any human mind can communicationally acquire and cultivate. Although a particular range of cultural memory may tend to be associated with a sociocultural position at some particular time and place, that same range can be empathetically absorbed by people whose position is different, for instance within programmes for foreign language education (Sell 2002b, 2007b). Thanks to one and the same kind of empathetic communication, literary or otherwise, human beings develop operative knowledge of the cultural memory associated not only with “their own” indigenous tradition but with “alien” traditions as well.

Sometimes cultural memory even expands to embrace elements for which there has been very little precedent, either indigenous or alien, and certainly no direct precedent. Whether in literary or other kinds of case, this is where it can still seem appropriate to speak of originality and creative genius. Yet bearing in mind that even these exceptionally interesting developments are dependent for their survival and consolidation on communicative processes, their success must also be examinable in communicational terms.

The most relevant consideration here is the principle of communicative dynamism as proposed by Prague linguists such as Jan Firbas (1964). What Firbas emphasized was that, in all communication, there has to be a movement from the known or the old to the unknown or the new. The reasons for this are, we can say, both practical and ethical. Communicators cannot hope to introduce something unexpected unless they start with, and pay deference to, the expected. A human being is, paradoxically, a social individual, and a communicational act is an individual *parole* which instantiates, but may also change, the received *langue* (Sell 2000: 145-58). Communicators have no choice but to use the knowledge, the beliefs, the values, the codes, the genres, the memories which are culturally available, because otherwise their addressees may think they are mad, or will quite possibly feel insulted. Yet their use of the received norms may well be innovatory. Yeats could never have written his poem “Easter 1916” if Tennyson’s “The Charge of the Light Brigade” had not already been deeply entrenched in cultural memory, as what most Anglophone readers took to be the definitive form for a poem about a group of idealists who meet their death in fighting for their values (Sell 2000: 187-9). By setting up fascinating intertextualities with Tennyson’s poem, Yeats was helping his first readers find their feet. Yet he also introduced some marked differences, which instantaneously made “The Charge of the Light Brigade” seem rather antiquated. Between the social and individual aspects of Yeats’s own being, there was, as we
can put it, a kind of co-adaptational compromise (Sell 2000: 145-58). On the one hand, an absolute cultural discontinuity is impossible. On the other hand, a writer is not a socially programmed robot. Yeats was influenced by a cultural inheritance, which he then influenced in turn.

With all its apparent lapses, resurfacings, borrowings and co-adaptational expansions over time, cultural memory does not automatically synthesize itself into some uniform ideology, or into some single all-embracing narrative or set of narratives. Especially within a literary community, it is shot through with frequent and radical discontinuities, alternatives, and contradictions, and is open to recall and use in many different ways, depending on particular circumstances and particular individuals’ own perceptions, values and intentions. To mention just one example, as the Christian Humanist poet Milton gradually became part of British cultural memory, his significance proliferated. He and his work were a topic for communicational negotiation by widely various parties. Whereas he himself had claimed to see his undertaking in *Paradise Lost* as an attempt to justify the ways of God to man, the Romantics Blake and Shelley saw it very differently. Milton, they said, was on the Devil’s side without knowing it. In the twentieth century, C.S. Lewis (1942) professed to see the poem more as Milton saw it, A.J.A. Waldock (1945) more as Blake and Shelley saw it. This discussion still rolls on today.

As is clear from recent work in sociology, any culture or subculture is actually heterogeneous (Dirlik 2007). Even if we used to believe that we were dividing the human world and its history up into cultural or subcultural groupings and epochs that clearly corresponded to something in the real world, we now increasingly admit that we were merely trying to make sense of chaos. A culture or subculture is simply not real in the same sense that Mount Everest is real, but is an intellectual category imposed on a very wide range of human phenomena. The only way a culture or subculture can be seen as a homogeneous consensus is by being observed from a very high level of descriptive abstraction. The lower our level of abstraction, the greater the amount of diversity and even contradiction we shall notice.

