



The Burden of Inherited Memory: Postmemory and Cultural Trauma in George Szirtes' *New & Collected Poems*

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the concept of memory and postmemory and inherited trauma in the collection of New & Collected Poems by George Szirtes' in the light of the theory of postmemory as developed by Marianne Hirsch. Although Szirtes' poetry has garnered significant scholarly interest in the areas of exile, migration, identity, and historical consciousness, the complex interplay between memory, postmemory and transgenerational trauma has been under-researched. The analysis is qualitative and interpretative, using a close reading method to study imaginative reconstruction of historical experience through poetic language, in the introductory material and a selection of poems from the first section of the collection. The analysis reveals that Szirtes sees memory not as a firsthand memory of lived experience, but as a process of mediation and inheritance of memory through family stories, a silence, family spaces, urban spaces, photographs, and visual images. The mnemonic structures have the power to convert individual memory into collective historical consciousness, which demonstrates that the collective historical memory of war, forced migration, exile, and the Holocaust continues to influence the identity and ethical imagination of later generations. The study further proposes that Szirtes' poetic vision is very close to Hirsch's theory of postmemory as it depicts inherited trauma as a mode of dealing with the past with an ethical dimension and an aesthetic dimension. This article foregrounds the interplay of memory, historical inheritance, and poetic representation and makes a contribution to the fields of memory studies, post-memory studies, trauma studies, and contemporary British poetry.

Keywords: George Szirtes, Memory, Postmemory, Inherited Trauma, Marianne Hirsch, Memory Studies, Contemporary British Poetry

INTRODUCTION

George Szirtes is a poet of exile, migration, history, violence and cultural memory in a unique position in contemporary British poetics. Having migrated to Britain with his family after the Hungarian Uprising in 1956, Szirtes, born in 1948 in Budapest, Hungary, wrote in English but imaginatively explored his Hungarian-Jewish heritage. His *New & Collected Poems* (2008) recovers over 40 years of his poetic output, which focuses on memory, displacement, history and identity. Instead of an ordered history of past events, the collection is used to reconstruct history as a series of disjointed memories, home spaces, images, urban environments and family stories, thereby creating a personal memory as a means to developing a collective historical consciousness. The themes of war, exile, the Holocaust and migration keep recurring in Szirtes' work, not only as historical events but as living presences that continue to influence later generations. In the preface, he notes that he was motivated to write poetry by his efforts to connect "reality-sense" and "historical-sense" and that he has been interested in "the living thrill of the visible present, and the invisible persistence of the past."

In the past 30 years, the interdisciplinary field of memory studies has greatly grown, with the works of Maurice Halbwachs (1992), Pierre Nora (1989), Jan Assmann (1995), Aleida



Assmann (2011), and Marianne Hirsch (1997, 2012) playing key roles. Their work has led to a significant reorientation from memory as an individual psychological phenomenon to memory as a cultural, historical and transgenerational process. Of these advancements, Hirsch's notion of postmemory is particularly significant in relation to how the descendants of trauma survivors inherit the memories of events they have not personally experienced. Postmemory is defined by Hirsch (2012) as the strong way in which traumatic experience is passed down through stories, images, silences and family narratives, allowing for later generations to recognise emotionally and imaginatively with the past. Memory is therefore not only a process of recollection, but also a process of reconstructing historical consciousness that is continually ongoing and will continue to be a significant part of identity from generation to generation. This theoretical framework has a great affinity to Szirtes' poetry. Exile is a theme he shared as a child, but many of the traumatic stories portrayed in his poems—such as the Holocaust, war time violence, and the persecution of European Jews—come before his own memory. These histories are passed down in bits and pieces – through family memories, family secrets, photographs, abandoned buildings, and repeated urban space that has become a site of cultural memory. In his poetry, he thus shows how inherited trauma can transcend the personal narrative and turn into an ethical experience of the collective historical suffering.

Furthermore, Szirtes always depicts memory as fraught and unreliable, as one of absence, fragment, and imaginative reconstruction, never of historical certainty. His poetry is especially ripe for the study of post memory because of such qualities. In spite of the wealth of secondary material on George Szirtes, most of the critical focus has been directed at the writer's life as an exile, his multilingualism, ekphrasis, urban images, visuality, translation practice and the depiction of Central European history. Previous research has explored his navigation of Englishness and Hungarian identity, his interaction with visual culture and his poetry in relation to past exile. Yet his poetic work as a whole has been about as little explored as the integrated theoretical relationship between memory and post memory. Trauma is often discussed as a solo biographical exile, and the possibilities of inherited familial memory and transgenerational historical experience are not often explored as a part of the imaginative architecture of his poetry. As a result, the ways in which Szirtes translates inherited trauma into poetic form are under-studied.

The present study seeks to fill this gap by exploring the interplay of memory, postmemory and inherited trauma in *New & Collected Poems*. The paper focuses on how Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory serves as the key analytical tool to examine the ways in which Szirtes enacts a poetic reconstruction of familial history, collective memory and historical violence. Recurring themes of domestic spaces, photographs, urban architecture, landscapes, family relations and silence are given special attention, as these acts as mnemonic sites that transmit traumatic histories across generations. In this way, the study claims that Szirtes' work in poetry goes beyond being a personal testimony and represents a more general poetics of historical remembrance based on imaginative reconstruction.

