Journal of Arts & Humanities

Volume 06, Issue 01, 2017, 01-11
Article Received: 08-12-2016
Accepted: 27-12-2016
Available Online: 11-01-2017
ISSN: 2167-9045 (Print), 2167-9053 (Online)

"Family Secrets." The Difficulties of Remembering and the Distortion of Memories in a Contemporary Hungarian Novel[1]

Krisztina Karizs[2]

ABSTRACT

The concept of memory and the process of remembering is an interesting and important topic in numerous theoretical and literary works since ancient Greece. Memory studies connect scholars from different fields such as philosophy, literary theory, cognitive and neuroscience, and psychology, while the uncharted processes of our brain and the often paradoxical characteristics of memories have inspired writers throughout the world. Their work and research resulted in — among others — autobiographies, family novels, or trauma fiction. In my research, I concentrate on the psychological aspects of memory studies and analyse how certain disturbances in the process of remembering and 'special' mental states (such as dissociation or post-traumatic stress disorder) form or deform narrative and result in particular narrative strategies. In my current paper, I analyse a contemporary family novel by a famous Hungarian writer, Krisztián Grecsó, Mellettem elférsz (There is space beside me), which was published in 2011. The plot concerns the life of a young man who attempts to imbue his life with meaning, and while doing so, seeking out the lost memories of his ancestors. In my analysis, I propose three core problems: Firstly, I give a brief description of the connection between memories and personal identity and examine if exact knowledge of the past is needed to retain a stable identity. Secondly, I argue if it is possible to retrieve the aforementioned knowledge. And lastly, I analyse the variables that possibly cause the disturbance in remembering and the distortion of the family history as pictured by Grecsó in his novel.

Keywords: Distortion of Memories, Identity, Memory Studies, Shame, Trauma.

1.0 Introduction

The concept of memory is a core topic in numerous theoretical and literary works throughout history, which encompass different representations and explanations of it. The field of memory studies cannot be narrowed down and forced into a single discipline. On the contrary, the urge to understand and explain the skill of remembering has inspired lively interdisciplinary discourse between scholars and

[1] This work was supported by Hankuk University of Foreign Studies Research Fund of 2017.

[2] Assistant Professor, Department of Hungarian Studies, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, South Korea, E-mail: sevenke@gmail.com.

researchers. Finding the key elements of human memory has been a concern of scholars since at least ancient Greek times. This research began with Plato and the ancient Greek philosophers and was further pursued by Locke, Hegel, Nietzsche, Bergson, Freud and others (see for example Bergson, 1896; Freud, 1925). Since Freud and the golden age of psychoanalysis, memory and the process of remembering have had an unbreakable connection to the psychological realm. This new approach was also strengthened by a number of historical crises during the 20th century, as well as the development of technology, which has made us rethink and reconfigure the meaning of our existence and our place in the world (Rossington & Whitehead, 2007). The technological boom and the achievements accomplished in the field of neuroscience allowed us to learn more than ever about the brain and its functions; however, human memory still holds many undiscovered secrets since its 'nature' (or our understanding of it) is continually changing, seeing that it is deeply bound not only to our biology, but also to our social milieu.

Although defining memory is not an easy task, it is possible to capture its most salient aspects. According to psychology, memory can be defined as "the capacity of a body or substance for manifesting effects of, or exhibiting behaviour dependent on, its previous state, behaviour or treatment" (OED, 6b). This capacity is crucial for life, because it is a key to learning and using information obtained from our surroundings to develop knowledge.

Based on the basic cognitive model, human memory has three tasks to perform: to process (i.e. encode) incoming information; to store encoded data; and to access the storage and retrieve this data at an arbitrary moment. A background component of this model is motivation, since the mind stores all of its data in order to use it and benefit from it at a future moment (Sutton, Harris, and Barnier, 2010).

This model represents an ideal situation in which the encoding and processing of incoming information are smooth procedures that occur without any difficulties. However, in fact, there are several variables that affect the act of remembering, which very often lead to the distortion of some of the stored memory, or which block one of the functions. The loss of information can be a result of the intentional manipulation of memory material, when an individual or a group changes aspects of certain past events in order to benefit from it at a future moment. On the other hand, in numerous cases, the distortion happens during those stages of remembering, which cannot be controlled consciously. Psychological research has proven that a great number of mental disorders can have strong effects on the act of remembering. Recently, the most predominant reason for forgetting is trauma, when the memories of a traumatic event reside at a consciously inaccessible level in order to protect the individual from further pain and suffering (see for example van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995; Caruth, 1995).

