Dr F.E. England

Honorary Research Associate, Department for the Study of Religions, University of Cape Town ROR Rondebosch, South Africa.

E-mail: frank.england@uct.ac.za

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5903-8087

https://doi.org/10.38140/at.v45i2.8661

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2025
45(2):115-132

Date received:
17 October 2024

Date accepted:
5 November 2025

Date published:
5 December 2025

Published by the UFS
http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at

© Author(s)

CC BY

OPEN ACCESS

"Before the cock crows, you will deny me" (Matthew 26:34): Betrayal and Redemption in Aminatta Forna's *The Memory of Love*

ABSTRACT

The Augustinian conception of memory as self-constituting compels an inquiry of how one remembers and how one employs memory to forge a moral and authentic human self. The characters in Aminatta Forna's novel, The memory of love*, are haunted by their memories, those experienced in an intensely personal way, and those witnessed in Freetown, Sierra Leone, before, during, and in the aftermath of the violent civil conflict during the 1990s. The multidimensional impact of memory in the characters' lives recalls their loves and losses, and their embedded, often suppressed, deceit. It invokes an ancient self-betrayal that echoes again in the recensions, suppressions, and elisions of their narrative self-tellings in a novel that, ultimately, extends an invitation to the reader to* re-member *oneself redemptively.*

1. INTRODUCTION: FICTIONAL TRUTHS OF THE SELF

To read fiction, as to attend other modes of cultural production – dramatic, balletic, artistic, musical and operatic - may also be deemed pleasurable activities. But they may also contain perceived references to the life of the one who reads or who

attends to these cultural forms. Where such self-references are evident, then, not infrequently, rather than merely affirm the life of the reader or the spectator, they also include a critique of the self. They may issue a challenge directed at those acts of self-interest, of bystander complicity, when one's deliberate, yet self-excused, deflected gaze turned elsewhere; of one's selective amnesia that has suppressed unworthy thoughts, or even unearthing those immoral acts that one has dissevered from oneself by projecting their cause and their consequent guilt upon others. One may well, again, further suppress these challenges and accusations as intrusive cultural imaginings fleetingly entertained and, instead, reaffirm oneself as excused, changed or, more troublingly, some entirely new and other person. Alternatively, one may consider examining them as stumbling blocks (Mt .18:7; Gal. 5:7-12), as possible obstacles to one's own self-integration. They may then invite cognitive enhancement (Mikkonen 2021:76) and provide insights into one's mode of indulgent self-knowing – of how one thinks about, and constructs oneself (Zournazi & Williams 2021:162-165) – by recognising that "[o]ur best parts, if left unlived, can be as poisonous as our worst, if left unhealed" (Ulanov & Ulanov 1982:2).

It is proposed that Forna's novel, *The memory of love* (2010),[1] extends an invitation to the attentive reader to assess possible self-recognition, and to ask some searching questions: What does the novel mirror as images of the self? Are these one's own repressed, yet still influential, impediments to living an authentic and truthful life? Does this diegetic world of fiction recast as "fictional truths" a veracity that breaches its Sierra Leonese setting and contests the created fiction of oneself? Do they reveal one's palimpsestic attempts to airbrush away, to shuttle aside or aggressively discard what one's memory appears to have lost, and yet cannot be anywhere else but stubbornly retained there (Augustine, *Conf*. X. 19 (28))?

In fact, it could be more forthrightly stated that religious adherence compels confessional self-confrontation and forms of private and public repentance, whether sacramental or liturgical. In particular, Christian commitment, at its inaugural level, pledges the believer to the life story of another person, acknowledged as God's presence to one: "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gl. 2:20, NRSV). Therefore, it requires one to return, repeatedly, to a founding sacred story, whose central character informs and transforms one's life.[2] This character and his story critique one and call on one to meditate upon his singular life of virtue and his obedience to suffering.

1 Hereafter, references to the novel will comprise only the page numbers.

2 Lash (1986:37-46) considers the Christian life dramatically. See Chapter Three: "Performing the Scriptures".

It exhorts one to become Christlike (Kirk 1931; Harton 1932)[3], a vocation that extends beyond the personal and is never solitary. Indeed, for the tradition of liberation theologians, as Moore (2013) has recently insisted, the Christian life includes a political and social praxis of "kenosis", a contestation of the bureaucratic and systematic violences that ravage human lives. One's own perceived inadequacies are not excuses. Rather, one is asked about what capacities and influence one possesses that may be employed to intervene for the powerless and marginalised (Lukes 1986:5; Sykes 2006:Chapter 1). Boldly phrased, the disciplinary rigour of assenting to this faith entails a profoundly unsettling willingness "to be questioned, judged, stripped naked and left speechless by what lies at the centre of [one's] faith" (Williams 1990: 1).