Thus, the main aim of this paper is to delve into the representation of memory, postmemory and inherited trauma in George Szirtes' *New & Collected Poems* from the theoretical perspective of Marianne Hirsch's concept of 'postmemory'. Specifically, the study aims to explore the ways in which traumatic experiences of war, the Holocaust, migration and exile become poetic narratives; to identify and analyse the symbolic and spatial structures that mediate the transmission of traumatic memories; and to examine how these structures can help build cultural identity and historical consciousness.



The importance of this work goes beyond a contribution to the study of Szirtes and affects other interdisciplinary areas such as trauma studies and memory studies. This article highlights the transgenerational transmission of historical trauma as a structuring principle of Szirtes' poetic imagination, whereas previous criticism has focused on exile and identity. The study employs the combination of literary analysis and postmemory theory to enrich understandings of the current British poetry scene and to show how poetry language can keep alive historical experience beyond the lives of those who lived it. Additionally, the study adds to the existing debates between literary studies and memory studies as it demonstrates the ways in which poetry processes inherited histories in a constantly and ethically reimagined fashion. The study is restricted to George Szirtes' *New & Collected Poems* (2008), and is focused on the poems which have an obvious or implicit rapport with memory, family history, exile, migration, war, historical trauma. While there are poems that are motivated by visual art, mythology, and other aesthetic issues, they are analyzed only as far as a contribution to the portrayal of memory and postmemory is concerned. The analysis is also limited in that it only uses the theory of postmemory by Hirsch as the main theory, with the theory of cultural memory being used only when needed to support the discussion.

Literature Review

George Szirtes is one of the most important living English poets whose poems continually explore the interrelated issues of exile, migration, history, memory and identity. A native of Hungary and exile in Britain after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, Szirtes straddles a unique position in the contemporary Anglophone poetry world. His work is testimony to the complexities of diasporic consciousness, to the tensions between personal remembrance and collective history, and between linguistic displacement and cultural belonging and between the private memory and the public trauma. As a result, his poetry has been the subject of ongoing scholarly study by literary scholars, as well as by scholars of memory, diaspora, trauma and visual culture.

Most research into Szirtes' works focused on his poetry, as viewed from an exile or migration perspective. With the experience of geographical displacement, his poetic imagination has always been negotiated by critics between the Hungarian historical consciousness and the British culture. Instead of exile being defined as a physical separation, Szirtes depicts it as a permanent, psychological and cultural state in which the experience of exile has altered the relationship of the individual with language, history and memory. His poetry will therefore challenge essentialist models of national identity by developing variable notions of subjectivity that are multilingual and historically contingent. In this way such readings have placed Szirtes in the general field of diasporic and transnational literature, focusing on the aesthetic potential of cultural hybridity and historical displacement (Sears, 2008).

John Sears' *Reading George Szirtes* (2008) is the single most important work on Szirtes scholarship; it is the first comprehensive critical examination of his literary career. According to Sears, Szirtes' poetry creates a unique style where the personal, the historical misfortune and the visual are complexly intertwined. A more fractured notion of the past is created through the use of memory, architectural space, visual image and interrupted narrative in Szirtes' works. Sears argues that this involvement with Central European history leads to "a poetics of uncertainty, absence, fragmentation, and imaginative reconstruction," one that allows readers to experience history not as an objective account, but as "an ongoing process of remembrance and interpretation. Sears' study is unquestionably essential since it serves to mark memory as



a major factor in structuring Szirtes' poetic imagination. However, its main focus is on aesthetics and historical awareness, not the passing of traumatic memory.

Later research has extended this conversation to explore Szirtes' ongoing work in the realm of visual culture. Many critics have proved that the photography, painting, architecture, sculpture and cinema are not mere decorative art references but are an essential part of his poetic language. These are visual media, mnemonic tools, which make the disjointed bits of historical experience imaginatively recoverable. These studies show that Szirtes always uses visual images to connect the gap between the lived and the remembered historical experience and to turn visual representation into a form of historical testimony. But these analyses tend to focus on questions of ekphrasis, transmediality, and aesthetic formality, and receive a comparatively small share of the attention when it comes to the affective processes by which trauma is transgenerational.

A second important strand of criticism has examined how exile, identity and historical awareness can be seen to be related in Szirtes' poetry. These studies argue that these circumstances of displacement create a multilevel identity in between languages, cultures and national histories. Focusing on memory, migration and historical ruptures, Szirtes does not yearn for a lost homeland but instead sees the negotiation of identity as a continual process. This scholarship has greatly enhanced the knowledge of the poet's diasporic imagination, in which individual identity is continuously being re-constructed in relation to historical and cultural memory. Yet autobiographical exile is usually the primary focus, and this tends to overlook the significance of inheritance – the passing of traumatic historical experience, through familial narratives, domestic spaces, photographs, silence, and intergenerational telling. The rise of memory studies as a multi-disciplinary field has offered key theories in the understanding of such processes.