In their reader, Anne Whitehead and Michael Rossington point out that there is an alternative way of thinking about memory, which also has a long tradition in theory. It began with John Locke's idea that memory has a significant role in forming one's identity, which first arose in philosophy (Rossington & Whitehead, 2007). However, psychological research further shaped and complicated this idea. Work with amnesiac patients made it clear that the existence of memories is not an absolutely necessary condition for a stable identity. Wiggins states that "memory is not irrelevant to personal identity, but the way it is relevant is simply that it is one highly important element among others in the account of what it is for a person to be still there, *alive*" (Wiggins, cited in Warnock, 1987).

The following account by an amnesiac patient supports Wiggins' idea: "My memory limitations are not so much a problem anymore. I don't mourn the loss of my memory as I can't remember what it used to be like. The condition has helped me to evolve, I think, into a different type of person" (Wilson, 1998, p. 133).

In my paper I examine how this realization can be relevant in a situation in which someone does not have the luxury of being in an amnesiac state, but lives with fractured pieces of history which are not consistent with his or her own experiences; in other words, when one suffers from a different kind of partial amnesia, which was formed by traumatic events, shame, and/or lies.

My analysis concerns the contemporary Hungarian novel *Mellettem elférsz* (There is space beside me) by Krisztián Grecsó. I explain how the secrets and lies in the narrator's family affect him, and see if his identity problems are the outcome of this problematic representation of the past alone or — as Wiggins suggests — consist of more variables.

When introducing the dynamics of remembering in *Mellettem elférsz*, I concentrate on the situations when the aforementioned cognitive model cannot function properly, and explain how and why the distortion of memories happens, what effect it has on the narrator and the novel, and why or whether it is important to restore the original memories of the narrator's family. I also ask whether or not it is possible to obtain truthful data about the actual events of the past through the process of remembering.

2.0 The characteristics of identity problems in the novel

Grecsó's novel, *Mellettem elférsz* (There is space beside me), was published in 2011. As most of Grecsó's other novels, this one also has a strong connection to the Hungarian countryside. The protagonist and narrator of the story is a young man, who — unlike the other men in his family — graduated from university and moved from his small village to the capital city. However, even though he is able to succeed in his career, his personal life is over-encumbered with disappointments and failures. While he cannot 'find his place' in the capital, returning to his village is not an option either, because he wants to develop his social identity, which is not possible in his village. This identity crisis reaches its peak when his girlfriend leaves him for another man. In this situation, he realises that he needs to find a way to rebuild the identity he had lost after leaving his village in order to find solid ground in his new home. He searches for safety and certainty in his and his family's past, believing in the concept that one's identity is also rooted in the lives of one's ancestors.

Before answering the main questions mentioned in my introduction and analysing the process of remembering, it is necessary to present an overview of the main causes of the narrator's identity crisis. As stated before, it is firstly triggered by the loss of social safety. From a bystanders' point of view, he does not differ from anyone who was born and raised in Budapest. While being an outsider was clearly visible during the time of his grandparents, this is no longer a problem in his generation (after the end of communism in Hungary in 1989). His appearance, education, and social status shaped him into someone who seems to be no different from any other citizen. However, the way he sees and defines himself sets up a wall between him and his new city. Although his lifestyle has already separated him from the village, fragments of the connection still remain as a block that keeps him from finding his place in Budapest. The next quotation shows very clearly how the tastes, smells, and places of the village are also present in the narrator's life. The sites of Budapest are often mixed with the sites of familiar places from his childhood. These sensations and pictures of his former home are like a mist that veils his present reality.

> A nyárfák között, ha a Rákos-patak felé néztem, háttal a Bosnyák téri piac erdejének, kicsit olyan volt, mintha otthon, a telepi pályán állnék. Az építési hulladékot kendernek vagy pozdorjának láttam, a halmok éppen olyanok voltak, és a nyárfák sem rázzák a lombjukat máshogy. A száraz gaz fojtó szaga átjárta az orrom, és annyira honvágyam lett, hogy fájt. (Grecsó, 2011, p. 182)
>
> If I turned my back on the forest of market stands at the Bosnyák Square and looked towards the Rákos Stream through the poplar trees, it felt like I was standing on the playground of our settlement. The construction waste looked like hemp or pieces of wallboard, the piles were almost the same, and the poplars shook their branches in the same way too. The suffocating scent of dry grass filled my nose, and the feeling of homesickness was pure pain.[3]

Obviously, it is not extraordinary (or wrong) to maintain a connection with one's place of origin; however, it is interesting as to why this bond becomes unhealthy for the narrator in particular. The core

[3] My translation. All further translations from the text are my own as well.