To take another literary example, consider the ways in which Fielding’s novel *Tom Jones* has been remembered within British culture (Sell 2001: 309-315). From its first publication onwards, this novel was on the one hand fiercely blamed for irresponsible superficiality, and on the other hand warmly praised for humanity, realism and humour. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu said that Fielding’s happy endings “encourage young people to hope for impossible events to draw them out of the misery they chuse to plunge themselves into” (Montagu 1967 [1754]: 65), and Johnson agreed with Richardson that “the virtues of Fielding’s heroes were the vices of a truly good man” (Boswell 1906 [1791]: 343-344). Boswell, on the other hand, said that Fielding did not encourage a “strained and rarely possible virtue”, but certainly did favour honour, honesty, benevolence and generosity. “He who is as good as Fielding will make him, is an amiable member of society” (Boswell 1906...
For Coleridge, too, Fielding was charming. “To take him after Richardson is like emerging from a sick room heated by stoves into an open lawn on a breezy day in May” (Coleridge 1960 [1834]: 496). Up until fairly recently, if we had asked Fielding’s British readers for a written statement of their views, most of them would probably have opted fairly coherently for either the one account or the other. But in more genuine communication, such distorting coherence always breaks down, as it did in the honest remarks of Thackeray. Fielding’s Tom, said Thackeray, is “an ordinary young fellow, ruddy-cheeked, broad-shouldered, and fond of wine and pleasure. He would not rob a church, but that is all” (Thackeray n.d.: 60). In which, he continued, there is nothing surprising, and nothing that might not be dealt with in a novel. But how could Fielding so bluntly admire such a fellow? There was the rub! Fielding’s novel obviously left Thackeray unable to make up his mind, a predicament with which as cultural beings we are all perfectly familiar.

3. Negative capability: Postmodern novelists

A communicational critic is particularly concerned to see whether a given writer’s handling of cultural memory is restrictively coercive or more generously liberal. Here the kinds of ambiguity, polyvalence and uncertainty to which I have been pointing become especially relevant, since they suggest that cultural memory can indeed allow for some diversity of values and opinion.

Literary writers draw on and develop cultural memory in their own way. But they give rise to traditions which always involve a dialogue between their own take on it and that of their addressees. Although we are often likely to feel that a literary writer’s words are far more powerful than anybody else’s, as an element and exponent of cultural memory within an infinitely enlargeable community they are actually less highly privileged than may at first appear (Sell 2011a: 51-81). Across the ages, and in many different countries, a very great number of human beings remember and respond to them in their own distinctive ways, and some writers actually leave room for such different interpretations in their very manner of address. By positively encouraging an eclectic resort to widely varying ranges of cultural memory, such writers stimulate processes of individuation that are rewardingly complex. Put another way, their use of cultural memory is negatively capable -- they are prepared to remain in “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Keats 1954 [1817]: 53). As a result, their communication comes across as genuine in the sense explained above. Its gesture is to invite readers to a comparing of notes which does not emphatically pin everything down, but which offers them a certain leeway.

Since post-postmodern communicational criticism itself began as a response to the postmodern politics of recognition, I begin with some examples from the time of the culture wars. And to confine myself to novelists of that period, one major but unsurprising observation must be that many of them hammered cultural memory
into just a single strong form, in order to support some particular identity formation. This kind of restriction, the very hallmark of postmodern politics, involved precisely the kinds of lieu de mémoire and acts of transfer discussed by Nora and by Hirsch and Smith. When previously underprivileged and marginalized groupings were for the first time trying to draw attention to their own voice, success was a matter of winning acceptance as a community or sub-community with certain clearly distinguishable characteristics (Sell 2004). Alex Haley’s Roots, for example, was both written and marketed as “[t]he monumental saga of one man’s twelve-year search for his family’s origins. The man is Alex Haley, a black American” (Haley 1977 [1976]: blurb). To the extent that Haley saw himself as offering other black Americans a defined subject position with its own distinctive history and interests, and as thereby providing them with an identity which other groupings could very easily perceive, he was an A sending a message to a B or a grouping of Bs within a unitary context of his own setting. To that same extent, his use of cultural memory, and especially of the memory of slavery, was uncomplicatedly polemical. His addressivity left little room for disagreement, and negative capability was at a minimum.

Postmodern novels with Haley’s kind of addressivity could be stirriingly effective in their own terms, and many of them will doubtless retain their interest and power as important landmarks in the history of politics. But there were also other postmodern novels whose handling of identity and cultural memory was more nuanced. Even when they, too, emanated from historical positions which in the Western tradition had been marginalized and underrepresented, and even when their subject-matter was actually very close to that of Roots, their appeal may in the long run turn out to be both wider and more permanent. Ideologically speaking, they were simply less narrow. So much so, that they satisfy the evaluative criteria of a communicational critic today.