In his fundamental work, Maurice Halbwachs (1992) has revolutionized the study of memory, stating that remembrance always takes place outside the individual, by showing how it is organized in a social way, in collective frameworks. Collective memory is essential to comprehend historical consciousness, as according to Halbwachs, personal memory is continually shaped by the social groups to which individuals belong. Building on this, Pierre Nora (1989) devised the notion of lieux de mémoire (sites of memory), which reveals the ways in which monuments, archives, landscapes, rituals, and cultural artifacts help to maintain an historical consciousness in the absence of living memory. These basic theories combined to create a concept of memory as a dynamic social and cultural process and not just a psychological phenomenon.

Basing themselves on these foundations, Jan Assmann (1995, 2011) and Aleida Assmann (2011) differentiated communicative memory from cultural memory, which consists in the way societies keep historical experience on the basis of symbols, literary texts, ritual, institutions and archival documents. Their work is particularly relevant in the field of literary studies as it focuses on the importance of cultural representation in the process of maintaining and passing down historical consciousness from one generation to the next. In this context literature is not just an act of art but a means of recollecting the past in a way that it can be rethought and rethought for readers of the present. Therefore, Szirtes' poetry – with its consistent interaction with history, visual imagery, and family stories – can be read as involved in broader processes of cultural memory.

The most significant theoretical advance related to the present study is that of postmemory as developed by Marianne Hirsch. But, as Hirsch first theorized in *Family Frames*



(1997), and further developed in *The Generation of Postmemory* (2012), descendants of trauma survivors frequently inherit potent memories of events they have never personally encountered. Such memories are passed on through pictures, family narratives, silence, family customs, and imaginative identification, and become so ingrained that they inform the identities of subsequent generations. Postmemory therefore goes beyond conventional historical knowledge and calls attention to the affective, ethical and imaginative connection between later generations and catastrophic historical events, especially the Holocaust. Hirsch's theory has had a significant impact on the fields of Holocaust literature, diaspora writing, migration narratives, postcolonial studies and trauma theory.

More recent studies have extended postmemory to the study of colonial violence, forced migration, refugees and transnational memory cultures (Erll, 2011; Rothberg, 2009). The way in which inherited trauma is mediated through family narratives is not the only way scholars now acknowledge it may be passed on. This interdisciplinary extension highlights the continued applicability of postmemory in the study of literature today. Cathy Caruth (1996) and Dominick LaCapra (2001) have also shown within the realm of trauma studies that traumatic experiences often don't get represented directly, but rather through disjointed narratives, repetition, silence, displacement, and symbolic imagery. Their scholarship has prompted literary scholars to investigate how literature stages aesthetic strategies that represent experiences that go beyond the conventional historical narrative. This type of theory is particularly relevant to Szirtes' poetry in which the highly discontinuous forms, visual metaphors, and elliptical narratives so many times invoke the presence of historical violence without offering simple historical reportage.

Although a considerable amount of research has been published on George Szirtes, there is still a notable gap in the theoretical analysis. Previous research recognizes the significance of memory, exile, visual culture and historical consciousness but comparatively few systematically differentiate lived memory and inherited memory, or use Hirsch's concept of postmemory as the main interpretive framework. Furthermore, there has been little focus on how family stories, images, domestic spaces, buildings, cities, and silences function as mnemonic devices that transmit traumatic experiences from one generation to the next. As a result, the complex interplay between memory, postmemory and inherited trauma in *New & Collected Poems* is under-examined.

Research Gap

This review of the scholarship has shown that although George Szirtes has been the subject of many scholarly studies as a poet of exile, migration, visual culture and historical consciousness, the transgenerational aspects of memory have not been explored through an in-depth investigation of postmemory theory. While many previous studies have focused on autobiographical displacement, aesthetic form and/or historical representation, few have explored the process of inherited trauma as it is mediated through family narratives, photographs, silence, domestic spaces, symbolic landscapes and imaginative reconstruction. Moreover, while Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory has become one of the most influential theories in contemporary memory research, its use in the context of Szirtes' *New & Collected Poems* is quite restricted.

This study fills that scholarly lacuna by providing a full postmemory reading of *New & Collected Poems*. It invokes Hirsch's theoretical perspective as well as the concepts of collective memory, cultural memory and trauma studies to claim that Szirtes remodels inherited historical trauma into an ethical and imaginative poetic discourse. This study shows that



memory in Szirtes' poetry is not limited to personal memory but becomes an intergenerational process where history continues to influence identity, cultural belonging and historical consciousness. The article does as such not only for Szirtes scholarship but also for memory and postmemory studies, trauma theory and for contemporary British poetry.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive research design to examine the representation of memory, postmemory, and inherited trauma in George Szirtes' *New & Collected Poems* (2008). Since the research seeks to explore the symbolic, historical, and affective dimensions of poetic language rather than establish empirical or statistical relationships, qualitative textual analysis provides the most appropriate methodological framework. The study is grounded in close reading, a well-established method in literary criticism that facilitates detailed examination of linguistic patterns, imagery, symbolism, metaphor, narrative voice, spatial representation, and historical references. Through close textual analysis, the research investigates how poetic form and imagery participate in the transmission of traumatic memory across generations.

