

“Memory Lives Inside Us”:  
Writing as Memory Traces in *The Secret Staircase*

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*The Secret Staircase* is the title given to an installation presented by Caroline Isgar and Michèle Roberts at the Foundling Museum of London in 2008, and also to the accompanying book, a collection of Isgar’s drawings and Roberts’s eighteen narrative pieces, meant as a souvenir of the exhibition. Roberts tells the story of a daughter’s recollection of her childhood and her life with her mother on the occasion of the latter’s approaching death. Each piece is inspired by an object belonging either to the past or to the experience of the mother’s confinement in a hospice. Roberts’s contribution to the installation constitutes a memory text in its own right, and suggests that writing is the actual trace that can bring the past to life and the means by which the daughter comes to terms with the mother figure.

Keywords: trace; memory text; Michèle Roberts; mother-daughter bond

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“La memoria vive en nuestro interior”:  
la escritura como huella de la memoria en *The Secret Staircase*

*The Secret Staircase* es el título de la exposición presentada por Caroline Isgar y Michèle Roberts en el Foundling Museum de Londres en 2008, y también el del libro que la ilustra, una colección de los dibujos de Isgar y dieciocho narraciones breves, proyectados como souvenir de la exposición. Roberts cuenta los recuerdos de infancia de una hija junto a su madre con ocasión de la inminente muerte de ésta. Cada texto se inspira en un objeto que pertenece al pasado o a la experiencia de confinamiento en el hospital. La contribución de Roberts constituye en sí misma un texto de la memoria y sugiere que la escritura es la verdadera huella que devuelve el pasado a la vida y el medio por el cual la hija se reconcilia con la figura materna.

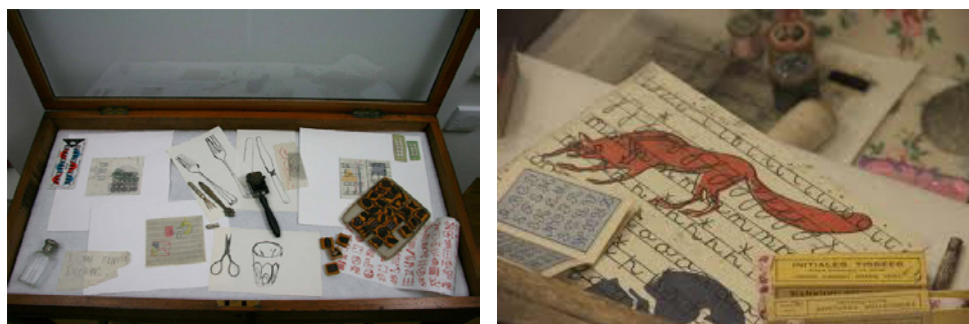
Palabras clave: huella; texto de la memoria; Michèle Roberts; vínculo madre-hija

I see it—the past—as an avenue lying behind;  
 a long ribbon of scenes, emotions.  
 (Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past,” [1939] 2002: 81)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Between April and June 2008, the visual artist Caroline Isgar and the writer Michèle Roberts exhibited a joint installation entitled *The Secret Staircase* at the Foundling Museum in London.<sup>1</sup> Isgar and Roberts took their inspiration from a collection belonging to the museum which consisted in a number of familiar objects left for babies by their mothers in the hope of their being recognised by their children in later years, and the pair created both prints and text to accompany them. Isgar’s work included drawings reproducing animal images with a strong oneiric component inspired by folklore and legend, children’s handwriting and woodblocks, whereas Roberts’s texts were eighteen short pieces which evoked a daughter’s childhood memories prompted by domestic objects, meant to help her accept her mother’s approaching death. Both types of material worked in the installation as mnemonic tools to recover the past. In this essay I will focus on Roberts’s literary pieces and argue that they constitute what critics in memory studies have termed a *memory text*. More specifically, I shall study how her narrative sketches perform memory, inscribing traces of the past on the blank page creating a memory archive. Each piece ends with the writer’s own version of a nursery rhyme, which connects the child’s past and the adult woman’s repressed feelings for her mother at that moment. In this light, I am also interested in showing how Roberts’s composite text fosters the reconciliation between mother and daughter, separated from one another by a generation gap.

Figure 1. “The Secret Staircase” Exhibition, Foundling Museum, London, 2008. Details.  
 (Isgar and Roberts 2008). © Caroline Isgar



<sup>1</sup> This research is part of a larger project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (MINECO) entitled “Nuevos parámetros críticos en torno al concepto de la huella y su aplicación a la literatura reciente en lengua inglesa” (FFI2013-44154-P). *The Secret Staircase* was later exhibited at the Rook Lane Arts Centre in Frome, Somerset, to commemorate International Women’s Day in 2012.

I contend that *The Secret Staircase* privileges the connection between memory and the emotions, proposing an account of memory as an essential affective capacity, on the one hand. On the other hand, Roberts’s text in particular foregrounds the mother-daughter bond, situating the discussion in the context of feminist readings of narrative and memory.