Fred D’Aguiar’s The Longest Memory (1994) is set on a Virginian plantation in 1810, and is underwritten by D’Aguiar’s confident grasp of social and ethnic differences. Curiously enough, however, its representational convention is totally unrealistic. Each and every character is created through a stream of consciousness that is unfailingly beautiful but socioculturally unspecific, and there is also an absolute minimum of direct speech. As a result, the facts of heteroglossia never actually surface, even though they are always an urgent presupposition. The novel has only 137 pages, and the convention could probably not have been sustained for very much longer. The risk was that it would become just as euphemistic as, say, the middle-class decorum of the longueurs in Dickens (Sell 2001: 165-93). But as it stood, D’Aguiar’s writing idealized or demonized neither the slave owner, Mr Whitechapel, who is not a mere whitened sepulchre, nor the old slave, Whitechapel, named after his master, and as dignified as his master, but not more so. Difference here was far from “all the way down” (Miller 1995), and was definitely not a matter of better or worse. D’Aguiar was deliberately questioning the roles and modes of
expression towards which so much public discourse tends to force us, and his sense of the tension between the individual and the social dimensions of human identity was very sharp. On this showing, the longest cultural memory of all, as we might put it, was a-polemically ambiguous.

To take another example, Caryl Phillips’s *Cambridge* (1991) is set some time between the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the abolition of slavery in 1834. One of the discourses it brings into play is that of Cambridge himself, an early black Briton, who having achieved both his freedom and a fine mastery of the English language is then subjected to slavery in the West Indies and in the end taken to court for the killing of a white plantation manager. The other main discourse is that of Emily, daughter of the absentee owner of the plantation, who crosses the Atlantic to see it for herself. Cambridge’s narrative is close to those written by blacks who really did achieve their freedom, and who came to think of themselves as virtual Englishmen, even if they dared not emulate a native Englishman’s freedom of speech. Emily’s narrative is in ideological contradiction with that of Cambridge, in that it continues to valorize the European at the expense of the exotically non-European. But Phillips is actually performing a mediating function here, between the early-nineteenth-century colonial past and the postcolonial present, so encouraging his readers to some thoughtful introspection (Kuurola 2006). In the nineteenth century the two discourses he highlights could only cross paths, as it were, and never meet to become one. Today, things are potentially very different. The novel, in other words, is not re-surfacing the culture’s discoursal memories just for the sake of it, or merely to explore the roots of different ethnic groupings. The memories are Phillips’s way of promoting a wider community in our own present.

Two novels tending towards the same effect but tapping rather different subject-matter are Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1992 [1988]) and M.G. Vassanji’s *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003). *The Satanic Verses* is even more directly a book about present-day hybridity, by an author who is himself a hybrid of India and Britain, and who invites readers to compare notes about living in, or between more than one culture and its memories at a time, an experience which can bring firm loyalties, beliefs, and attitudes into question. M.G. Vassanji, similarly, has been resident in Canada since 1978 but was raised in Tanzania, having been born in Kenya of Indian or (from a post-Partition perspective) Pakistani stock, and the checkered past of his book’s main character is much the same. Vikram Lall is sensitive both to white farmers’ colonialist assumption of natural superiority, and to aspersions cast by the Mau Mau on his Asian inauthenticity as a true African. But he passionately loves what Africans call God’s bowl, the great Rift Valley, and becomes increasingly implicated in the web of corruption surrounding Jomo Kenyatta. During his Canadian exile, his thoughts shift between different aspects of his own liminality, with all its different ranges of cultural memory. As he looks back on his Kenyan past, his feelings alternate between nostalgia, guilt, and detachment.
Hybridity and liminality can be painfully difficult, and postmodern writers of the calibre of D’Aguiar, Phillips, Rushdie and Vassanji did nothing to disguise this. Yet their work could also carry more than a hint of excitement. The kind of predicament they were describing was both a challenge and an opportunity. Sometimes they showed cultural differences, including differences in cultural memory, becoming so endlessly communicable that traditional barriers gave way to vistas of intoxicating freedom, even if the price for this enlargement was a loss of customary security.