The primary source of data comprises George Szirtes' *New & Collected Poems* (2008), a comprehensive volume that brings together poems from more than four decades of the poet's literary career. The collection includes poems from *The Slant Door* (1979), *November and May* (1981), *Short Wave* (1984), *The Photographer in Winter* (1986), *Metro* (1988), *Bridge Passages* (1991), *Blind Field* (1994), *Portrait of My Father in an English Landscape* (1998), *The Budapest File* (2000), *An English Apocalypse* (2001), *Reel* (2004), and the section entitled *New Poems* (2008). This chronological arrangement enables the study to trace the evolution of memory and inherited historical consciousness throughout Szirtes' poetic career.

The selection of poems is guided by purposive sampling. Rather than examining every poem in the collection, the analysis focuses on texts that explicitly or implicitly engage with themes of family history, exile, migration, the Holocaust, war, urban memory, photography, architecture, and intergenerational remembrance. Particular attention is devoted to recurring sequences such as *The Photographer in Winter*, *Metro*, *Bridge Passages*, *Blind Field*, *Portrait of My Father in an English Landscape*, *The Budapest File*, *An English Apocalypse*, and *Reel*, as these collections collectively represent Szirtes' sustained engagement with historical memory and inherited trauma.

The analytical procedure follows an inductive process of thematic textual interpretation. Initially, the selected poems are examined to identify recurring motifs associated with memory, including photographs, domestic interiors, family relationships, abandoned buildings, urban landscapes, journeys, silence, absence, ghosts, and historical references. These motifs are subsequently interpreted through the conceptual framework of postmemory to determine how they function as vehicles for the transmission of traumatic histories. Special consideration is given to the interaction between personal memory and collective history, the relationship between visible and invisible histories, and the symbolic significance of recurring spatial and visual imagery.

To ensure analytical rigor, the study employs triangulation between the primary poems, Szirtes' own reflections in the preface to *New & Collected Poems*, and relevant theoretical scholarship in memory studies. The poet's reflections concerning historical consciousness, visual language, and the concept of the "blind field" provide valuable contextual insights into his poetic philosophy without displacing the primacy of textual analysis. Secondary sources, including books and peer-reviewed journal articles on memory studies, trauma theory, and

George Szirtes' poetry, are used to contextualize and support the interpretation.



The study does not seek to reconstruct historical events or verify biographical details. Rather, it investigates how poetry imaginatively reconstructs inherited historical experiences and transforms them into ethical acts of remembrance. Consequently, the emphasis remains on literary representation rather than historical documentation.

Theoretical Framework

One of the most influential theories that formed the foundation for the present study is Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory, which is one of the most influential theories in the field of memory studies today. Hirsch's term was developed in her book, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (1997) and further developed in *The Generation of Postmemory* (2012) and refers to the way in which traumatic historical experiences are passed down from one generation to the next through stories, photographs, silence, ritual, and cultural practice. While direct memory is rooted in lived experience, postmemory is an intergenerational memory that is not directly experienced by the person but rather assumed as a traumatic memory that shaped his or her life.

For Hirsch (2012), postmemory is the relationship borne out between the "generation after" and the personal, collective and cultural trauma of those who came before. These memories are not directly remembered but lives on in the emotional, imaginative life of future generations as mediated memories. Thus, the trauma passes on not only as a factual memory, but also as a repetition of the narrative, as a visual image, affective identification, familial non-discourse, and symbolic reworking. Postmemory thus questions the dichotomy between memory and imagination, showing that what has been transmitted in the past can still affect the present.

Mediation is a key factor in Hirsch's theory. Traumatic events are not usually passed on in a coherent or complete story, but as bits of photographs, family tales, incomplete testimonies, domestic objects, inherited silences, common practice. Later generations must creatively reconstruct these fragments and assume moral responsibility for the histories they are helping to sustain, which they themselves have not discovered. Thus, postmemory does not simply refer to a psychological inheritance but is a cultural process that maintains the social and emotional relevance of historical trauma.

George Szirtes' *New & Collected Poems* are especially relevant to this theoretical point of view. The recollections of the Holocaust, war-torn Europe, the Hungarian Uprising in 1956, exile, migration and the breaking up of families are present as disjointed fragments throughout the collection, in the form of landscapes, buildings, photographs, interior domestic spaces, dialogues and repeated family images. Szirtes continually comes back to inherited histories that can never be contained within the limits of personal autobiography, and he turns into the random bits of family memory to explore the construction of collective historical memory. His poetic imagination thus corresponds to the ways Hirsch understands postmemory as a way for historical trauma to live on without being recollected.