of the problem is that the narrator's strong social insecurity and his inability to integrate follow from the fact that the village is not only a place where he was born and raised, but it also represents the whole history of his family. The lives of his ancestors intermingle with the history of the village and also determine his future. On the other hand, the legends and stories that were handed down through each family generation are only relevant within the collective memory of the village, and are not consistent with the present. This is firstly because the family stories concern great men — his father, grandfathers, and uncles — who should have had bright and successful lives, but who all ended up as alcoholics, suffering from mental problems, and finally dying without any dignity. The present is not a continuation of the past, as believed by every member of the family, but it is more like a curse for the narrator, who fears that he will have to face the same end as the other men in his family, regardless of his actions. Secondly, the stories and traditions of the village form a virtual reality that is only relevant while one is part of it. As soon as the connection to the origins of this reality are broken, it cannot be considered as a "truth", and thus the certainty of life, knowledge of the world, is questioned. The narrator's inability to form a stable identity follows from the uncertainty of the representation of the world around him.

It is easily foreseeable, and understandable, that in this state the narrator turns to the only stable thing in his life, which is to try to form his identity with his body and his appearance. However, these attempts fail every time he comes face to face with the changes that are the natural consequences of time. He examines himself in the mirror or the window of shops and tries to place the substance that he believes he is into this changing container of flesh and blood that is his body, but realizes that, after losing weight or changing his hairstyle, he can no longer recognize himself. The body changes, and as he states, "his clothes are just like curtains, but no one stands behind them" (p. 89). The betrayal of the body becomes certain when he meets his grandfather's lover, and despite his attempts, he cannot find the attractive young woman in the face of the seventy-year old lady in front of him.

> Ösztönösen végigmértem, próbáltam a töpörödött, apró testében felfedezni azt a nyúlánk, kívánatos nőt […] azt látni, aki a képen állt. […] Nem tudtam. (Grecsó, 2011, p. 238–239)
>
> I instinctively looked her up and down, I tried to see the slender, attractive woman in her small, wizened body. […] I tried to see the woman who was standing in the picture, […] but I couldn't.

Finally, he summarizes his confusion and disappointment in the following way:

> Nem tudtam elhinni, hogy semmi nem marad, hogy a test ekkora árulásra képes: teljesen megváltozik, minden sejt, szerv, vonal, idom kicserélődik. Az is átvillant rajtam, hogy mennyire földhözragadt vagyok, azonosítom magam ezzel a két karral s lábbal, törzzsel, fejjel. De ez igenis én vagyok, gondoltam aztán, és ez az én nem lehet teljes egészében más. Lehet romlottabb, ráncosabb, de ha mindenestül másik testem lesz, akkor én sem lehetek ugyanaz. (Grecsó, 2011, p. 240)
>
> I could not believe that nothing lasts, and the body is capable of such a betrayal: it transforms completely, every cell, organ, characteristic or contour deforms and changes. It flashed across my mind how much I am bound to the earth, because I try to identify myself with two arms and legs, a torso, a head. But this is me indeed, and this part of me cannot change completely. It can become wrinkled, more wizened, but if everything changes, I cannot be the same person either.

The role of the body is also very significant from another point of view. As mentioned previously, the fate, and especially the death, of certain family members, has a very strong impact on the narrator's life. The novel begins with clearing up his intentions towards and expectations of his body:

> Én a testemmel szerződést kötöttem. […] Egészséges akarok lenni, mert a múlt tele van halállal, és én érezni akarom, hogy bírom a halált. (Grecsó, 2011, p. 5)
>
> I have made a treaty with my body. […] I want to be healthy, because the past is full of death, and I want to be strong enough to face it.

This dilemma is addressed at the very beginning of the book, and it becomes even more important later, for the narrator is trying to avoid the pitiful way his relatives died. It is interesting that these deaths are not only traumatic for him, because they had lacked dignity and peace, but also because he was the one who found his grandfather's brother, as well as his own uncle, lying cold in their houses, just as he had witnessed the complete mental and physical breakdown of his father. However, his body is already giving him warning signs — his shaking knees and hands and the trepidation of a nerve on his face are family characteristics, and as the next quote explains, he suffers from them in the same way as did his uncles, grandmother, and father.

> A térdem egyre erősebben remegett, a combom is, mintha a génjeimben bujkáló hajlamok, Benedek tisztátalan vágyai, Márton tata remegése, az ifjabbik Márton görcsei, Juszti mama Parkinsonja működni kezdtek volna a testemben. (Grecsó, 2011, p. 146–147.)
>
> My knees and my legs were trembling faster and faster as if the taint coded in my DNA — Benedek's desires, my grandfather's trembling, Uncle Márton's cramps and Granny Juszti's Parkinson's — were awakened in my body.