One of the most striking examples is Pat Barker’s *Regeneration Trilogy* (1996), in which questions of cultural definition at first seemed to be set back in the British past. Barker was re-activating cultural memories associated with British poets of the First World War, purporting to show how Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon were treated for shell-shock by W.H.R. Rivers at Craiglockhart in Scotland. In their different ways, what all three men – and other patients and doctors as well – were trying to come to terms with was a fundamental shift in their own culture’s values and restraints. But Rivers, who was not only a psychologist but an anthropologist, could draw comparisons and contrasts with Melanesian cultures and, despite being a healer in his own society, had long since come to understand how sick he must have seemed to the women of that very different part of the world – even to those who had been missionized. Having once asked a group of them his anthropologist’s question, “Suppose you were lucky enough to find a guinea, with whom would you share it?”, he was then teased into telling them his own answer to the same question: that “he would not necessarily feel obliged to share his guinea with anybody”. His life as a bachelor don in a Cambridge college merely provoked their sniggering disbelief, and he suddenly realized that their view of his society was neither more nor less valid than his of theirs. No bearded elderly white man looked down on them, endorsing one set of values and condemning the other. And with that realization, the whole frame of social and moral rules that keeps individuals imprisoned – and sane – collapsed, and for a moment he was in … [a] condition of absolute free-fall. (Barker 1996: 499-500)

Although the real-life Rivers was to die in 1922, Barker’s fictionalized Rivers and his patients were learning how, in the teeth of great personal distress, to seize openings which can arise from a radical questioning of authority, values and memories in any society at all, including the one to which *The Regeneration Trilogy* was itself contributing in 1996.

4. Varieties of community-making: An early modern poet

Thanks, then, to processes of genuine communication, value-laden memories typically associated with one sociocultural grouping can end up being borrowed into, or hybridized with, the life-world of some other grouping. Still more to the point, these are communicational processes which a literary text can not only portray, but actually be a part of as they continue within society as a whole. Granted,
there are countless cases in which communicants, including many professional
writers, do not encourage these kinds of fusion. Instead, they positively exclude the
human other, which means that the community they seek to create or consolidate has
strictly defined boundaries. But in other cases, the boundaries between one
community and its memories and another are far more porous, so that
communication becomes very inclusive.

So far, so good. But my worry is that the argument’s scope may at first have
seemed narrower and more superficial than it really is. In the previous section, I
dealt with only one period of literary history, and merely surveyed several writers at
great speed. In order to suggest something of the topic’s fuller implications, I shall
now switch to a completely different period, and deal with just a single writer in
more depth.

The fact is that complexities such as those of The Regeneration Trilogy abound
in the literature of earlier periods as well. Barker’s questioning of hard and fast
patterns of identity perpetuated what had always been one of literature’s most
characteristic ways of working. There had been Rudyard Kipling, for instance, who,
though so often described as the voice of empire speaking to empire’s own ear,
created that great riddle, Kim, the white boy “burned black as any native”, who uses
the local vernacular “by preference” (Kipling 1920 [1908]:1), who is ambiguous in
his loyalties, and who always blends in with his surroundings. Or there was
Shakespeare, creator of Shylock, the Jew who on the one hand feels physically ill
when ordered to submit to baptism, and proudly tells of Jacob’s cunning scheme for
getting sheep to produce party-coloured lambs, a chunk of cultural memory which
the Christian Antonio finds irreducibly grotesque, but who on the other hand makes
the famous speech about the Jews’ full share of the existential basics: “Hath not a
Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?” (Shakespeare 1959:
73). Like all great writers, Shakespeare was constantly testing his own values, and
those of his first audience, and novels such as those by D’Aguiar, Phillips, Rushdie,
Vassanji and Barker tended to suggest that his plays, performed in the theatre of
their later day, would push audiences into a cultural free-fall more precipitous than
ever, stirring memories increasingly difficult to categorize as those of just some
single, homogeneous culture.

One range of English literature in which communicational critics are studying
both memorial exclusiveness and memorial inclusiveness is that early modern
religious writing (Sell and Johnson 2009). I have already said enough to suggest that
exclusivity here was likely to be a religious grouping’s defensive move in the face of
opposition or even persecution, so tending to strengthen the particular kind of
religious identity under threat. Such was indeed the case. As for more inclusive
strategies, these were of three main kinds. First, the inclusivity could lodge claims to
common memorial ground that were basically coercive. Secondly, inclusivity could
be the disingenuous acquiescence of a subordinate or outlawed subjectivity in a
discourse that was socially dominant. Thirdly, inclusivity could be altogether more dialogical in spirit, neither aggressive not self-demeaning, but rather an invitation to compare notes in the hope of viable co-existence. And paradoxically enough, not only defensive exclusivity, but all three types of inclusivity could be manifested in the work of one and the same writer, as in the case of Sir John Beaumont, the most important Catholic poet at the court of James I in the early 1620s, and a protégé of James’s favourite, the Duke of Buckingham.1

