

Empirical Literary Memory Studies and the Memory of Complicity in Flemish Fiction about World War II

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Abstract: This article proposes an integration of cultural memory studies with the empirical humanities through a small-scale qualitative study of readers' responses to Jeroen Olyslaegers's *Will* (2016), a novel exploring moral complicity in Nazi-occupied Flanders. Building on recent calls to move beyond the study of literature's "mnemonic potential" towards the observation of its actual effects, the study investigates how ordinary readers engage with historical fiction dealing with complicity and responsibility. Drawing on interviews with four volunteers who read *Will* as part of a university-based experiment, the analysis traces how readers interpreted the novel's representation of collaboration, responded to its affective and ethical dimensions, and connected its themes to broader historical and contemporary injustices. The findings suggest that readers do recognise and respond to the novel's ethical argument about complicity, though often implicitly, and that conversational framing and vocabulary development can help elicit more explicit reflections. The study highlights the plurality of reading practices and shows how literature can foster critical and self-reflective engagement with the past. Ultimately, it argues that empirical approaches to literary reception are vital for understanding how collective memory is

negotiated through cultural production and how literature may act as a catalyst for ethical awareness in contemporary societies.

Keywords: cultural memory studies; memory theory; military occupations; Jeroen Olyslaegers; ethical reflections

Introduction

This paper presents the results of a small-scale empirical study in cultural memory studies conducted at Ghent University in the spring of 2025. Four volunteers, recruited through an elective university-wide course on Human Rights, were asked to read the novel *Will* by Jeroen Olyslaegers and to complete a series of simple tasks during their reading experience. These included marking passages that resonated with them emotionally and writing at least two reflections prompted by the novel—one halfway through and another upon completing it. Afterwards, the volunteers took part in individual interviews of about forty-five minutes each, conducted through a semi-structured questionnaire. Their responses were analysed qualitatively in order to gain a better understanding of how ordinary readers approach literary texts dealing with historical injustice, and of the extent to which the novel stimulated ethical reflections on the Second World War. The novel *Will* was chosen for its powerful portrayal of Flanders under Nazi occupation, and because—according to my own interpretation as a trained literary scholar—it compels readers to consider the various forms of complicity that affect the lives of ordinary people caught up in a military occupation. This small qualitative study of readers' reception sought to determine the extent to which readers would interpret the novel in this way and use the fictional world created by Olyslaegers to reflect on the ethical dilemmas raised by history.

This type of study combines methodologies and theoretical insights from the field of cultural memory studies with the practices of the empirical humanities. Research in this area—which could be tentatively defined as empirical literary memory studies—remains scarce and has so far been pursued mainly by a handful of pioneering scholars (Ortner 2025; Andersen, Ortner, and Borčak 2022 and 2025; Antonini, Brooker, and Škopljanac 2024). The present contribution is divided into two parts. First, it offers a brief overview of key theoretical concepts in cultural memory studies, arguing for the need for more empirical research on literature and memory. It then discusses the qualitative study on Olyslaegers's *Will*, presenting its main results and considering their implications for memory research.

Cultural Memory Studies and the Issue of Reader Reception

Cultural memory studies is a sub-branch of the wider interdisciplinary field of memory studies that focuses on the role of cultural production in sustaining, disseminating, maintaining, and at times challenging collective memory—that is, the collectively held beliefs about the past articulated in the social sphere through narratives and discourse. In the 1990s and early 2000s, cultural memory studies was still in its infancy, pursued as a specialised research interest by a relatively small group of scholars across the globe. Since then, however, the landscape has changed profoundly, and cultural memory studies has developed into a well-established field of academic inquiry.

One of the scholars who can be most credited for this transformation is Astrid Erll—whom we were fortunate to hear during her keynote speech at the EROL symposium. Professor Erll has offered a systematic account of how cultural products shape the dynamics of memory and forgetting (Erll 2011 and 2025; Erll and Nünning 2008), and she has been a driving force in turning cultural

memory research into one of the central—if not *the* central—areas within memory studies.