## 2. HISTORY, MEMORY, WRITING

The past has traditionally been related to the workings of history and memory. History is generally regarded as the public and official record of events that transcend individual lives, whereas memory tends to be associated with the private and personal capacity to reconstruct the past. *The Secret Staircase* explores the dynamics of memory through the forms of art and narrative, and through these traces—drawings and writing—it suggests the existence of a past that never was. From that perspective, and focusing on Roberts’s text, I will argue that writing becomes the trace that constructs memory in the absence of a real past. In the next pages I will focus on the key findings in the field of memory studies that support this view.

In *The Past is a Foreign Country* David Lowenthal affirms that the past plays an essential role in processes of identity formation—“[r]emembering the past is crucial for our sense of identity” (1985, 197)—, and that memory contributes to this end by, for example, turning public events into personal experiences, that is, turning history into memory. He explains how the latter takes us back to childhood whereas history refers to a former past. Lowenthal enumerates some of the dimensions of memory that might be potentially useful for this study. Memory links the personal and the communal, and is supported by traces, usually physical remnants of the past that require interpretation (1985, xxii). It is those traces that tend to bridge the gap between past and present. Following R. G. Collingwood’s *The Idea of History* (1956), Lowenthal affirms that the past does not exist and that, in spite of relying on memory traces, it can never be relived. At most, it is only partially accessible and knowable, and through recollection, experienced. He is specifically interested in memorial knowledge, in as far as it has a bearing on who we are, on our sense of identity: “The need to use and reuse memorial knowledge, and to forget as well as to recall, force us to select, distil, distort, and transform the past, accommodating things remembered to the needs of the present” (1985, 194). Lowenthal dissects the memory phenomenon and distinguishes between three related concepts: *habit*, *recall* and *mementoes*. All of them can be found in different degrees in Roberts’s accompanying text to *The Secret Staircase* and, taking them in the same order, each is gradually more related to the emotions and the affections: “Habit embraces all mental residues of past acts and thoughts, whether or not consciously remembered. Recall, more limited than habitual memory but still pervasive, involves awareness of past occurrences or states of being. Mementoes are cherished recollections purposely salvaged from the greater

mass of things recalled. This hierarchy resembles relics: everything familiar has some connection with the past and can be used to evoke recollection” (1985, 194). These elements of memory are invariably connected, according to Lowenthal, with age and life experience, and have been scrutinised by other critics, like Paul Ricoeur, who similarly distinguishes between *habit* and *memory*. The former refers to the general act of remembering, and the latter to distinct recollections (2004, 24).

From a phenomenological standpoint, Ricoeur comprehensively studies the memory/history dyad in *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004). He begins by offering a philosophical overview of the memory phenomenon, from classical to contemporary approaches. His starting point is that memory is the only link to the past, and argues that there is a compelling relationship between memory and corporeality, on the one hand, and memory and images, on the other. In his view, both positive bodily experiences and ordeals like illness, wounds and physical trauma, leave traces in our memory (2004, 40). Ricoeur’s association of memory-image refers back to Plato’s *eikōn* and is also inspired by the Derridean rendering of the Platonic presence of the absent, understood as the recollection of what once was (memory) and as the enactment of a reality (image, or else imagination) (2004, 44). He follows Jacques Derrida’s models of memory (*Of Grammatology* 1967), who distinguishes between “typographic”—persons, events and objects—, “iconographic”—or the presence of the former in the mind—and “engrammatological” traces—referring to the gap between the present image and the absent original (Krell 1990, 165). Similarly, Ricoeur’s approach supports a threefold use of the concept of “trace,” namely “trace written on a material support; affection-impression ‘in the soul’; corporeal, cerebral, cortical imprint” (2004, 15). Reading closely both Platonic and Aristotelian sources, Ricoeur centres on what constitutes for him the basis of the critical reading of trace: the origin and function of written traces and the relationship between the “impression” of traces and the affections. Reading Plato’s *Phaedrus* he makes a distinction between the graphic component of writing and “the eikastic component of the image by virtue of the metaphor of the wax impression” (2004, 13). Ricoeur also describes the imprint of the memory trace on the affections—the Aristotelian *pathos*—by means of which the shock of a particular event is experienced and leaves an indelible mark on our soul. In Ricoeur’s view, literature is used to illustrate memory processes, like evocation—*mneme* or “affection,” “the unexpected appearance of a memory” (2004, 26)—and recollection—*anamnesis*—or the conscious search for memory traces.

It is Maurice Merleau-Ponty, though, who explicitly relates the notion of trace to bodily sensation, thus underlining the physical dimension of memory. He claims that the body is memory’s mediator, in its function as the medium of communicating with time and space (1958, 210). In his view, the body allies with memory in animating the present, and therefore, in bringing the past back to life. In spite of this connection of materiality-perception and time-space, the act of remembering is never complete.

Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between “to perceive” and “to remember,” claiming that “[t]o remember is not to bring into the focus of consciousness a self-subsistent picture of the past; it is to thrust deeply into the horizon of the past and take apart step by step the interlocked perspectives until the experiences which it epitomises are as if relived in their temporal setting” (1958, 26). The problem of memory derives from the attempt to distinguish between what is perceived—“the visible” in *Phenomenology of Perception*—and the evocation of memories—which he also refers to as “illusory perception” (1958, 23). He elucidates that there is always a “hollow,” “a space where time is made” (Krell 1990, 103)—similar to Derrida’s engrammatological trace—that prevents full knowledge of the past. Krell identifies such a liminal space with the body (and perceptions) and writing, each of which determine, but also grant, our access to the past.