In order to understand Beaumont’s handling of cultural memory, we need to bear in mind the larger historical background. The English civil war of the late middle ages, the so-called War of the Roses between the white rose of the House of York and the red rose of the House of Lancaster, had come to an end with the Battle of Bosworth in 1485, when the Yorkist King Richard III was conquered by the Lancastrian Henry Tudor, who consequently became Henry VII of England. But it was not until the reign of Henry’s son, Henry VIII, that the English Reformation got under way. In 1535 an act of parliament declared that Henry VIII himself, and not the Pope, was supreme head of the church in England, and the dissolution of the monasteries began in the following year. During the reign of Henry VIII’s daughter Mary, Roman Catholicism was re-introduced, and many notable Protestants were executed. But with the accession of her sister Elizabeth I in 1558, Protestantism was instated once and for all, bolstered with recusancy laws designed to punish anyone refusing to recognize the English monarch’s supremacy over the church in England. Many Catholics hoped that Elizabeth would be ousted by their fellow-religionist Mary Queen of Scots. But in 1587 Mary was executed, and in 1588 a Spanish armada which had set sail in the hope of forcibly bringing the British Isles back into the Catholic fold was defeated by Sir Francis Drake. James Stuart, Mary Queen of Scots’ son, was not a Catholic, moreover, even though his wife, Anne of Denmark, became a Catholic convert, and it was James who, already James VI of Scotland, eventually succeeded Elizabeth in 1603 as James I of England. After the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, a Catholic conspiracy to blow up the Houses of Parliament, the recusancy laws were applied with renewed vigour. Yet Queen Anne was by no means the only practising Catholic in high places, and James’s own foreign policy was an attempt to bring about peace between Catholic and Protestant powers in Europe at large. For some years he therefore cherished the hope of a marital union between his son Charles, the Crown Prince, and the Spanish Infanta, a plan fully supported by Buckingham, who in 1623 accompanied Charles on a journey to Madrid which was supposed to bring it to fruition, but which finally ended in failure. About a year later, a treaty was signed with France, providing for the suspension of the recusancy laws, and for a marriage between Charles and another Catholic princess, Henrietta Maria. The marriage took place in May 1625, just a few months after James’s death.

1 The commentary on Beaumont which follows takes up some of the points made in a fuller study of his communicational activity in Sell 2009a.
Now Beaumont’s *magnum opus* was *The Crowne of Thornes*, a poem of 11,000 lines which he completed not long before his own death in 1627. In one of its key passages, he writes that although he is conscious of no great handicap when trying to pay poetic tribute to Jesus Christ, what he finds far more difficult to write about is Christ’s bride, the one true Church. This is because

```
mine eye
could never yett that glorious staite espie,
Which shee [the one true Church] enjoyes, in nations where shee raighes;
nor ever felt her sweetnes but her paines.
```

```
... [O]ft our fainting soules crye out, how long
shall wee, in Babel, sing a mournefull song?
```

Here the writing moves from the experience of his own “I” towards that of his fellow-religionists’ communal “we”, and consolidates their cultural memories of despoiled church buildings, forbidden worship and martyrdom by alluding typologically to the captivity of the Jews as similarly recalled in Psalm 137 (cf. Hamlin 2004). Elsewhere, having adored the Blessed Virgin Mary on her heavenly throne, an adoration strictly out of bounds to Protestants, needless to say, and having paid tribute to many Virgins, Saints, Martyrs, and Doctors of the Church as well, Beaumont then mentions two other Maries who were very dear to English Catholics, the one already a tragic cultural memory, the other still a present hope. These two Maries are typologically joined together within the poem’s overarching narrative of the one true Church’s survival, not in “material” buildings, but in “nue temples in religious harts”, where “Devotion liues” that “shall, at last, prevaile”:

```
Shall we forget our glorie of the north,
Triumphant Marye, who dispercing forth
her beames from snowie Calidonian hills,
this happie Ile with princly offspring fills;
while two large realmes, vnited in her sonne,
laments the wrongs which they to her haue done;
when Scotland clos’d in walls her freeborne breath,
and England stood astonish’t att her death.
The bloud which shee from kingly vaines receiu’d,
confirm’d that faith, to which her parents cleau’d.
The miners [ i.e. the destroyers] of Gods house distroyd this wall;
```