Thanks to the work of Erll and other influential cultural memory theorists, such as Ann Rigney (2004 and 2021) and Michael Rothberg (2009 and 2019), over the past fifteen years, cultural memory studies has entered a phase of maturity. The field now rests on solid theoretical foundations for understanding the cultural dynamics that give rise to collective memory. The latter is conceived as an emergent and dynamic process sustained by acts of representing the past (*mediation*) across diverse forms of cultural production. The repeated mediation of particular events and stories across different media (*remediation*) enables specific interpretations of the past to persist and circulate within society. This sustained cultural work establishes certain narratives as dominant and widely accepted, providing schemata and implicit assumptions through which other, subsequent historical events are filtered and interpreted (*pre-mediation*). At the same time, cultural production also functions as an archive of interpretations of the past, allowing subordinate or marginalised perspectives to endure and, potentially, to challenge dominant narratives in later periods (*counter-memory*).

This view implies that memory is simultaneously an individual and a social process—one that unfolds within a plurimedial constellation of discourses, involving both human actors and cultural forms. From this perspective, cultural production is not secondary to psychological or sociological approaches to memory. On the contrary, it is a central and indispensable process that continually shapes memory itself—which can only exist through the mediation and representation of the past in the cultural artefacts circulating throughout society.

Now that the scaffolding for the study of cultural memory has been established, I believe there are several important areas that still need

to be addressed if we want the field to develop further and to arrive at a more precise understanding of how visions of the past continue to persist and shape the present. One of these crucial areas concerns the role of the reader. This remains a strikingly understudied issue within cultural memory studies, despite its far-reaching implications for the very theoretical model on which the field rests. According to this model, the consumption of cultural products is one of the key moments when individuals can acquire narrative templates as well as implicit and explicit ideas about the past (Rigney 2021). The study of literature and the arts therefore offers cultural memory scholars not only the opportunity to observe how writers have represented historical events in a given period, but also the chance to reflect on the kinds of ideas and values that texts transmit to their readers.

Astrid Erll, drawing on Paul Ricoeur's conceptualisation of mimesis, has distinguished between the processes of *configuration* and *refiguration* to capture these two moments (Erll 2011, 152-157). A text dealing, for instance, with Nazi-occupied Poland or Japanese colonialism in China configures the past by offering a representation that readers can then use to refigure history within their own interiority, imagining what life might have been like in another time. Literature can thus transmit knowledge about the past, enabling readers to follow history from the experiential perspectives of rounded characters who live through events that seem to unfold before their eyes. Not only can this open more direct, emotionally resonant, and heartfelt avenues into the past, but it can also prompt readers to reflect more deeply on the ethical dilemmas and moral questions that are central to the historical experience of humans.

From this it follows that literature can have transformative effects on readers' understanding of the past and on collective memory, and that literary texts can therefore be analysed, studied, and discussed in

terms of how they make the past intelligible and of the kinds of messages and values they attach to the representation of history. Yet the effects that literary texts can exert on readers remain *potential* effects, since they depend on how the texts are actually read and interpreted. For this reason, Erll argues that analysing how a literary work configures the past can only yield assumptions about its “mnemonic potential” (Erll 2011, 157), that is, the effects it could potentially have on readers’ understanding of the past. Moving beyond the idea of potential, and examining how literature is *actually used* by real-world readers as a tool for reflecting on the past, would require a decisive step towards the study of reader reception, a step that cultural memory studies has not yet fully taken.

The problem of reception—and of how the textual dynamics that literary scholars identify through their professional interpretations translate into actual acts of reading by ordinary, real-world readers—has haunted the theorisation of cultural memory studies from its very beginning. The issue was already fully foregrounded in an influential article published in 2002 by the late Wulf Kansteiner—whose sudden and premature passing has left a profound void in the field, as few scholars, if any, could match the combination of energy, wit, and acuity that Wulf brought to every academic exchange. In that article, Kansteiner urged the then-emerging field of cultural memory studies to engage more consistently with textual reception, identifying it as the crucial dimension through which many of the theoretical claims about the relationship between memory and culture could be tested and validated (Kansteiner 2002).