John Frow gives a new turn to the memory-trace association in *Time and Commodity Culture* (1997). He reads critically Pierre Nora’s concept of *lieux de mémoire*, or *sites of memory*, and focuses on the modes of memorialisation and the institutions that preserve memory. He includes within this group various places and forms such as “museums, archives, cemeteries, festivals, anniversaries, treaties, depositions, monuments’ sanctuaries, fraternal orders” (Frow 1997, 221). In short, he is interested in the “material mediation of memory” (1997, 222) and the methods by which the past can be accessed once memory fades. Writing is often the means of this material instantiation of memory in Frow’s view:

Rather than being an external support or implement in relation to memory, the activity of writing is a kind of memorization itself, or at least is intimately bound up with it. Thus, on the one hand, “the symbolic representations that we call writing are no more than cues or triggers for the memorial ‘representations’ . . . upon which human cognition is based”; and, on the other, “anything that encodes information in order to stimulate the memory to store or retrieve information is ‘writing’.” (1997, 224-225)

He argues in favour of an organic and material reading of memory by using the metaphor of the archive—as the place where memory is physically stored—, which further leads him to two other related metaphors: that of the wax writing tablet, or *tabula rasa*, and that of the *thesaurus*, another image for the storage of information. In adopting this model of classic undertones Frow supports the idea that memory is not the actualisation of the physical remnants of the past, but the construction of the past as it is dictated by present conditions and circumstances: “My figure, then, is that of the logic of textuality: a logic of autonomous narrative order and necessity which takes the form of structural symmetry and the reversibility of time” (1997, 228). According to this logic, forgetting—and illusions of memory, if we evoke Merleau-Ponty’s terminology above—would be an integral part of the act of memory construction.

Other critics, like Annette Kuhn, have contributed decisively to develop this notion of the narrative or textual nature of memory. She has been concerned in the last few years with what narratives of the past tell us about our lives, but also with what they leave out (Kuhn 1995, 2). She has coined the expression *memory work* to refer to this restitution of the past which finds material support in varied forms such as writing, drawing, sculpting or photography. In *Family Secrets* Kuhn explains that the nature of memory work is analogous to archaeology or detective work in so far as those carrying it out must decipher clues and thus reconstruct the past from the interpretation of traces (1995, 4). In later works she expands on this notion, exploring how it raises doubts and elicits questions about the truthfulness of the past: "Memory work undercuts assumptions about the transparency or the authenticity of what is remembered, taking it not as 'truth' but as evidence of a particular sort: material for interpretation, to be interrogated, mined, for its meanings and its possibilities" (Kuhn 2010, 303). As mentioned above, Kuhn examines the narrative structure of memory, and develops the concept of *memory text*, most useful due to its fragmentary character but also to its complexity and complementarity. Interestingly, she suggests that the memory text refuses the linearity of historical time in favour of a random structure: memory, and it is therefore a form of narration that does not conform to a pattern of causality (2010, 299).

More recently, Astrid Erll has also affirmed that literature is a medium of cultural memory (2011, 144), which takes us back to Ricoeur's association of memory and imagination. He states that genres and literary forms "fulfil a multitude of mnemonic functions, such as the imaginative creation of past life-worlds, the transmission of images of history, the negotiation of competing memories, and the reflection about processes and problems of cultural memory" (2011, 145). Literature works very much like memory, since both form condensed *memory images* through which they create meaning. Both include narrative processes as well: remembering relies on individual, and sometimes collective, narrative accounts that take the past as origin and proceed till the present. In this sense, Ricoeur uses the term "emplotment" to refer to this capacity of narrative to provide intelligibility by means of stories (1982, 31). The same idea could be applied to the nature of memory.

The material act of writing in Michèle Roberts's pieces in *The Secret Staircase*, that is, the inscription of childhood memories on the page, invokes the two senses traditionally associated with memory. Firstly, the written page is taken as a surface on which memory is inscribed, and stands for the metaphors of the wax, the seal or the writing tablet (Ricoeur 2004, 51). Secondly, the whole set of Roberts's sketches plays the function of a thesaurus, or archive, which holds or stores memories. In both cases, memory is called forth by means of metaphors and images, and by physical traces. Roberts's string of quotidian objects in her sketches represent the link between the elusive past that cannot be physically restored and its vestiges or traces in the present, brought to life through other means, like allusion or recodification.