---

\(^2\) MS Additional 33,392 B: 113. The first six books and the beginning of the seventh book of *The Crowne of Thornes* is paginated from 1 to 168. The remainder of the poem is in a different hand, and is paginated from 11 (*sic*) to 131. By “B” here, I indicate the second pagination.
and ioynd her murder to our churches fall;
but hee [God] who firmnesse to his rocke imparts,
erects nue temples in religious harts;
as hee hath chang’d her short, and earthly raigne,
for heavenly crownes, which noe foule hand can staine;
soe though with vs material churches faile,
Devotion liues and shall, at last, prevaile.
Expecting now a farr securer life,
for thee our second Marie, vertuous wife
of mightie Charles

(MS Additional 33,392 B: 127)

No contemporary reader could have missed the reference to Mary Queen of Scots, and few Catholic readers would have failed to sympathize with the hopes entertained of the union of Charles and Henrietta Maria. Beaumont’s mode of address to his fellow-religionists here was not coercively transitive, and had no need to be, but was intransitively phatic, drawing on aspects of Catholic cultural memory as the strongest form of bonding. His massive poem offered a sheer time-filling continuum of Catholic devotion, thought, feeling and, above all, fellowship. Not providing new information, not exactly telling a story, not exactly making an argument, he was inviting his readers to share a whole universe of Catholic learning, ideas, sensibility, history, experience, all of it held together in memories organized so as to strengthen just the one particular grouping, and to leave other groupings, for whom these signifiers did not signify in the same way, quite outside the poem’s circle of address.

Given such defensive exclusivity, there is a passage in Book 11 of The Crowne of Thornes which can come as a big surprise. All of a sudden, Beaumont’s address becomes more inclusive, and very coercively so, when he turns a distinctly missionary gaze upon one particular non-Catholic reader: none other than James himself, whom he urges to

Pull yppe these roots of schisme, let none divide
the maried realmes, from Christs vsnoted bride.
behould the name of Christ in peeces torne,
with errours, which daire chalenge to be borne
from ventrous sailing into scepters flood
and are not quencht, but fedd with christian bloud.
To thee there peacefull eyes all good men raise,
and pray thee to restore those goulden dayes
when faith, and practice of religious groundes
was generall, and not fastned to the bounds
of seve rall staites; then charitie shall heale
our mutual raige, and wee, possest with zeale,
shall whet our swords against the faithlesse Turkes,  
and fill all Asia with our glorious workes.  

(MS Additional 33,392 B: 110)

Here Beaumont addresses his king in a boldly man-to-man fashion, and the proselytizing urge behind his use of cultural memory is unmistakable. He is challenging James to bring about a Catholic community on a truly European scale, a community which, no longer torn apart by schism, would finally vanquish the Turks, the common enemy. In the background here is a generalized memory of the mediaeval crusades, and the more particular memory of an event which could be taken as extending that older Christian culture into modern times: the battle of Lepanto of 1571, a memory which, in 1583, James himself had helped to nourish by writing a narrative poem about it. Here the royal author had already developed the theme of different strands of Christianity uniting in order to conquer the Turks and, despite his own Protestant allegiances, had given credit where credit was due: to Don John, whose victory at Lepanto brought an end to years of conflict, even though he himself was but a “forraine Papist bastard” (James VI & I 1603 [1583]: sig. A2 recto).

For a Protestant writer in the England of Beaumont’s day, a coercively inclusive use of cultural memory was well within the bounds of political correctness. In Edmund Spenser’s well received *The Faerie Queene*, for instance, English history and Arthurian legend had been given a polemically anti-Catholic, anti-Spanish twist. But a poem adoring the Blessed Virgin Mary, lamenting the death of Mary Queen of Scots, seeing the union of Charles and Henrietta Maria as a step towards the restoration of the Old Religion, and seeking to coerce James himself through a polemically inclusive use of Catholic cultural memory could not expect an imprimatur. *The Crowne of Thornes* was bound to circulate only in manuscript, most probably among Catholics. There is no doubt that the Earl of Southampton read the early parts of it, since up until his death in 1624 he was its patron. The Catholic wife of Buckingham and Buckingham’s Catholic mother (a Beaumont by birth) almost certainly read it as well, as would doubtless have Queen Anne if she had not already died in 1617. Among all such court Catholics the poem would have been well known. But even if James, Charles and Buckingham, too, had read it, they could not publicly acknowledge having done so, and the same would have applied to any other member of the court who professed Protestantism. Protestant readers, though perfectly capable of activating the same memories which meant so much to Beaumont’s Catholic audience, actually had to steel themselves against their Catholic connotations, interpreting them from within what was officially supposed to be a different communal camp, even if many of their own close family members and loved ones were actually still Catholics.