Over the past twenty years, many scholars have responded to Kansteiner’s call. As a result, cultural memory studies does not treat texts in isolation but has developed methods to assess their effects across society: for example, by examining critical reception in

specialised journals and online repositories (Perra 2010; Saxena 2021; Noji 2023); by analysing how certain works become canonised and the focus of sustained debate (Assmann 1999); and by studying how literary texts are re-actualised by other artists and writers through intertextual relations, adaptations, and transmedial or intermedial reworkings—in other words, through the processes that Erll and Rigney have classified as acts of *remediation* (Erll and Rigney 2009). All these approaches seek to capture different forms of textual reception within society by tracing the afterlives of specific cultural products and examining how they continue to exert an impact on diverse audiences over time. Yet one crucial dimension has remained strikingly underexplored, namely, the actual reading experience of ordinary readers.

The lack of research on how lay readers engage with literature and on how they use it as a tool to reflect on the past creates at least three major problems for the field of memory studies. The first issue is that the reflections developed by literary scholars on the effects of literary texts on memory culture must stop at the level of *mnemonic potential*. In other words, these reflections remain speculative: we currently lack the evidence and data needed to demonstrate how literature's potential is realised in concrete, situated acts of reading.

The second problem is perhaps even more significant—and it shows how transformative a serious engagement with readers could be for research on cultural memory. Because the perspective of everyday readers has not been sufficiently taken into account, the field of memory studies is still marked by what Rita Felski (2008, 12) calls the division between professional and ordinary reading practices. As a result, our current assessment of literature's mnemonic potential may be highly partial and incomplete, since it rests almost exclusively on the reading practices of a small

professional group trained in literary criticism. The true potential of literary texts may therefore be far broader, richer, and more diverse than our current models suggest, encompassing transformative experiences that remain powerful for ordinary readers, even if they have long been normalised, and thus overlooked, by literary scholars.

Finally, while we do not yet know whether, or how, literature's mnemonic potential is realised in the experience of ordinary readers—and how the very category of that potential might need to be rethought in light of such findings—the lack of research on readers prevents literary memory studies from asking whether something could be done to amplify literature's mnemonic potential across society. Scholarship has shown that literature can be instrumental in supporting unethical or self-serving narratives, but literary criticism has also compellingly demonstrated that literature can exert a profoundly positive influence on memory culture, offering a space for imagining the past in complex, non-reductive, and richly nuanced ways. The absence of research into how readers actually use literature to think about the past is therefore preventing the field from exploring methodologies that might help foster and sustain these positive societal effects.

Case Study: Reading *Will* by Jeroen Olyslaegers

The study I carried out at Ghent University in late spring and early summer 2025 was entitled *Everyday Reading of Complicity in Fiction about World War II Occupation in Flanders*. As mentioned earlier, its aim was to observe empirically the effects of a literary text that represents World War II occupation through the prism of complicity. Hence my choice to work with *Will*, a novel that offers a painful and unsettling account of collaboration during the Second World War.

Set in Flanders, the story is narrated by Will, an unreliable narrator living in contemporary Antwerp who recalls the years of the city's Nazi occupation when, in order to avoid military service, he joined the local police force. Moving back and forth in time between the twenty-first century—when Will struggles with the ailments and issues caused by old age—and the wartime past, the novel traces the ethical choices that the protagonist had to make while navigating between resistance fighters and Flemish fascists. Lacking clear political convictions, Will becomes increasingly entangled in the crimes of the occupiers, participating as a policeman in the round-up of Antwerp's Jewish population. Through this figure, the novel recounts the Second World War from the perspective of an in-between character—an "implicated subject," to use Michael Rothberg's terminology (2019)—who gradually becomes complicit in atrocities he did not himself initiate.

One of the core aims of the study was to examine, through qualitative analysis of readers' responses, whether the mnemonic potential that I, as a literary scholar, had attributed to the text was in fact activated through the act of reading. In particular, I wanted to determine whether readers were receptive to the novel's exploration of complicity, and thus to assess whether literature, as it is often argued, can serve as a viable tool for fostering reflection on complex positionalities vis-à-vis the crimes of history. To achieve this goal, the study employed a small degree of misguidance. In the communications with participants, the title was slightly altered to *Everyday Reading of Fiction about World War II Occupation*, thus omitting the reference to complicity that was central to both the novel and the research question.