Postmemory is even more evident in Szirtes' own comments on poetic creation. In the preface to *New & Collected Poems* he eschews concept of "identity" and portrays his poetry as attempting to balance "historical-sense" against "reality-sense. He also proposes the idea of the "blind field," a term coined by Roland Barthes, to describe the ways in which invisible histories are still present outside the scope of the poem's field of vision. For Szirtes, the "blind field" denotes the unseen force of obscure lives, historical violence and missing memories whose pressure is always felt on the poetry's language. Both theories highlight the continuity of



invisible histories that remain relevant to the experiences of the present day, and this conception of image memory falls under each view.

The main analytical framework employed is Hirsch's theory; however, the study also selectively borrows from larger memory studies to provide context to its interpretations. The social construction of remembrance is emphasized in the concept of collective memory developed by Maurice Halbwachs, and the theory of cultural memory developed by Jan Assmann, which describes how societies maintain historical experiences in cultural symbols, narratives and institutions. These complementary perspectives reveal the collective aspects of Szirtes' poetry but are secondary to Hirsch's theory as the primary interpretive lens for analyzing inherited trauma and intergenerational memory.

Informed by this framework, the current study investigates the ways in which the acts of inheritance and transformation of historical experiences into poetry are achieved by the presence of recurring motifs in Szirtes' work such as family, architecture, photography, urban space, silence, and visual imagery. It suggests that his poetry is not only a reminder of the past suffering but also that painful histories remain present in the imagination of future generations. This study uses the concept of 'postmemory' developed by theorist Dori Laub to uncover the ethical and aesthetic work of the poem as a space of historical transmission, cultural remembrance, and imaginative witness in *New & Collected Poems*.

4.1 Memory as the Reconstruction of the Past

The main aim of the study is to analyse the poetics of memory and postmemory in the work of George Szirtes as responses to the inherited historical trauma. Memory is not a passive act of recalling lived events, and not a nostalgic trip back in time, is immediately evident in the opening piece of *New & Collected Poems*. Rather, it can be seen as an imaginative act, a kind of "re-Labeling" of scattered histories, an interpretation and passing on from one generation to the next. The reader is introduced to Szirtes' poetic world in the introductory material, long before encountering individual poems, as a world haunted by the legacies of war, exile, of the Holocaust and of migration. The publisher's description describes his poetry as "haunted by his family's knowledge and experience of war, occupation and the Holocaust, as well as by loss, danger and exile" and as "a permanent tension between hope and catastrophe, which are created by these historical experiences.

This framing is especially noteworthy in relation to the theory of postmemory that was developed by Marianne Hirsch (2012). Traumatic experiences have descendants who often "inherit" the past in the form of narrativisation, not as memory, Hirsch argues. Stories, photographs, silences and cultural practices mediate such memories and enable future generations to imagine what they never saw. It is precisely this condition that is mirrored by Szirtes' poetic project. The collection is fragmented, re-constructing the past again and again in parts, images and emotional aftertaste; a sign of the imagination always intervening in the process of memory.

This idea of memory is further underlined by the epigraph from Wallace Stevens. Stevens invites the observer to "look round" at ordinary objects such as a book, a shoe and a "rotted rose", in which the materiality of everyday objects becomes a repository for temporal experience. These objects are so simple that they seem trivial, however they do ultimately represent the mnemonic process outlined by Hirsch when ordinary objects are given extraordinary historical significance through the traces of absent lives. The rose going bad represents the passing of time, and the book and shoe represent man's presence in the absence.



The collection thus becomes not a chronological record, but an encounter with an invisible history through the prism of memory that is interpretive.

The Preface elaborates this philosophical stance in a most impressive manner. In his own poetic evolution, Szirtes does not wish to make too simple a split between autobiography and history. Rather, he says his writing began to try to reconcile the “historical-sense” with the “reality-sense”, both of which would always be present in the visible world. This is an important observation as it reflects the conceptual dimension of memory and post memory. In Szirtes' writing, the present never stands alone, but is always determined by the past experiences that have been handed down and are half-remembered, but nonetheless present emotionally.

The most illuminating idea of the Preface is the "blind field," which is borrowed from Roland Barthes. In Szirtes' work, this idea is used to refer to those historical realities which are not perceived but nevertheless shape consciousness. The "blind field" is superficially connected with the visual representation, but at the same time it is a metaphor of inherited memory. Trauma from historical events, family histories and societal suffering may not be visible but can have a deep impact on subsequent generations. This conception is very similar to Hirsch's conception of postmemory as one that is imaginative, dealing with events that are not ones that can be remembered first hand. Thus, the so-called 'blind field' is a central poetic device with which Szirtes (re)displays forgotten histories.

Poems gathered together in *Poetry Introduction 4* (1978) carry these theoretical reflections into the practice of the poem. The speakers often hold ambiguous positions with respect to presence/absence, certainty/uncertainty, implying that the knowledge of history can only be a partial reconstruction. The poems do not recount history events, but rather suggestive imagery, symbolic landscapes and fragmented observation. These methods are not interested in providing a documentary realism, but rather invite the reader to engage in the process of meaning reconstruction, meaning that remains incomplete. This strategy is a good example of how Hirsch's postmemory is more about an imaginative investment than a factual recollection. Another important feature of the first poems is the way that domestic and quotidian spaces are treated. The setting of houses, rooms, streets, windows and common objects is seldom neutral. Rather they are mnemonic places of personal experience and shared history. It is the familiar world that thus becomes invested with historical associations and seemingly normal space becomes a storehouse of inherited memory. In this poetic move Szirtes shows how the traumatic past is not only written in public monuments or official archives, but lives on in the textures of the ordinary.