This, though, is by no means the whole story, for Beaumont also wrote poetry that was more politically correct. In many cases, present-day readers with a weak
sense of the pressures entailed by his historical circumstances may blame him for being a good bit too correct. Here I am thinking of poems addressed to James, Charles and Buckingham on the occasion of birthdays and other family and court events, in which Beaumont wholly erased his own religious affiliation and drew on a body of cultural memory that was little more than superficially humanistic: ranging from the contemptus mundi of standard Christian Stoicism, sometimes in embarrassingly compromised forms, to the personnel, episodes and landscapes of Greek and Roman mythology at their most decorative. He himself was perfectly well aware of his self-betraying self-disguise here, and in some cases explicitly tried to dispel his own fear that he was grovelling too low. In one of his ostensibly moralizing poems to Buckingham he wrote that, because Buckingham was such a successful courtier, he had at first hesitated to describe him as an embodiment of true goodness, but that

... when your temper, innocencie, truth
(Now famous all) I balance with your youth
I cann not thinke it sinne or flatterie then
To write you in the roule of honest men.

(Beaumont 1974: 180)

In his epithalamium for Buckingham’s marriage, similarly, his pretty mythologizing even acquiesced in the aura of eroticism, including homoeroticism surrounding the king’s favourite –

The Bridgroomes starres aries,
Maydes, turne your sight, your faces hide:
Lest ye be shipwrack’d in those sparkling eyes,
Fit to be seene by none, but by his lovely bride:
If him Narcissus should behold, he would forget his pride.

(Beaumont 1974: 138)

– but the same poem opened with nothing less than an apology for this kind of thing. Addressed to his “Severe and serious Muse”, it asked her to be not “too nice”.

But then again, in much other work Beaumont’s political correctness was not shameful in the least, because he could also identify with the cultural memory of his addressees in a much deeper sense, even when it was not explicitly Catholic. At the higher levels of society, many items of memory were widely shared by Catholics and Protestants alike, not least the memories of aristocratic ancestors, which could fuel a shared pride of station vis à vis the lower orders. Beaumont could converse on equal terms with high-born and well educated readers whose immersion in the civilization of ancient Greece and Rome was genuinely humanistic. And since, like the vast majority of English Catholics, he was totally loyal to the English monarch in a way that the English authorities sometimes failed to understand, he also had not
the slightest qualm about appealing to the commonalities of Stuart political ideology, and of national and genealogical history. Another of his wavelengths was an interest in more modern, scientific learning, and he also showed some sympathy with the period’s more serious aesthetic taste, though again with just that dash of erotic, sometimes homoerotic sensuality, which was such a persistent interface between the high culture of early Stuart England and the imageries of the Counter-Reformation. Indeed, another clear commonality was of biblical knowledge, and of religious belief, experience and practice of an ecumenically Christian character which was warmly endorsed by James’s eirenical foreign policy. In short, there were times when Beaumont’s own religious affiliation did not prevent him from convincingly drawing on a wide range of ideologically loaded cultural memory that was the common property of the entire establishment.

This resulted in a communicational inclusiveness that was not coercive, and not self-disguisingly self-betraying either, but altogether more congenially dialogical. One of his most widely admired poems was “Bosworth Field”, a mini-epic on that crucial battle of 1485. Nowhere does the poem comment on the fact that the action described took place fifty years before the English reformation, even though for most readers, Protestant or Catholic, its very silence on this point was probably enough to code the author’s sympathies as Catholic. What the poem does dwell on is Henry Tudor’s victory as a memory which twines together the red and white roses in a type of James’s joining of Scotland and England.

The Winters storme of Civill warre I sing,  
Whose end is crown’d with our eternall Spring,  
Where Roses joyn’d, their colours mixe in one,  
And armies fight no more for Englands Throne.  