### 3. FEMINISM AND MEMORY STUDIES

Feminism has pioneered in stressing the significance of the recuperation of memory and history for women, both as a collective and as individuals. The purpose of feminist historians and writers has in this respect been similar, reclaiming the importance of memory, both orally and in written form, in representing women’s lives in the public and private spheres. An attempt to provide a full picture of the past needs to include women’s contributions. Critically speaking Judith Fetterley’s image of the *resisting reader* can be used to argue that texts (memory-texts included) need to be interpreted through processes of recodification, figuration and reconstruction (1978). In general terms, this act of resistance defines the concerns of women’s studies, and more particularly the work of feminist literary critics, psychoanalysts and historians alike. Thus, for example, reading the work of the historians Margaret Lourie, Domna Stanton and Martha Vicinus, Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith contend that feminist scholarship is a form of “countermemory,” in charge of rescuing women’s (hi)stories from oblivion and forgetting (2007, 224). Memory is transmitted by a witness whose experience faithfully represents the concerns of feminist criticism, by bridging the gap between the personal and the political, the individual and the collective. Thus, women’s studies and memory studies share the belief that the contestation of the past is a necessary step to understanding and accepting the present. I contend that feminist historiography, psychoanalysis and literature gravitate towards the mother figure, represented both in real and fictional terms, in order to explore the role of memory in resituating the past. Memory has been associated with both history and imagination before, Ricoeur’s and Frow’s notions of memory as archive being the starting point. In its bodily nature, the concern for memory fits successfully in the areas of feminist psychoanalysis—regarding the disavowal of Freudian readings of the mother—, historiography—in relation to the recuperation of historical women and figures of female ancestry—and literature—for example by blurring the distinction between history and story, or by taking women’s memoirs as a case in point.

Linda Anderson (1990) uses Toni Morrison’s emblematic novel *Beloved* (1987) to illustrate memory’s complex web of interrelations. Set against the backdrop of the mid-nineteenth-century historical experience of slavery, this story of a daughter who has been killed by her mother and whose ghost comes physically back to life to join (and eventually destroy) her, faithfully represents the memory-history association at the three levels suggested above:

History becomes in the novel the series of stories which the characters tell themselves and each other about their lives, stories which move into and out of each other, merge and overlap. Memory reveals the complex formations of history within the characters; how the subject is constituted in and through history. But the process of remembering also highlights the past as not past, not finished, but as continuously reaching into the present and beyond, into the future. (Anderson 1990, 138)

The same reference to *Beloved* is chosen by Marianne Hirsch in *The Mother/Daughter Plot* (1989) to illustrate how the traditional plot of the family romance, inherited from Freud, can be disavowed. Hirsch affirms that *Beloved* underlines the sense of loss as it revises the classic tale of Demeter and Persephone, sequestered by patriarchal culture and forced to comply with the “natural” cycles of growth (1989, 5). Morrison’s novel obliterates *Beloved*’s voice but creates another type of discourse, completely material and bodily, which clearly states the presence of the absent. *Beloved*’s grotesque body remains a visible trace of the past as it was not. The whole story is narrated by *Beloved*’s sister, Denver, who is both witness and improvised historian.

Feminist thinkers like Nancy Chodorow (1978), Adrienne Rich (1995), Luce Irigaray (1993) and Julia Kristeva (1980) have argued in different ways that to talk about mother-daughter bonding entails an act of reappraisal of the past, of going back to a preoedipal period, a time previous to the daughter’s inscription in the world of patriarchal culture. Hence Rich’s and Chodorow’s attention paid to the mother-daughter unwritten story, a necessary process in the path to identity formation, or Irigaray’s and Kristeva’s projects to imagine a pre-symbolic woman’s language, which challenges the economy and the imagery of phallogocentric discourse. In the work of feminist critics, the search for traces of the mother is often charged with nostalgia. This concept has been the object of scrutiny of scholars in memory studies, like David Lowenthal in *The Past is a Foreign Country* (1985) and Raphael Samuel in his recent study *Theatres of Memory* (2012), and has often been identified with the postmodern drive to look back, being described as the effect of “an abuse of history,” or as a kind of invented tradition which makes up for “a lost sense of continuity with the past” (Radstone 2007, 113). Rita Felski though, studies nostalgia’s ties with modernity, specifically as it relates to the search for the maternal and its association with the eternal feminine principle, in the psychoanalytic literature of the period, Sigmund Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) and J. J. Bachofen’s *Myth, Religion and Mother Right* (1967), being cases in point. In such works women are said to mourn the loss of the mother and to be moved by their nostalgia for a golden past (Felski 1995, 39). In keeping with this psychoanalytic reading of nostalgia, Mary Jacobus proposes a feminist revision of the Freudian principle of mother-right, and also a reassessment of the Lacanian concept of nostalgia, previously always connected with the castration complex and the phallus, and she suggests that nostalgia would entail looking back not only to women’s desires but to what women desire differently (Jacobus 1987, 138). Understanding nostalgia as “a regret for a lost past that occurs as a result of a present view of that past moment” (136), she sees that feminist psychoanalysis and fiction are both responsible for the interrogation of memory texts which often reproduce forgotten or repressed mother figures and myths.

The topic of trauma can be also scrutinised from a gendered perspective in the context of memory work. Cathy Caruth describes the etymology of the term as a body pathology that has latterly been applied to a wound of the mind (Caruth 1996, 3).