Moreover, the first poems constantly merge the personal identity with the collective historical part. The speaker of the lyric is rare in exclusively personalizing memory. Rather, recollection often comes in the guise of family ties, family narratives, or cultural awareness. Such representations support Hirsch's argument of the relationality of postmemory. The individual's memory is not solitary but rather emotional and a result of experiences shared through generations. In Szirtes' poetry, the family's story is thus entangled in larger European stories of migration, persecution and displacement.

Visual perception is also an important aspect in the reconstruction of memory in these poems. Images are rarely decorative; they often save parts of experiences which are not amenable to straightforward narration. This is a visual orientation that relates to Szirtes' training as a painter, and the presence of photographs, landscapes, architecture, and material objects throughout his pieces. Photos transform to other historical records that can capture feelings for



which standard historical accounts often do not account. According to Hirsch, one of the central "mediating structures" by which traumatic memory is passed on from generation to generation is the visual representation.

The first book of *New & Collected Poems* consequently sets out memory as a process of reconstruction rather than remembrance. The poems don't aim for chronological completeness, instead they create history in fragments, symbols, spatial images, and traces of emotions that have been passed on. These poetic strategies enable memory to become an ethical event of recuperating history, in which forgotten voices and hidden experiences can re-enter the contemporary consciousness. This imaginative reconstruction is very close to the main task of the present study, which is to prove that Szirtes' poetry transcends an autobiographical recollection in order to engage in a postmemorial process of dealing with inherited trauma. From this point of view, the first poems are not only personal lyrics, but cultural remembrances. They show how histories are inherited and can continue to affect identity regardless of how distant they are in time and space, and demonstrate how language, imagination, and poetic form can play a role in the survival of the past. In poetry, then, memory is neither forgotten nor repressed, and the invisible stories of exile, violence, and family disappearing can be imaginatively retrieved by future generations, as Szirtes does.

4.2 Inherited Trauma and Familial Memory

A most fascinating aspect of George Szirtes' *New & Collected Poems* is the way he repeatedly explores the inherited trauma through familial memory. The previous section showed that memory in Szirtes is an imaginative reconstruction of the past, but this discussion will demonstrate that it is an imaginative reconstruction based on the intergenerational. Not only are the memories in the poems shaped by the poet's family, but in the repeated gestures, the domestic rooms, the absences of history, they also reveal a connection to the larger histories of violence and displacement. In this way, Szirtes' poetry represents the concept of postmemory as theorised by Marianne Hirsch (2012), in which descendants are emotionally, culturally and imaginatively passed traumatic histories.

It is a heritage that is clearly emphasised in the introductory pages of the collection. The volume itself is less concerned with Szirtes as refugee or immigrant poet, and more interested in the fact that his work is "haunted by his family's knowledge and experience of war, occupation and the Holocaust, as well as by loss, danger and exile. These experiences are not portrayed as historical events but as ongoing presence which influence the emotional and imaginative world of the poems. The focus on the family's experience instantly moves memory from the realm of personal memory to the realm of collective memory - memory as inheritance - the very thing Hirsch calls postmemory.

This emphasis is reflected in Szirtes' Preface, which is a reflection on the gradual development of his historical awareness. His poetry was no longer looking for a stable personal identity; he writes but was increasingly trying to find an "amalgam of reality-sense and historical-sense. When he comes back to Hungary, he is not only faced with geographical landscapes but also with "buildings and streets and bullet holes in walls, the world of the missing and a clutch of dead relatives. In these photographs, the past lives on in the present, making places where memory is stored. The missing relatives hold a particular place as they represent history that has been passed on via family memory and not personal recollection. Hirsch contends that postmemory is a "fragmented" memory; it is not a story. Family photos, unfinished conversations, passed-down artifacts and silences become the means through which future generations can envision historical events that they did not experience. It is exactly this



way, in this poetic imagination, that Szirtes works. The dead are rarely depicted but rather present by being left behind in the humdrum of everyday existence. Such remembrance is therefore an interpretative act, in which the absence often is more compelling than the presence. These forms of indirect transmission of memory are repeated throughout the poems in *The Slant Door*. Domestic interior, family houses, doors, windows, furniture, gardens and household objects are mnemonic spaces, where private experience meets historical consciousness. The title, *The Slant Door*, is suggestive symbolically. A slant or oblique door indicates not the full access but rather partial access, whereas a door normally denotes entry and transition. Memory also is incomplete – the past can be approached but not fully recovered. This symbolism is very similar to what Hirsch sees as the imagination and emotional identification that always shape inherited memory.