It is evident from the next passage that the fear of sharing the fate of the aforementioned men is also present in his life and is triggered by his psychical symptoms.

> Fájt a hasam, remegett a kezem, féltem, hogy ilyen rövid lesz az életem. Remegett a lábam is, meg az állam, mint mindig, ha ideges vagyok, ültünk egymás mellett a padon [Márton és a narrátor], ő pizsamában, rajtam kapucnis dzseki, remegtünk. Ott ült a szentesi elmeosztály udvarán két egészen hasonló formájú, remegős férfi. (Grecsó, 2011, p. 115.)
>
> I had a stomach ache and my hands were shaking, because the single thought that my life could be as short as his was terrifying. My legs and my chin started to tremble too as they always when I am under pressure. We were sitting next to each other on the bench, Márton in his pyjamas, me in my jacket. The two of us, resembling shaking men, were sitting in the garden of the psychiatry ward of Szentes.

3.0 The dynamics of remembering and the distortion of memories

Considering the characteristics of the narrator's identity crisis, his urge to retrieve the most important memories of the family, and to clear up and recompose his family history, are rooted in two important factors. Firstly, the narrator attempts to define himself and find the core substance of his identity, something that would not dissipate along with the physical changes of his body. Secondly, he tries to find the cause of his relatives' problems and pinpoint the moment when the destruction in their minds and bodies started, in order to change his own fate by correcting their mistakes. However, the recollection of these memories does not begin because of this strong determination, but because of a coincidence, which occurs when he meets an editor who asks him to send an old family picture and an interesting story to his newspaper. In order to find the right story, he re-reads the memoirs of his grandmother; afterwards, he sends a picture of his grandfather's brother, Benedek, and tells a story about him being a monk and later a soldier and a war survivor. But all the family legends about Benedek prove to be untrue when he receives a letter from the monastic order claiming that Benedek had never been a member there. In his confusion, the narrator confronts his grandmother and forces her to tell the truth about Benedek and explain why it was necessary for her to lie about his life.

From this point on, the novel consists of three separate stories of three family members: the story of the narrator's great-uncle Benedek and his partner Sadi, the narrator's uncle Márton, and finally his maternal grandfather Domos. While it is the young man who shares the stories with the reader, he very rarely talks about his own memories. Because of his age, his experiences are only relevant in Márton's case — the grandparents' generation is too far from him to remember and he does not know anything about their early life, so he has to rely on his sources. The main storyteller is his grandmother, Granny Juszti, but in the case of his maternal grandfather, he acquires information from Domos' old friend and

his lover. Although the protagonist's aim is to discover the truth about his family's past, the fragmented stories that he hears sometimes differ quite significantly from the facts. The causes of the distortion of their memories are different in each case, but there are two key elements that I want to mention.

One of the main reasons that certain memories often cannot be retrieved is due to trauma. Research concerning trauma and its consequences has proven that our minds process memories about a traumatic event differently from those of average experiences. According to van der Kolk and van der Hart, generally we have the ability to code our memories on a symbolic level using our language skills. That is, we process our experiences by turning them into narratives that we can give meaning to and fit into our interpretation of reality. However, fear or pain can cause these language skills to deteriorate or weaken and thereby change the way we process our memories. We are then unable to form narratives, which end in storing only fragmented pictures of an event, which are very clear, but on the other hand inaccessible in conscious states (van der Kolk & van der Hart, 1995).

Because of the special nature of traumatic memories, many past events are dim and so cannot be recollected. None of the family members know much about the grandmother's childhood as an orphan, and there are only fragmented narratives about the wartime. There are testimonies about how the paternal grandfather tried to return from the frontlines to his young wife but fell into the enemies' hands instead and spent years in a Siberian camp. There are also stories about how Benedek had been injured during fights at the monastery, but there is no coherent knowledge about those specific years, his real fate and trials. Benedek's experiences during his short stay in the religious order also have a traumatic aspect, and he and the whole family remain silent about them, just as they never discuss the war either.

The narrator also retains very confusing traumatic memories about the aforementioned deaths of certain family members. He discovered Benedek's body as a child, when his father sent him to fetch some homemade vodka from the old man. These memories were completely erased by dissociation, and the narrator can only recall the moment of arriving at the house with the empty bottle. Later, when in his thirties, he is forced to search for his missing uncle, Márton, when the family suspects that something bad has happened to him. Just as before, he finds a corpse which had been in the house for days, and that he cannot identify as his uncle. Although the memories of this event are not completely dissociated, they cannot be told coherently, and the narrator constantly escapes into older memories about Márton and discusses those instead of the story at hand. At a key moment, when the narrator finally has to reveal the conditions in which his uncle's body was found, he realises that he cannot recall many of the details of the event. He does not remember entering Márton's bedroom, or calling the doctor and the police; he can only recall certain flashbacks about being interrogated at the police station and some details about Márton's body: dirty underwear and a strange injury to his eye.