Trauma becomes a fundamental concept in memory studies, since it serves "not simply . . . as record of the past" but further as a register of "an experience that is not yet fully owned" (Caruth 1991, 417). In Caruth's view, traumatic recollections mean much more than simple memory and might indeed enliven or re-enact a past that has never been fully experienced. Traumatic symptoms include amnesia and entail an unconscious recall which far exceeds willed memory, and usually manifests in the form of flashback. The critic explains how traumatic memories give full force to "a history that literally *has no place*, neither in the past, in which it was not fully experienced, nor in the present, in which its precise images and enactments are not fully understood" (1991, 419). Most tellingly, trauma involves reconciliation, often by means of verbalization through narratives that state the repressed knowledge of the past. This effort makes clear, on the one hand, the fluidity of the capacity to remember and the impulse to forget and, on the other, the blurring of the boundaries between the reality of the past and the fiction of memory. Caruth reminds us as well of the way in which one's own trauma may foster the connection with the trauma of another, "the voice of the other" as she puts it (1996, 8). The universalising character of the traumatic experience extrapolates individual experience to a communal understanding of history.

As companion pieces to Caroline Isgar's drawings and prints, Roberts's texts in *The Secret Staircase* enact the traumatic recollections of the narrator-protagonist. As delineated above, the different scenes portray the daughter's process of remembering, an exercise consisting in a kind of search for traces of the mother, stemming from present evidence, the quotidian objects which elicit memories. In so doing, the traditional plot of family romance is under revision, following a double process: the nostalgic vision of an ideal motherhood is contested, and the figure of the real mother is reassessed and seen in a new light. The daughter's voice expresses her yearning for the mother in an effort to make up for her sense of loss in the face of her mother's coming death, and it contrasts with the mother's silence. The readers of the sketches, as much as the audience of the installation, become the community with whom the traumatic memories are ultimately shared.

#### 4. *THE SECRET STAIRCASE* AS MEMORY TEXT

The terms "memory" and "imagination" are intertwined and ever-present in Michèle Roberts's literary and critical production. Part of her work has in fact been devoted to reflecting on the role of the past, as it concerns the relationship between individual memories and the creation of a communal sense of history. Moreover, Roberts worries about how world and public historical events come to bear on women's lives and experiences in particular. As a writer, she uses language to mediate between reality and imagination, between presence and absence, as she puts it: "Language is founded upon absence. . . . Language erupts out of silence and splinters it. So when I write fiction I'm creating a presence. . . . This presence that fiction creates is crucially connected, I think,

with absence, an absence that can be felt as insistently material” (Roberts 1998, 12-13). She argues, though, that contrary to what it might be expected, literary imagination has the capacity to skirt around both “sentimental nonsense” and “dangerous nostalgia” when looking at the past (1998, 19).

Michèle Roberts associates her own past with the maternal body, which she idealises as paradise both in her literary production and her criticism.<sup>2</sup> A great part of her writing is concerned with the reconciliation with the mother principle, with finding *la jouissance*, in line with proposals like Julia Kristeva’s (1980). Accordingly, Roberts plays with the slippery borders between fiction and autobiography and makes a claim for the right to remember the lost mother through an act of imagination. In her suggestive imagery, the writer’s desire for the mother manifests both at a physical and a symbolic level, standing at the same time for the concepts of presence and absence mentioned above:

The experience of absence and loss can include our fantasy that we have killed the mother with our angry, hungry wanting. We’re left in a pit of despair, abandonment. Into this emptiness comes the desire to make something: the words of desire themselves, images of desire, images of the beloved body we fear we may have destroyed with our biting, wanting, greedy neediness. Out of this *chaos* of feeling, out of this overwhelming sadness at *absence*, we learn to create something beautiful: our words, later on our gifts, later still our works of art. We re-create the mother inside ourselves, over and over again. (1998, 20-21)

According to Roberts, the writer’s art encompasses this duality, representing the child’s longing for the mother and endlessly recreating this figure inside themselves.<sup>3</sup>

In 1992 Michèle Roberts published *Daughters of the House*, one of her most popular books to date, winner of the WHSmith Literary Award and shortlisted for the Booker Prize. She began to experiment in this novel with the collective dimension of an individual’s memories, recollected by means of objects as traces that made the past

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<sup>2</sup> In her lecture “The Place of Imagination” (1994) Roberts confesses that her return to her figures of mother and daughter is meant to evoke part of her childhood in France, a time which she recreates as paradise: “They stand in, these images of lost bliss, as images of something even more specific than childhood: she who is paradise itself for the baby, the growing child: the mother” ([1994] 1998, 20). For a thorough review of this topic in Roberts’s fiction, see Laura Lojo’s recent article on the notion of the maternal body as paradise in Robert’s short story “Charity” (1994). She claims that this perspective is adopted by a narrator who positions herself as a child, and whose vision is “dependant on language, memory and mythic reconstructions of her own past” (Lojo 2012, 33).