In most of the early poems, family relations do not have sentimentality. Rather, kinship is used as a repository of past history. Experiences are handed down to younger generations, and parents or other older relatives become caretakers of them. The family thus becomes a double space – a place of love and a place of the transmission of history. Everyday family dynamics thus gain a more historical dimension in that they hold memories of exile, migration, persecution and loss.

This process is made more apparent in the poem sequence which appears later in the volume under Reel, in particular that of "My Fathers. It seems beyond the scope of *The Slant Door* as far as its chronological order is concerned; but, as it is included in the collected edition, it can explain an imaginative pattern already found in the early poems. This first section describes a series of father figures:

‘My fathers come and go / Their history and fabled occupations...’

When the fathers are plural, so too is the usual autobiography. Memory is filled with multiple ancestral presences, rather than just one paternal one, and the lives of these ancestors are filled with history and imagination. The father's gestures—of "walking" the child over a field "like a black bird"—are at once recollections of childhood family scenes, and symbolic acts of historical guardianship. This personal affection is thus connected with historical vulnerability, which is passed down from one generation to the next. In a way the father's body not only carries the child but also the burden of collective memory.

From Hirsch's point of view, such images represent the affective aspect of postmemory. It is not only facts from the past that are passed on, but emotional experience itself. Family gestures take on symbolic qualities since they are expressing historical conditions that are not fully articulated. The consequence is an emotional flow that goes beyond the time line of experience. Szirtes' preoccupation with silence is another major element of his family memory art. Trauma is often encrypted, rather than testified to, in families impacted by war, genocide and forced migration. Hirsch names silence as one of the hallmarks of postmemory because descendants often have patchy stories that are broken up by an emotional emptiness. This condition is introduced several times by Szirtes' poetics, showing a bit of understatement. He seldom depicts violence directly, instead often focusing on the effects of violence: empty rooms, missing family, changed cities or interrupted home lives. Thus silence becomes an active narrative method which calls for the reconstruction of the missing historical context by the reader.

The poet's visual imagination enhances this process of inheritance. The painter turned researcher, Szirtes often translates scenes from memory into visual images, which are carefully composed. In many ways, these photographs are like family photos, retaining moments that



both show and hide history. Photographs have had a special role in postmemory, as Hirsch has pointed out, as they bring emotional closeness to events that are not directly remembered. Photographic principle is carried over into poetic language by Szirtes. His attention to detail invites the reader to think about common items that have significance in history not immediately apparent.

Another important link is between family memory and the geographical displacement. The first few pages remind the reader that Szirtes was a refugee in Britain since the Hungarian Uprising of 1956, at the age of eight. But all the poems avoid telling just a purely autobiographical story of exile. Migration rather becomes an inherited historical state passed down through the generations. Hungary as a place is not so much a geographical home as an imaginative one, created through family memories, recurrent images and feelings. Thus transnational trauma is passed on to the next generation and forms part of the cultural identity. There is a lot of ethics in this poetic approach. In reconstructing family memory instead of the historical events themselves, Szirtes attends to the historical responsibility as opposed to historical certainty. His poems call readers to engage in remembering lost lives, lives cut off by war, persecution and displacement. This is what participation is: an aspect of Hirsch's postmemory is an ethical witnessing. Later generations are held responsible because they become victims of the emotional and cultural impact of the trauma and not because they suffered the trauma directly.

As far as the research purpose of the present study is concerned, the following observations show that inherited trauma is one of the main organizing structures of the poetic imagination of Szirtes. Memory is passed down via family ties, domestic places, fleeting images and heretical silence, in which historical experience outlasts the lifetime of those who experienced it. The poems do not portray the past as closed or as something to be recovered, but rather as a reminiscence of the fragmentary nature of the past that lingers in contemporary consciousness. Familial memory therefore is not only an esthetic form of performance but also an ethical performance that keeps on constructing identities, even though the memories are forgotten.

Considering this, Szirtes's poetry can be seen to expand upon Marianne Hirsch's theoretical concept of postmemory and create a unique poetic expression. Heritage of war, exile and loss is neither remembered nor nostalgically celebrated. Rather, their imaginations are recreated by language and poetry becomes a kind of living archive of intergenerational remembrance. Through this *New & Collected Poems* shows that family memory is not only a documentation of the personal experience, but also an important medium that serves to keep collective historical trauma culturally and ethically alive for future generations.

4.3 Domestic Space, Urban Landscapes, and Memory

George Szirtes' *New & Collected Poems* proves that memory can be maintained not only by the human memory but is materialised in domestic and urban environments. In the first few works in the collection, houses, streets, rooms, windows, bridges, and cityscapes serve as mnemonic landscapes, which cling to the memory of historic violence, displacement, and familial experience. These spaces are not just places in the physical world, but are symbolic places where individual memory can meet collective history. The buildings and streets and bullet holes in walls confront the author upon his return to Hungary, as Szirtes writes in the Preface: "Architecture itself is witness to historical trauma."