Participants in the study were asked to respond to a semi-structured questionnaire that included the following fairly open-

ended questions: Did you have any prior knowledge of Flanders during World War II?; What are your overall thoughts on this novel? What do you think about Will, the main character? What was it like to experience history through Will's perspective? Do you think the novel absolves or justifies the main character's actions? What did you find particularly effective and convincing in the novel? Were there aspects of the novel that you found unconvincing? While reading, did you make any reflection about World War II military occupations? Did the novel make you think about other historical or contemporary contexts? What kind of broader reflections did the novel elicit for you? Did reading *Will* let you re-think some of your previous ideas about history and individual responsibility in the face of injustice? Were there parts of the story that stayed with you after you finished reading? Is there anything else about your reading experience that you would like to share? While the interviews followed this common framework, follow-up questions allowed each conversation to take its own specific direction, reflecting the distinct views and sensibilities of each participant. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and pseudo-anonymised.

In what follows, I will discuss the data that emerged from this small-scale empirical study with readers. Beyond its specific focus on the transmission of reflections on complicity, the discussion foregrounds what these interviews reveal about two of the three theoretical issues addressed in the previous section: namely, the actualisation of literature's potential as envisioned by literary scholars and some of the specific factors that need to be considered if we are to amplify readers' realisation of this potential.

With regard to the central research question concerning the transmission of reflections on complicity, Reader 2 immediately identified this as a key theme of the text, describing the novel as "a

journey [...] which captures a progression, from innocence to complicity; from guilt to regret". He further observed that the narrative as a whole compels readers "to reflect on their own choices under a tyranny, [showing that] there are no easy solutions". This interpretation closely aligns with that of Reader 3, although in her case the articulation of this view was less direct. In response to the open questions about the novel's meaning, she remarked that what struck her most was that it did not adopt "the victim perspective", but almost "the opposite point of view". Following the events of the Second World War from Will's standpoint, she explained, "made [her] feel very uneasy", and she admitted that Will "definitely brought a new perspective" from which she could think about the past. When prompted through follow-up questions to expand on these remarks, she produced a reflection that engages directly with the issue of complicity:

"Yeah, I mean, as I... we already said, it's kind of an explanation of why people did what they did [...] and it might help me to understand why locals who didn't have anything to do with the idea of the Holocaust, um, then ended up being involved [...] Like, why? I think this book can give some kind of explanation, maybe".

After receiving this answer, I decided to introduce the concept of *complicity* myself, noting that the participant's interpretation was already pointing in that direction. I therefore asked directly whether, during her reading experience, she had reflected on the issue of complicity and on the nuanced degrees of participation in injustice that characterise Will's behaviour. This comment resonated with Reader 3, who appeared to find words that more clearly expressed the kinds of meditations she herself had been making:

"I haven't made the reflection, actually, that there are these kinds of nuances. Yeah. But I think you're right that they play an important part in the story. I mean, Will doesn't really choose sides, he walks along with whoever is there. Yeah, uh, and there is complicity, for sure. I think this is the thing that worries me: if I was ever in such a situation, would I end up being complicit?"

The exchange shows that, through the reading of the novel, Reader 3 had perceived the moral questions that Will's vicissitudes brought to the fore, but these remained somewhat clouded by a lack of specific terms that could be used to unpack his behaviour.

In the case of Reader 1, things were even more complicated. On the one hand, her answers revealed a deep understanding of the dynamics portrayed in the novel. She argues that Will shows "the interplay between free will and one's existence as a social being" as well as "the entanglement between free will and what is right or wrong." Here Reader 1 is clearly foregrounding the ethical dimension of the story, hinting at how the novel enables us to contemplate both Will's individual agency and his participation in structural dynamics over which he has no real control. Moreover, she several times defines the novel as "heavy", because, she explains, "I was following his logic, I was following his dilemma all the time." On the other hand, while being unsolicited, Reader 1 does not make any reference to the concept of complicity. Yet, after thirty minutes of interview, when explicitly asked whether in her view the novel also engaged with the issue of complicity and responsibility, and whether she had been thinking about these issues, she replied: "Yeah, complicity! Definitely a lot about complicity, and partially about responsibility".