<sup>3</sup> In her interpretation of Freudian psychology Madelon Sprengnether conceives the figure of the spectral mother as the recurrent metaphor of the presence of the absent, prompted by memory. The mother’s body becomes in his view the locus of desire and endless return; its loss the necessary step for ego formation: “The mother’s body becomes that which is longed for yet cannot be appropriated, a representative of both home and not home, and hence, in Freud’s terms, the site of the uncanny. As both origin and Other, the preoedipal mother escapes the equally devastating effects of idealization and erasure, allowing for the possibility of maternal discourse as well as a non-phallogocentrically organised view of culture” (Sprengnether 1990, 9).

reverberate into the present. The nun Thérèse comes back to the family house in Normandy, kept by her cousin Léonie. She treasures every object in the house, and each of them sets evocation in motion: the doorbell, the ivory ring, the photographs and the chandelier, are some of the many items that help reconstruct their childhood and the untold secrets of their village during the Nazi occupation. Public history and private memory merge in this novel by virtue of a mnemotechnic exercise, which consists of associating memory images with certain objects and places.<sup>4</sup> In the setting of the family house these pieces of memorabilia, together with material traces like human bones found in a common grave, have the power to reconstruct the fragments of family history which compose the wider picture of world history during the traumatic experience of the Second World War. Similarly, in *Impossible Saints* (1997), Roberts reinforces the link between personal and public history, between memoir, diary and historical writing by reconstructing the private life of Josephine, who stands for St. Teresa of Avila, through her niece’s narration. Artificial memory is also enacted in this novel as images are linked to places—Josephine’s shed, the so-called “sensual convent” founded by her, or St. Ursula’s chapel where the bones of ten thousand women martyrs are exhibited as material reminders of feminine piety and self-sacrifice. Curiously enough, the reader is to know through Isabel’s manipulation of her aunt Josephine’s *Life* and memory that the “real” Josephine, that is, her flesh and blood as well as the pages of her unauthorised *Life*, have been destroyed, the former cooked and eaten by her religious congregation, in an unholy enactment of the Holy Communion, the latter made into paper rosary beads for the pious consumption of her fellow nuns. More recently, *Ignorance* (2012) explores the thin line between memory and traumatic forgetting by means of a story that starts once more at the time of the Nazi occupation of France during the Second World War. Ironically, Roberts’s novel gives voice to the silenced narratives of single mothers, abused women, foundlings and victims of the Jewish Holocaust, showing how even deeply buried and partly forgotten stories, as well as apparently innocent gestures, looks, smells and objects, can bring the past to life.

In the installation *The Secret Staircase* Roberts’s contribution to the workings of memory comes full circle. The exhibition book is meant as a “souvenir of the original show” (Isgar and Roberts 2008, 7). As a whole they constitute a piece of memory work, in the sense that Kuhn uses the term: “Memory work makes it possible to explore connections between ‘public’ historical events, structures of feeling, family dramas, relations of class, national identity and gender, and ‘personal’ memory” (1995, 4). In this light, Roberts’s sketches match Isgar’s drawings to perfection, since they combine a daughter’s childhood memories of her aged dying mother with suggestive images reproducing the world of childhood and dreams. Each sketch is based on an object that calls forth a memory of the past and connects it to the present. Every day the

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<sup>4</sup> Early rhetoricians like the author of *Ad Herenium* considered this “artificial memory,” or *artificiosa*, as the basis of *ars memoriae* (Ricoeur 2004, 62).

anonymous narrator visits her mother, who suffers from a terminal cancer and is in a London hospice. The daughter's fragmentary narrative unearths her feelings of love and admiration for her mother, but also her resentment towards this figure. In so doing, she reconstructs her own past, learning to accept her mother's death. Familiar objects and items, which are sometimes rescued from her childhood memories, and on other occasions from her mother's experience of being in hospital, prompt these memories. In all cases, they constitute the traces that evoke the mother-daughter bond. As hinted above, I suggest that Roberts's scenes work as a memory text, as the daughter inscribes memories of her mother and her childhood on the page, but also that these memories constitute a piece of narrative in its own right, defying the traditional time of history and causality in favour of a more random structure.

Through material traces like photographs, the narrator-protagonist claims precedence over the mother's lost body, the memory of which helps her recover their relationship and her own childhood. In terms of structure and narrative design, the first and last sketches, "The Secret Staircase" and "The Russian Doll," respectively, provide a valid frame for the daughter's narration, while the rest of the scenes follow one another without apparent order, except for the fact that as the narration progresses the narrator gradually shows her full acceptance of her mother's death. "The Secret Staircase" invites the reader on a journey of introspection, setting artificial memory in motion, as Roberts's fictional persona relates the motif of the staircase to the intangible capacities of memory and imagination. Immediately though, the metaphor of the staircase gains material entity and turns into a real staircase, leading from her kitchen to the cellar, from outside to inside, where she finds coffins containing women's corpses, "time travellers" (Isgar and Roberts 2008, 9), as she calls them:

Here's a woman, turbaned and aproned in steam, hauling a twist of boiled sheets through the mangle. Here's a woman dressed in a short swing fur jacket, her hair rolled up in swoops pinned back from her laughing face. A woman in a white brocade evening frock. In a flowered red and white 1940s pregnancy smock, full sleeves caught into tight cuffs fastened with carved red buttons. Here's a woman in a tightly belted camel overcoat walking her scruffy terrier on the common. (2008, 9)

In an attempt to represent memory in physical terms, the staircase of the imagination becomes the staircase of her backbone, sustaining her body: "The staircase, neat and knobbed as my spine, leads down inside myself. I swivel down inside my spinal cord. Memory lives inside us. We have to go down inside ourselves to find it, enter it" (9). This exercise of self-exploration takes her back to her past, once more in a materialisation of artificial memory, by means of which image and place are associated: "A secret staircase down to childhood. Here it is: like a room in a museum; preserved exactly as it was. The sitting-room in which we all lived together, with its coal fire and battered pink settee" (9). House and body, kitchen, cellar and spinal cord turn into apt metaphors of

memory that can be identified with Frow’s reading of *lieux de mémoire*, understood as either sites or institutions of memory.