> Ettől kezdve nincs valóság. Be kell mennem [a rendőrségre]. Saját magam védelmében. Hogy tanúskodjam magam mellett, ellenőrizzem őket, azt fotózzák, amit találtam: Márton maradékát, azt a kicsavarodott, csontsoványra fogyott, félszemű testet, amelyik édes bűzt áraszt magából, és amit ekkor sem látok. (Grecsó, 2011, p. 172–173.)
>
> From this moment on nothing was real. I had to go to the police station to protect myself. To testify for myself and see if the officers took photos of what I had found: Márton's remains, that twisted, bony, single-eyed corpse, that was emitting the smell of putrefaction, and that I was still not able to see clearly.

These blackouts caused by traumatic dissociation are very dominant characteristics of the narrator. When his maternal grandfather's former lover has a panic attack and faints in his presence, he reacts exactly the same way as in Márton's house. He is able to take care of all the necessities required by the situation, however, later he cannot retrieve consistent memories of his actions.

> Minden összefolyt, kicsordult, ami ott történt: az unokaság, a látogatás, a papírok – teljes köd ereszkedett arra az órára, utólag csak csomókat tudok kitapintani, mint a bőr alatt. (Grecsó, 2011, p. 259.)

> Everything that happened there was blurred — becoming a grandson, my visit, her documents — the whole hour has disappeared in the mist, and now I can only feel the nodes, as lumps under the skin.

Aside from the trauma that the family members had suffered throughout many decades, there is another significant element that deforms the past and reality: shame. Shame can be described as an affect auxiliary and affects are defined as "sets of muscular, glandular, and skin receptor responses located in the face (and also widely distributed throughout the body) that generate sensory feedback to a system that finds them either inherently 'acceptable' or 'unacceptable'" (Thomkins, 1987). According to Thomkins' research on the affect mechanism, these physical responses of humans are caused by various triggers, which can vary widely depending on a person's familial or cultural background and personality. However, the physical responses they have are biologically coded, and therefore they are the same for every human being. Shame is characterized as an affect auxiliary that "operates only after interest or enjoyment is activated" (Thomkins, 1987). In other words, shame is awakened by an incomplete reduction of interest, and it is always followed by the fear of being exposed. Besides its biological nature, shame also has a social aspect, which helps in understanding the reasons for such fear. As human beings, we want to be part of a group and be accepted by its members; we long for attention and the interest of others, therefore the reduction of interest gives us a very strong and clearly negative self-judgement. As a result of being exposed, we can be discriminated against by a group we wish to belong to. The fear of discrimination increases in the social milieu of the countryside village, where everyone knows and judges the other members of the community, and where the expectations of society are accompanied by the village's own rules. It follows that shame is a significant factor in forming public narratives about a person or a family, and has an important role in all three stories told in the novel.

When it comes to the narrator's paternal relatives, Benedek and Márton, he obtains information about them from his grandmother. In the original family tales, they are both depicted as smart and ambitious men who had the chance to create better futures for themselves. However, instead of the predicted — and also expected — success, they both failed to achieve their goals and ended up with serious mental problems that led to depression and alcoholism. The details of their failures are not mentioned in the grandmother's original stories, which results in the discontinuity between the past and the present. When the grandmother is later forced to tell the truth that had been left out of her memoirs, it comes to light that the stories about these men were forged to retain their dignity and save them from humiliation.

In Benedek's case, there is a simple but very taxing story behind the lies about his life as a monk. Benedek was in fact a member of a monastery, but only for a few weeks, until a rumour started that he had had a homosexual relationship with his school friend, Sadi. According to the grandmother, the rumours were not based in fact, at least not at the time, and the only truthful detail was Sadi's love for his friend. However, Benedek was banished from the monastery and had to return to the village, which was a source of great shame for him and his family, and also an unbearable disappointment for everyone in the village, who had expected him to do something extraordinary and to prove to the whole community that life could be more than what they knew of. After all this, Benedek also suffered the consequences of the war and then joined another religious order for a short time, but he never discussed the fact that everything he had experienced in the monastery was tainted by feelings of inferiority and humiliation. Finally, he returned to the village, and as a grown man, Sadi spent his life with him. Unfortunately, after Sadi's death, he could no longer face the trauma of the war, the shame of his failures, and the discrimination he felt in the village, and ultimately died as a result of serious alcohol problems.