The case of Reader 4 is also interesting, especially because it was the only interview that took place with a significant delay from the moment of reading. In fact, while the other volunteers were interviewed between one and two weeks after they finished the novel,

Reader 4 was interviewed more than two months after completing the book. In her answers about the general assessment of the novel and about the main character, this reader shows a clear understanding of the issues raised by *Will*, arguing that “the author tries to show you how difficult it is to be in that situation, because everyone is always saying: if I was around during the Holocaust, I would have done this and this and this. And I think the author is trying to show that, no, you’re just a regular person. You don’t know what you would have done”. Yet, while replying to the initial questions about the overall interpretation of the novel, Reader 4 focuses above all on the contemporary parts of the story, discussing the struggle of an old, lonely man who is grappling with guilt and regret for the past, and who has remained alone after the tragic loss of his wife, friend, and granddaughter — in a subplot that is still connected to the traumas of the legacy of World War II.

If our conversation returned to the issue of complicity under Nazi occupation, it was above all because Reader 4 decided to consult and read aloud some of the notes she had taken while reading the text. In her notes, she wrote about the feelings she experienced while reading the story, which she described as “nauseous-making, disturbing, unsettling”. She also observed that “Will’s memories of occupied Antwerp so far reflect questions and struggles of guilt, responsibility and powerlessness”, and that the complexities of the modern society in which he lives “make it hard to point at agency and responsibility”. When asked why these issues that had seemed central to her during the reading sessions were not foregrounded in her answers during the interview, she explained that such reflections were above all linked to specific parts of the novel rather than to the text as a whole. This showcases the plurality of reading experiences and how the mnemonic potential of a novel may be the result of

selective attention to specific features and parts of a more complex narrative object. Moreover, it also suggests the need for more longitudinal studies that could observe the effects of reception over an extended period of time and how textual interpretations evolve — in line with what Harald Weirich (2003) has called “the post-history of reading”.

The plurality of reading experiences was also clearly embodied in the diverse responses that readers had towards the novel’s depiction of violence. On the one hand, the moments of violence were identified as highly memorable and among the scenes that remained most vividly in the readers’ minds. For instance, Reader 3 openly stated that she “definitely remember[s] the brutal images very well”. Reader 2 referred to the torturing and killing of an anti-fascist professor as “the most important scene that is still stuck in my mind”. For Reader 4, the most memorable sections of the novel were the round-up of Jews in Antwerp’s ghetto and the long scene in which Will, his fiancée, and his aunt are in a bar frequented by collaborators and occupiers, when the protagonist “gets really, really, really drunk and then he beats someone up really, really bad”.

On the other hand, readers reacted with different susceptibilities to these moments of violence, which elicited diverse emotions, contrasting interpretations, and even original reading practices. For instance, Reader 4 considered Will’s decision to kill a collaborator in the aftermath of World War II as “the lowest point” of his moral trajectory as an individual, whereas for Reader 2 that same act of killing constituted an appropriate act of retribution and, therefore, almost a satisfactory moment to read: “I think it’s karma and [the collaborator] deserved that because he was a bastard, and he was a vicious person... diabolical, immoral, and he deserved what was coming for him. He really deserved that”. By contrast, Reader 1 found

the graphic depictions of violence too burdensome and therefore decided to skip them, skimming through all those parts which she found unsettling and difficult to bear.