(Beaumont 1974: 66)

The poem depicts the high-born combatants on both sides of the battle as epitomes of noble valour, and in doing so addresses itself to their descendants in the Jacobean court, an aristocratic audience which is taken to be already in sympathy with Beaumont’s own lofty standards of judgement, and which, regardless of any internal religious disagreements, here quite unmentioned, is assumed to be as totally homogeneous in its devotion to the ancient virtues of courage and generosity as were their great ancestors on that battlefield of 1485, quite regardless of whether their rose was the white one or the red one. The battle becomes a cautionary image of the sheer folly of discord, with a whole series of episodes – none of them to be found in Beaumont’s printed sources, whose memories he clearly felt free to embroider for his own high ends – in which a noble warrior on the one side pities a noble warrior at a disadvantage on the other, “though in armes his foe / In heart his friend” (Beaumont 1974: 81). And whereas the spiritual aura surrounding blue blood is gently sentimentalized – the young Lord Strange, for instance, reprieved from death, is like a sacrificial steer sent back from the burning altars and allowed to
breathe the air in peace —, the common soldiers are described in large masses, and accorded individual mention only for some act of special despicability towards one of their betters. When “rude hands” are laid on “that noble flower”, the Earl of Surrey, whose bravery Beaumont further idealizes by making it — in another departure from a more accurately historical memory — the bravery of a warrior young and unfledged, the relish is considerable as Surrey sends “the Peasants arme to kisse the ground” (Beaumont 1974: 78). But the poem’s strongest condemnation is reserved for Richard III, figured as the reason for the noble warriors’ continued discord, quite human enough in his fears and aspirations to arouse interest and understanding, yet unmistakably the hell-bound villain that his role in Tudor-Stuart historiography required, thereby further strengthening the genuine bond between Beaumont and his court readership – a bond which was hardly to be loosened by a glancing memory, in the mention of the grim punishment awaiting the fiendish Richard, of a Catholic dies irae.

6. Cultural memory and communication

By way of conclusion, I must first underline something which I hope is already clear, even if it has not been my main point. When post-postmodern communicational critics identify a literary use of cultural memory which is not negatively capable, a use, for instance, such as Haley’s in Roots or Beaumont’s in much of The Crowne of Thornes, a use which sharply separates one community or sub-community from another, they may well feel obliged to respect the defensive narrowness and exclusiveness of this. As I said at the outset, the post-postmodern dream of a non-hegemonic globalization is tempered by a strong sense that systematic and violent injustice not only preceded, but still lives on after, postmodernity’s democratizing maelstrom. Indeed, there probably always has been, and probably always will be a need for a very robust politics of recognition. In the past, that strategy’s way of defining marginalized identities has risked oversimplifications which, insofar as they suggested that the difference between one grouping and another is “all the way down” (Miller 1995), did not immediately improve the chances of genuine communication across the board. Yet both now and in the future, if the same grave drawback were to recur, it should arguably be tolerated, in the hope that emergent identities and their cultures, having once become perceptible to other groupings, will gradually enter into fuller dialogue with them, within a larger, egalitarian community that is indefinitely large and indefinitely heterogeneous (Sell 2004).

I repeat: indefinitely heterogeneous. The post-postmodern ideal of community most definitely does not entail a levelling out of differences. The ideal community’s members would not conform, except in a profoundly eirenic relish of each other’s othernesses. This would involve, as one might put it, the politics of recognition in a new, post-culture-wars phase of reciprocated empathy. Stridency, barricades, and inhumanly narrow identity scripts would be firmly relegated to the past.
One of the things a communicational critic singles out for positive emulation is any use of cultural memory which promotes the growth of just such a community: uses which are inclusive without claiming a solidarity that is insincere, and without coercion; uses which work, rather, in a spirit of negative capability that is at once frank and deferential. In their different ways, D’Aguiar’s *The Longest Memory*, Phillips’s *Cambridge*, Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, Vassanji’s *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, Barker’s *The Regeneration Trilogy*, Kipling’s *Kim*, Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, and Beaumont’s *Bosworth Field* all have these qualities. In cases like these, cultural memory is a resource that is polyvalent, and not so much the fundamentalist shibboleth of some very circumscribed identity, as the exponent of those kinds of personal hybridity and rainbow coalition by which differences are most fruitfully negotiated. Although, in both literary and other spheres of life, differences are nothing less than the communal life-blood, the less a memory is experienced as eternally available to just some single grouping, the more it contributes to genuine communication. In an ideal world as we are beginning to conceive of it today, cultural memory would be open to discussion from every quarter.

**References**


James VI, I (1603) [1583]. *Lepanto, or heroical song being part of his poetical exercises at vacant houres*. London: Simon Stafford and Henry Hooke.


**Manuscript Sources**

Additional 33,392, British Library