Márton's fate resembles that of Benedek's in many details. He and his brother — the narrator's father — also had great potential in their youth, and both the community and the family had high hopes for them. Even so, Márton was not able to graduate from university because of his weak nerves and, just as Benedek, he had to return to the village without fulfilling his own and the community's

expectations. He could not succeed in his personal life either. After two failed attempts to build a family of his own, he ended up being a bachelor for the remainder of his life. The story of his last years is like a replica of Benedek's fate, as he also sought relief in alcohol and died alone in his bed from alcohol poisoning.

The family and the village process these unsuccessful lives in a very typical way: they tailor the narrative about these people so that the acceptable parts are remembered while they simply remain silent about the events that do not fit their representation or expectations of reality. It follows that the unpleasant and disappointing details are left out of the collective memory of the family. While the grandmother does not per se lie in her memoirs, there are details that she refuses to mention. Moreover, she is an author-like figure in the novel and is very adept at creating stories, which makes it probable that she is creating her own fiction, her own life narrative, in order to maintain the dignity of the people she loved.

It is also probable that the recreation of the past is her way to live out her own trauma of being an orphan and the only outsider in the family and the community. Although her grandson wants her to revoke her false narrative and tell him the facts, we cannot determine to what extent she can fulfil his expectations. On the one hand, she has lived her whole life in and according to the stories she had created, meaning that she may not necessarily be able to differentiate them from the facts. On the other hand, her Parkinson's disease and dementia affect her linguistic skills, preventing her from outlining the facts clearly, and thus interfering with the creation of a more truthful narrative.

Shame and envy — which intertwine very easily — are important factors in the maternal grandfather Domos' stories too. However, unlike Benedek's and Márton's cases, the transformation of the facts in this version of the narrative is not meant to restore Domos' dignity but the storyteller's. The narrator learns of the anecdotes about his grandfather through two sources: Andor, who lived in the same workers' dormitory as Domos, and Domos' lover, Zách Éva. In Benedek's and Márton's cases, the shame arose out of the fact that, despite their potential, they could not achieve the higher social status they were aiming for. Unlike them, Domos does not have special talents, and no one has high hopes for him; however, when he gets the chance, he succeeds at everything.

After the Second World War, he was one of the construction workers hired from the countryside to rebuild Budapest after the bombings. Domos spent every week in the capital and he loved the city with all his heart. He also made his way very naturally through the unexpected hardships of the new and unknown city, which irritated some of the people around him. Both Andor and Zách Éva envied his talent for this success, which he achieved with his partly humble and naive but nevertheless confident personality. While Domos had to return to the village, Andor was ashamed because, even though he could remain in Budapest, he could never establish as strong a social identity and become a capital citizen, as did his former workmate. Zách Éva's envy went even deeper. Domos' success was a source of pure humiliation for her. She had felt that she should automatically succeed in certain situations because of her social status. She wanted to picture herself as someone more valuable and influential than Domos the poor peasant, but her lover was able to surpass her in many ways, thus completely undermining her social dignity.

In order to appear more influential or powerful, Andor and Zách Éva present almost boldfaced lies to the narrator. Andor wants the young man to think that he played a role in Domos' life and success, while Zách Éva puts on the airs of a respected gentry woman. Unlike Andor's, her struggles are not utterly personal, but have a strong collective aspect when examined from the angle of the political changes of post-war Hungary. Andor's lies are exposed when he mixes the dates, and his story loses all its factuality. Zách Éva, on the other hand, hardly tries to conceal her act of an influential gentry woman, and in the following quotation openly admits that she had been lying whenever she could persuade the narrator to believe her. "Zách Éva became anxious when I [the narrator] mentioned Andor. *I didn't want any witnesses*, she said, *until now I could lie to you whatever I wanted*" (p. 269).

4.0 Strategies of creating a family history

In the last part of my paper I want to analyse two important questions. Firstly, what strategy does Grecsó's narrator use to build a narrative out of the fragmented anecdotes? Secondly, do these anecdotes help him to unfold the truth about his past (and if so, how), and do they provide a basis for the identity he tries to recreate?

The narrator's first obtrusive attribute is that his memory is flawed, so that his recollections of the anecdotes are not controlled by strict rules of a linear narrative. He is driven by the events of his present and also by the old stories that he tries to unearth. Most of his actions are motivated by his instincts, not logic. As he transforms his family anecdotes into his own narrative, the narrative takes on the characteristics of a psychoanalytic memory, where the fragments are linked through free association, thus the connections between them are not always apparent, and the narrative itself is not coherent either. With this narrative strategy, Grecsó's novel gives an important role to the reader as well, who — as it were — has to do the work of the psychoanalyst and identify the meaningful details of the past that are relevant to the narrator's present situation.