While responses to violence were multifaceted, the answers to another question proved far more consistent among the participants. When asked whether reading *Will* made them think about other historical and present-day contexts, all readers showed that, for them, reading about World War II in Flanders was a catalyst for reflections on both the present and other aspects of the past. For Reader 1 and Reader 3, this meant above all thinking about the plight of the Palestinian people and the victims of Israeli war crimes in Gaza. Reader 2, instead, established a connection with the rise of far-right populism across Western Europe. Reader 4, in his answer, preferred to focus on other historical contexts and discussed both the British occupation of Ireland and the long share of blood it caused during the twentieth century, as well as the crimes of the Ottoman Empire. Yet, while giving this answer, the participant also alluded to the destruction of Gaza by Israeli forces, which had already been a subject of discussion between the two of us, since the volunteer had family from that region. During the interview, he chose not to return to this painful present-day catastrophe, and I respected his silence and did not ask him about it again. All these examples show that reading about historical injustices elicited reflections that were in no way limited to the specific historical context addressed by the literary text, but rather allowed participants to establish connections with other historical crimes, both past and present, according to a dynamic of solidarity and relationality that Michael Rothberg has famously defined as “multidirectional memory” (2009).

A final set of interesting reflections concerns the reading practices and uses of literature (Felski 2008) that the text generated. For

instance, after reading *Will*, Reader 1, who was not much used to historical fiction about wartime, felt the need to read something lighter and more edifying, and she turned for comfort to some of her favourite poems by Pessoa. Nonetheless, the reading experience was far from useless for her, since it gave her deeper insight into the history of the country where she is now living and elicited several reflections on her condition as a migrant in Belgium. For Reader 4, reading about Antwerp in World War II — and the relationship that the protagonist has with his city and with the memory of what it once was — led her to ask similar questions about her hometown, Ghent, prompting forms of historically inspired flânerie.

Yet the most transformative effects and active use of the reading experience were reported by Reader 2. Not only did he decide to watch *Will's* cinematic adaptation several times in order to compare the two media and observe how the novel was transmediated for the screen, but he was also inspired by the reading experience to intensify his writing habits. By following *Will's* ruminations in occupied Antwerp, Reader 2 gained the awareness that the lines of thought that occupy our minds are the first step towards future actions that can have wide ethical magnitude. Aware of this, he decided to explore his own inner world more deeply through journaling:

Honestly, the novel made me reflect on myself. What we have in our thoughts is controlling our actions. As I mentioned at the beginning, I started to write my daily notes, what I am doing and what I want to see. Because your thoughts become an action: that's something I learned from this novel. I was already writing once or twice a month, but now I'm kind of doing it every day.

This practice of self-development, inspired by literature, constitutes an example of an impactful, everyday use of a literary text — one that

would be difficult to predict through a purely literary analysis of a novel and without empirically exploring the situated acts of interpretation of ordinary readers.

Conclusion

This small empirical study has offered a modest yet illuminating contribution to the emerging dialogue between cultural memory studies and the empirical humanities. By exploring how ordinary readers engage with *Will* and by tracing the interpretive, emotional, and practical afterlives of their reading experiences, the research has sought to move beyond theoretical notions of literature's *mnemonic potential* towards an examination of how this potential is actually realised in practice.

Based on the interviews I carried out, it can be argued that *Will* does succeed in fostering ethical reflections on complicity and on the indirect participation of ordinary citizens in historical injustices, and that readers do, in fact, recognise and respond to the novel's central theme of complicity. Yet in some cases, such recognition remains implicit: to articulate more explicit reflections, some readers require conversational prompting and the development of a vocabulary that enables them to express their ideas and reading impressions. This insight indicates the need for further and broader empirical studies that can reveal which activities best support and amplify literature's potential as a means of encouraging critical reflection on the past.

By attending to the plurality of reading practices and by situating acts of interpretation within real contexts, we can begin to appreciate how literature functions as a dynamic agent in the ongoing negotiation of memory, identity, and responsibility. Even within its limited scope, this study shows that readers can use literature dealing with historical crimes to reflect on both the past and the present,

using the emotionally charged exploration of an imagined past to test ethical dilemmas surrounding present-day injustices, political issues, and personal concerns. More generally, the study demonstrates that listening to readers—and learning from their interpretations—remains an essential step for cultural memory studies' attempt to understand how collective memory is made, sustained, and transformed through culture.

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