This spatial representation is very similar to the concept of postmemory as proposed by Marianne Hirsch, in which the traumatic histories are conveyed not only through verbal



testimony but also through material and cultural environments. In Szirtes' poetry, domestic interiors thus become places where memories of the past are lived on through the generations. Common objects, spaces and everyday surroundings elicit emotional responses that are not exclusively personal, but remind the reader that history is not merely the past and that it lives on in everyday life. The recurring imagery of doors, windows and thresholds is also a symbol of the liminal nature of the relationship between the past and the present, implying that memory can always be partial, mediated and imaginative.

Similar functions occur in the context of urban landscapes. Cities are not only mapped in geographical space, but also as living archives that harbor visible, yet invisible histories. The streets and buildings keep the legacy of war, migration, and exile, and allow the past and present to co-exist. Thus, Szirtes using the physical space as a dynamic element in the process of historical remembrance. His poetic landscapes are witnesses to experiences not always written into official histories, and his poems remind his readers of the moral imperative of remembering the displaced or the silenced by political violence.

The household and the urban space are important mechanisms of the transmission of the inherited trauma from the point of view of the present study. They represent what Hirsch calls the affective continuity between generations: experiences do not need to be remembered; they can be carried over through material environments. The spatiality of Szirtes' poetry thus indicates that memory is a fundamentally spatial construct, that houses carry family histories, cities hold collective trauma, and that landscapes provide eternal monuments for culture and memory. Through the inclusion of history in familiar settings, the poet reveals that history is never 'gone' from within the spaces people live in, and thus expands postmemory not to just the family, but also the cultural landscape.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to examine the portrayal of memory, postmemory and inherited trauma in *New & Collected Poems*: George Szirtes' poetry from the theoretical perspective of postmemory as proposed by Marianne Hirsch. The study shows that memory in Szirtes' poems is not merely about recollection of lived past, but an imaginative reconstruction of pasts passed on through generations, by examining these selected poems in relation to the poet's *Preface* from the first section of the collection. A close examination of the poetry shows that the poet repeatedly turns everyday memories, family stories, household environments, and urban environments into strong mnemonic places, where the personal and the historical collide. The results suggest that inherited trauma is one of the main organizing principles of Szirtes' poetic imagination. The poems do not describe what actually happened, but instead evoke the emotional and psychological impact of war, exile, migration, and loss by using symbolic imagery, visual perception and spatial representation. Family relations become important means of historical transmission, silence, absence and ordinary objects become important symbols for the marks of memories that cannot be fully articulated.

Thus, Szirtes demonstrates that the inheritance of violence is not just one of the past, but one that continues to affect the identities and lives of later generations through affective and imaginative inheritance. The study also shows how domestic interior and urban landscape are not only the background of the emergence of historical memory but also the active subject of the process of preservation. Traces of political violence and displacement are visible and invisible on houses, streets, buildings, windows and architecture, which serve as the medium and repository of cultural remembrance. The spatial images, in turn, confirm Szirtes's own idea of a connection between "historical-sense" and "reality-sense," and between the present and



the histories that are contained in day-to-day places. The poet's concept of the "blind field" also shows that the most important historical facts often lie beyond our immediate sight, and thus escape our consciousness until we imagine them and make them real.

In the context of the theory of postmemory as proposed by Marianne Hirsch, the poems can be seen as enacting postmemory through the medium of family narratives, images, silence, architecture and cultural memory. The collection therefore seeks to broaden the traditional conceptions of memory, to demonstrate how memory can be produced by ethical acts of imagination by those who were not present at the event. In this way, Szirtes' poetry moves from individual remembrance to social and historical responsibility to the reader, urging them to take up the lives and histories that are not their own to explore lives that have been forgotten and histories that have been obscured but that still affect contemporary consciousness. The current study also adds to the scholarly work on George Szirtes, which tends to focus exclusively on exile and identity; it explores instead the interwoven interplay of memory, postmemory, and inherited trauma. Previous research on his multilingual identity, his use of visual aesthetics and his depictions of displacement have shown that these themes are all intricately linked to a more profound discussion of transgenerational memory. A productive approach of using Hirsch's postmemory theory to explain the ethical and aesthetic aspects of Szirtes' poetic project thus opens up fresh ways of engaging with the poet's work on history, identity and remembrance.

Though the study does not cover the entire material of the book and selected poems from the first section of *New & Collected Poems*, it poses some avenues for future research. Future research could focus on later volumes, such as *The Photographer in Winter*, *Blind Field*, *The Budapest File*, and *Reel*, to explore the evolution of Szirtes' portrayal of postmemory throughout his work as a poet. Comparative studies can also be conducted with other contemporary poets who write about Holocaust memory, migration and transgenerational trauma to enrich the interdisciplinary discussion between literary criticism, trauma studies and memory studies.

Overall, George Szirtes' *New & Collected Poems* proves to be a rich poetic repository of inherited memory. The collection shows that poetry has a power to hold onto moments that are not easily told in history, through its interwoven personal memory, family history, visual imagination and historical awareness. In his ability to turn inherited trauma into an ethics and an imaginative discussion, Szirtes not only marks the past, but also guarantees that the human dimension it has retained will continue to resonate through the ages.

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