Obviously, some help is provided for the reader. The narrator uses different strategies and source materials to make the family history as consistent as possible. As a solid and factual foundation, he uses so-called "*printed schemes*", such as dates in certain documents. He also merges his own memories into the narrative, which are probably more reliable than the grandmother's memoirs or the anecdotes; however, they are still very ambiguous due to the traumatic experiences to which they are attached. Moreover, because the narrator revisits these memories in order to interpret his (and his family's) present, as in autobiographical and mnemonic narratives in general, past experiences might accumulate meanings that are relevant from the point of view of the present but were different or never existed at the time of the original event (Leiris, 1984). This problem is even more threatening if we consider that most of the stories are told and tailored by more than one person, and so are "suffused with others' memories — which are themselves suffused with other others' memories" (Freeman, 2010). This recognition becomes important, because the main sources are the aforementioned anecdotes and memoirs; however, it is very difficult to determine to what extent they are true. These three components are still not sufficient for outlining the family history, so the narrator also uses his imagination to fill the gaps in the story. He seems to be aware of details that could not have been available even to his grandmother, Andor, or Zách Éva. He also comments on some details, stating when something is very clearly a lie (or what he assumes to be a lie), but on the other hand, he lacks the information required to determine if the facts are true, and thus he only warns the reader. In this practice, we can catch a glimpse of 'the interpreter' in the act. Michael Gazzaniga states that this is a "special device" that "reconstructs… brain events and in doing so makes telling errors of perception, memory and judgement" and also "tries to keep our personal story together" (Gazzaniga, 1998). The presence of the interpreter — if we can assume that the device was functioning in the case of each source of the story as well as with the narrator — makes the family history highly unreliable.

This problem results in the question of whether it is possible to use this kind of history as a basis for a new identity. As previously mentioned, the narration of the novel resembles the dynamics of psychoanalytic memory, which cannot be defined through cognitive models, because it unfolds from a "constructed reality, half memory, half fiction" (p. 184). However, according to Roger Kennedy, a "literal and objective knowledge of everything that took place in the past is neither possible nor necessary for understanding the subject's history" (Kennedy, 2010, p. 181). Based on this, it is possible to state that the narrator does not need a linear storyline let alone all the details to understand his family or his present situation. However, he is unable to see himself irrespective of the past, and that leads him to the realisation that also explains the title of the novel.

> *Mellettem bárki elfér.* Vagy bármi. Egy kövér, kocka alakú embert képzelek el, ahogy kitölti a saját kockáját, nincs mellette hely, minden az övé. […] Nem csak a múltnak kéne elférnie mellettem, ez jutott eszembe. (Grecsó, 2011, p. 272.)

> There is space beside me for anyone. Or anything. I imagine a fat, cube-shaped man, who utterly fills out his cube, there is no space next to him, and everything is his. […] But more should fit beside me than just my past, that is what I realised.

As an answer to this, and aligned with Kennedy's remark, Zách Éva replies in the following way:

> *Mit akar maga?* […] *Mire jó ez?* […] Ő egész életében bánta Domost, és egész életében örült neki, hogy megszabadult tőle. […] Éli, megéli, átéli, eltűri, hogy ez van, ez az ő sorsa. De én miért nem az enyémmel bajlódom? Van nekem olyan? Hányszor kérdezze még meg? (Grecsó, 2011, p. 278–279.)
>
> *What do you want?* […] *What is the meaning of all this* [investigating the past]? She has been feeling regret for Domos her whole life, and at the same time she has been happy to be rid of him. […] She feels and accepts these feelings, because that is her fate. But I must struggle with mine. Do I even have my own fate? How many times does she have to ask?

It is affirmed in the previous conversation that discovering the past can lose its main function and become an obsession. Although it would be possible to understand both the past and its connections to the present, the narrator cannot separate himself from the stories. After Zách Évas's panic attack, he slips into an alternative reality, where the old lady is his grandmother. Moreover, he does not only act as her grandson, but as the next passage reveals that he also believes in this lie for a short time.

> […] nem javítottam ki, nem helyesbítettem, hogy én igazából idegen vagyok, aki harmadszorra látja ezt az asszonyt. […] A szemközti lakásból vénasszony jött ki, azt kérdezte, ki vagyok, mit csinálok az Évike lakásában. Olyan magabiztosan néztem rá, hogy visszakozott, *a nagymamámat*, mondtam, *bevitték a kórházba*. (Grecsó, 2011, p. 258.)
>
> I did not correct him or say that I am only a stranger who had seen this old lady for the third time. Another granny rushed out from next door and asked me who I was and what I was doing in Évike's apartment. I looked at her with such confidence that she backed out. *My grandmother*, I said, *had been taken to the hospital*.