In this first scene the mother figure is also idealised, as the narrator evokes the image of the Virgin, a statue kept in a little shrine in her childhood memories—“a tiny box-shrine, an empty wooden niche, hung up in the forest” (9)—, and then her body turned sacred when, in her imagination, her mother becomes the Queen of Heaven, whom she implores for love and attention—“I built a shrine to you on the shelf over the radiator in the hall in our old house. I put flowers and candles in front of your statue and prayed to you: love me please love me” (9). The image remains fertile in “The Roof,” where Roberts continues developing her sensual theology, and the mother stands once more for the Queen of Heaven of Catholic mariology, but also for Nut, the sky goddess in Egyptian mythology, whose body is usually represented as a canopy of stars covering earth and its inhabitants. In bringing both images together Roberts presents the mother’s body as a house and a place of protection, holding the baby before it is born, but also keeping the child safe from the dangers of the outside world (13). “The Cotton Reel” shows a similar image as this object stands for the thread, the umbilical cord, reminding the narrator of Demeter and Persephone. The daughter thinks about the attraction-repulsion relationship with her mother as she visits her by tube and bus: “You throw me away, unreeling my thread, then grasp the end of my thread and haul me back . . . You’re Demeter and I’m Persephone, your mole-daughter with spade paws. I run away from you, dive down underground, then dive back” (33).

Roberts’s biographical pieces turn out to be the only reliable traces of the past, since in spite of the passage of time they will be the written testimony of the daughter’s memories. In this light, the final sketch “The Russian Doll” offers a very substantial image of how writing works like a form of memory in *The Secret Staircase*. On her way to the hospice the narrator buys a wooden Russian doll which for her represents the way in which the memories of her mother will remain even after death. This metaphor suggests for her, on the one hand, the interchangeability of the mother-daughter role between the two women, since it is now the daughter who must care for her aging mother—“Eggs inside eggs inside eggs” (42)—and, on the other hand, the image of the doll containing a multiplicity of stories: “You believe in eternal life. I believe in your words. I write down what you say and that way you stay alive inside me” (42). Together with a handful of familiar objects, words are the traces that the mother leaves behind, her testament for her daughter, and also the monument to the mother’s memory; all in all, they constitute the perfect illustration of Kuhn’s notion of memory work. Reflection on the importance of language and its connection with memory also appears in other two sketches, “The Gifts” and “The Newspaper.” The former centres on the mother’s legacy—her jokes, advice and stories—which the daughter treasures and which are meant to compensate for the years of unuttered past misunderstandings and for the pervasive

sense of loss at the present time; words function as bridges to the past, both as tools for reconciliation and as weapons to fight and separate:

You talk and talk to me, as though you want to give me everything you can, give me words and words and words, make up for all those years when we couldn't understand each other, stabbed each other with spiked phrases, did not know how to translate each other. Now I sit next to you, holding your hand, and you talk to me. How I longed for that as a child. Now I have it. (14)

In "The Newspaper" the narrator forwards the link between language and memory by referring to the crosswords her mother tries to fill in while in the hospice to stimulate her brain, but also using this image as her own attempt to come to terms with her mother's terminal disease, like in "Five letters. Death? We're both trying to understand it" (34). The clues in the crossword also activate collective memory, recuperating, for example, her mother's youth in occupied Normandy, thus merging public history and personal memory.

Time is eventually one of the central concerns of the sketches and a fundamental axis to the analysis of memory in *The Secret Staircase*. The dynamics of time are inherent to the nature of each written piece and are explored by means of objects that recreate and bring together past and present. Sketches such as "The Shoes" and "The Hairbrush" focus on the mother's body, bridging the gap between youth and old age, health and sickness. In them, the narrator recalls a childhood memory about her mother's small and feminine feet while contemplating the old woman's currently swollen feet (10), or the fancy long hair her mother wore in the 1940s contrasting with her short white hair more than fifty years later (17). Two other sketches, "The Polka-dotted Frock" and "The Cotton Reel," also suggest the passage of time, and are associated with life stages: the white and black of the polka-dotted dress reminds the narrator of the frock her mother wore at her brother's wedding, as much as the garment that the daughter might choose for her mother's funeral. The choice of dress stands here for a language that the narrator interprets as the opposing forces of life and death, *eros* and *thanatos*: "I keep them apart. My wardrobe holds death and sex mixed up together but I can't" (25). Finally, "The Watch" situates the mother-child bond in an eternal present tense, outside the conventions of linear time, proposing an image of repetition and nonlinearity, as mother and daughter exchange roles: "The child I was lives on inside the woman I am and reaches out towards you. Wanting to make reparation for all that rage I felt towards you when I was younger, my love for you mixed up with aggression. . . . I am your child still and also I'm the adult woman helping my sister to care for you; mothering you; witnessing you" (37).