At the end of the book, the narrator's own life and Domos' love story converge completely. He waits for a woman at the same place where Domos had waited for Zách Éva decades ago. Since we do not know if Zách Éva ever arrived, the novel ends before the reader can learn whether or not the narrator's date ever arrived. With this ending, Grecsó leaves us in complete uncertainty, and the reader has to decide on their own if the narrator's life intertwines with that of Domos and submerges into the past for good, or if he manages to free himself of the reality of the old stories, and begin his own independent future.

5.0 Conclusion

My analysis clarifies that the fragments of the family history described in Grecsó's novel are based on highly unreliable sources, since the memory material is very drastically tailored. *Mellettem elférsz* provides examples of many of the variables that can inform the distortion of memory. The biographies of certain family members are blurred by lies, or silence, and as previously mentioned, the storytellers often intentionally change their testimonies in order to protect someone they love, or to restore their lost pride. However, it is difficult to distinguish their conscious lies from the silence that conceals memory due to trauma or shame. It follows that the recollection of past events and gaining objective knowledge about them is often not possible.

Although the stories about the past remain fragmented, the collected pieces are sufficient for the creation of a family history; moreover, they unfold the dynamics of remembering in the family: they expose the reasons behind the lies and the silence and contribute to how each individual revises whatever continuity they wish to establish between the past and the present. It follows that the

collected memory material could support the recreation of the narrator's identity. However, discovering the past becomes an obsession for him, as he ends up searching for meaningless details instead of using the accessible data for his original purposes. Based on this, it can be stated that both attempts to form a stable identity result in failure. The body cannot function as a stable basis for identity construction because physical attributes undergo constant changes. On the other hand, the narrator gets lost in the labyrinth of the memory fragments too, and instead of establishing a healthy distance between his own and his family members' lives, at the end of the book he starts to relive his grandfather's story himself. Through this act, he attempts exactly what all his sources did in the novel: creating an alternative reality free of mistakes and disappointments. However, he steps through the boundaries of the novel and narrative and starts 'playing' a real life act in which he can correct past mistakes and give Domos' story a different ending. As already mentioned, Grecsó leaves the reader in uncertainty and the novel ends before we can find out if the narrator's attempt leads to an independent future, or his life becomes a repetition of past failures.

References

Bergson, H., (1991). *Matter and Memory*. New York: Zone Books.

Caruth, C., (1995). *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. (pp. 3–12). Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.

Freeman, M., (2010). Telling Stories: Memory and Narrative. In Susanna Radstone and Bill Schwarz (Eds.), *Memory. Histories, theories, debates* (pp. 263–281). New York: Fordham University Press.

Freud, S., (1991). A Note upon the "Mystic Writing-pad". In Angela Richards (Ed.) *On Metapsychology: The theory of Psychoanalysis.* The Penguin Freud Library Vol. 11. (pp. 429–434). London: Penguin.

Gazzaniga, M., (1998). *The Mind's Past*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Kennedy, Roger (2010). Memory and the Unconscious. In Susanna Radstone and Bill Schwarz (Eds.), *Memory. Histories, theories, debates* (pp. 179–198). New York: Fordham University Press.

Leiris, M., (1984). *Manhood: A Journal from Childhood into the Fierce Order of Virility*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Rossington, M. & Whitehead, A., (2007). *Theories of Memory. The Reader*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.

Sutton, J.; Harris, C. B. & Barnier, A. J. (2010). Memory and Cognition. In Susanna Radstone and Bill Schwarz (Eds.), *Memory. Histories, theories, debates* (pp. 209–227). New York: Fordham University Press.

Tomkins, Silvan S. (1987). Shame. In Donald L. Nathanson (Ed.), *The Many Faces of Shame* (pp. 133–161). New York: Guilford.

Van der Kolk, Bessel A. – van der Hart, Onno (1995). The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma. In Cathy Caruth (Ed.), *Trauma. Exploration in Memory* (pp. 158–183). Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.

Warnock, M., (1987). *Memory*. London and Boston: Faber.

Wilson, Barbara A. (1998). 'When Memory Fails'. In Patricia Fara and Karalyn Patterson (Eds.), *Memory* (pp. 113 – 133). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Literature

Grecsó, Krisztián (2011). *Mellettem elférsz*. Budapest: Magvető.