On some occasions, memory is recalled by an object that belongs to the experience of hospitalisation, as happens in "The Bed," "The Bandages" and "The Bars," all of them representing the mother's current physical dependence and pain, but also the link

with several experiences in the past: the plights of a young working mother, trapped by the chores of her domestic life in “The Bed” (21); the bandaged and invalid mother who brings to mind the fledgling sparrows which children rescued and took care of in “The Bandages” (29); or the bars of the mother’s hospital bed which reminds the daughter of the playpen of her childhood (38). In so doing, the narrator manages to reconstruct family history, specifically focusing on the mother-daughter bond. Thus, Roberts carries out “the re-imagining of history,” to use Anderson’s expression (1990), which relies not on written documents, but on other non-traditional sources, like memory, oral history and objects.

The act of reconstruction of the past, of going back to the origins of the self, is complemented throughout the work with the author’s revision and reinterpretation of the popular Mother Goose nursery rhymes, most of them coming from collections like Joseph Ritson’s *Gammer Gurton’s Garland, or the Nursery Parnassus* (1810). All of them match the motive of the sketch complementing its meaning and uttering the daughter’s secret feelings for her mother.<sup>5</sup> The use of these variations on the original nursery rhymes, a popular form already varied and changing in nature, ties the narrator emotionally to her past and gives voice to her unconscious, also evident in the natural flow of the rhyme and in the lack of diacritics. Quite often the daughter’s versions contain a veiled critique of the mother’s behaviour in the past. The rhymes in “The Gifts” and “The Hairbrush” show the daughter’s feeling of lack of affection: “Hush little baby don’t say a word daddy’s gone to get you a mocking bird and if that mocking bird don’t sing daddy’s going to get you a diamond ring and if that diamond ring don’t shine *don’t blame me or you’re no daughter of mine*” (Isgar and Roberts 2008, 14; my italics), and “Roses are red violets are blue *ignore the child who cries boo-boo*” (17; my italics). In contrast, in “The Buttons” she combines two sources from oral and popular culture, the nursery rhyme and the fairy tale, together with official history, by virtue of which the pitiful episode of the Nazi occupation is depicted as a hunting scene in which the Germans are depicted as wolves. In her rhyme, the difference between hunter and prey blurs as the daughter asks for protection: “Bye baby bunting Daddy’s gone a-hunting gone to fetch a rabbit skin to wrap the baby bunting in. Bye baby bunting your Mummy’s gone a-hunting she’s leaving all her kith and kin and now you watch the night begin” (18). “The Polka-dotted Frock” unveils the daughter’s desire to occupy the mother’s place, “*when you are dead dilly-dilly I shall be Queen*” (25; my italics), and “The Cotton Reel” and “The Watch” show her unconscious longing for her mother’s death, “Girls and boys come out to play the moon doth shine as bright as day leave your supper and leave your sleep *Mum*

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<sup>5</sup> In *From Beast to the Blonde*, Marina Warner studies the status of fairy tales as historical documents which give an account of women’s daily experiences, as they illustrate their particular rites of passage and the relevance of maternal figures in their lives. The resonance of Mother Goose is taken by Warner “either as a historical source, or a fantasy of origin” which she can trace into ancient traditions, like the Islamic or the Christian, and which adds credibility to the stories (1994, xxiii).

*you're dozing all of a heap die with a whoop and die with a call die when you will don't die at all*" (33; my italics), "*Mumpty-dumpty sat on a wall mumpty-dumpty had a great fall death's coming we don't know how or when we can't put mumpty together again*" (37; my italics). The collection ends, though, with an image of reconciliation and acceptance. The final rhyme in "The Russian Doll" connects life and death, as the daughter reverts to babyhood at the same time as she grieves for her mother's demise: "I'll suck on my thumb. I'll mourn for my mum oh what a sad daughter am I" (42).

## 5. CONCLUSION

In *The Secret Staircase* Roberts bridges the gap between literary and non-literary genres, between the autobiographical impulse and the fictional account, as well as between artistic forms, the visual and the literary. She conceives narrative as a form of memory, supplying words for the protagonist's state of mourning. In the face of the disappearance of the loved object, the daughter resorts to creating a memory text that stands as a monument to her mother, by means of which she tries to put their relationship to rights. Roberts's sketches reproduce the workings of memory, understood both as the voluntary reconstruction of the past, but also as an act which involves imagination and thus the unconscious. Though partly relying on objects and remnants of the past like photographs, writing becomes in *The Secret Staircase* the very trace of memory, the material inscription of the past on the blank page and the means by which absence is conjured up and given presence. Isgar and Roberts perform memory in *The Secret Staircase* as they choose to recreate the child's world and unmask feelings of sorrow and resentment for the mother. In this work the mother figure is the object of desire, the source of trauma but also of self-identification and reconciliation.

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Received 10 June 2014

Revised version accepted 3 February 2015

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