Thus, in the reading of the Scriptures, in worship, and in private prayer, one is challenged repeatedly to scrutinise oneself and one's world with a mind renewed (Rm. 12:1-2). This "vision", to advert to Kirk (1931), is not limited. It encompasses all that is of creation. One looks through new eyes, and one may perceive in what appears as "secular" cultural production oneself reflected and contested. There, too, one's own self-telling may be interrogated as to its truthfulness. There, too, one may find oneself on trial for wreaking vengeance upon the undeserved and the innocent, for economic avarice that ignores the plight of the poor, and for a politics of apathy that sustains injustice (Williams 2014:136; England 2020).

2. MEMORY'S BURDEN

Memory, one proposes, is inflected iteration, and it is central to Forna's *The memory of love* (2014). In events located in Freetown, Sierra Leone, the burden of recall weighs upon the characters in their personal relationships, which are redolent of the political events prior to, during, and in the aftermath of the civil strife of the 1990s. The effects of the past and how they are re-presented impair these narrative lives with ineradicable scars. Like others of the African continent's tortured and shackled past, Sierra Leoneans are compelled to remember contextually, because without these often-malevolent impediments, they would not know who they are at present, of how the past has shaped them, and of how to envisage their futures. But the act of remembering imposes a moral burden, which is interrogative: Do I remember truthfully and

3 Among the many references that could be cited, these two books provide the wider context in which the life of the Christian is located and the virtues required of a Christian life, respectively. Williams' book (1990), is also noteworthy, and emerged from lecturing to prospective Anglican priests at Mirfield College, Leeds, and Westcott House, Cambridge.

with a dispassionate honesty?[4] Is there a self-deceptive selectivity to my recall? Am I editing my past with a subconscious or self-aware mendacity? As the reader is exposed to the memories of the characters, their complicit choices and decisions emerge in artful words and silences, in affections, self-interest, and betrayals, in pasts that haunt the present and the future, in a novel that both accuses and sketches a path to possible narrative redemption.

3. CONTEXT[5]

Prior to independence in 1961, Sierra Leone comprised two parallel states, namely a Crown Colony (established by the British for freed slaves) and a Protectorate: the former, directly governed; the latter, dominated by tribal chieftaincies. Their lack of integration at independence, and the concentration of power in central institutions, incrementally destabilised the democracy of the early years as the state institutions of the former colony contended with the traditions of ethnic governance and patrimony of the erstwhile protectorate (M'cleod & Ganson 2018: 9). However, there was some success at extending the public services that had been available in the colony to the former protectorate regions, and the *LSE-Oxford Commission on State Fragility, Growth and Development*, published in April, 2018, locates "the early 1980s" as the height of their efficient devolvement and function (M'cleod & Ganson 2018: 11). By then, autocracy had long replaced democracy.

The Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) of the first democratic governments of Sir Milton Margai, who died in 1964, and, subsequently, that of his brother, Sir Albert Margai, lost the 1967 general election to the All-Peoples' Congress (APC) of Siaka Stevens, who became Prime Minister. His rule was interrupted by a military coup in 1968. However, after a year under the National Reformation Council, presided over by Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew Juxon-Smith and, following the protests of junior-rank soldiers, the APC resumed power. In 1971, Sierra Leone was declared a republican one-party state under the executive presidency of Stevens and his APC. The Chatham House report of 2007 notes that, from this period, Stevens established a

4 To consider the contrary notion of nations erasing their histories, see Rieff (2016), who provides examples of the selectivity of national myths, and argues that remembering rather than forgetting the past may damage the possibility of peace in conflict-ridden regions. If this is so, then it ought not to exclude asking about the impact of such forgetting upon the lives of *individuals* who live in these regions.

5 The "context" is provided in some detail, because the notion of democracy, and how it was conceived by the former colonial powers, may be worthwhile recalling. In the case of Sierra Leone, the problematics of its summary imposition is evident.

> 'Shadow State' network of patronage ... [and] used the resources of the formal state, including international finance, and control over the informal economy to reward his allies and coerce his opponents (Thomson 2007:2).

It replaced the politics of democratic response to individual political subjects with a more general accountability to the collective, both by exploiting and incorporating the existing traditional, authoritative order, and by establishing or imposing new and selectively beneficial arrangements and structures.

This "politics of patronage", perhaps one may phrase it, is frequently cited in the West with disapproval. Yet, as the LSE-Oxford Commission report observes, the stability and the durability of meaningful existence is often maintained by such ancestral forms of jurisdiction in less central regions (M'cleod & Ganson 2018:9-10). However, if Stevens was more adept at the task of consulting and placating kinship, tribal, and communal structures and alliances, then his successor, Joseph Momoh, "failed to handle these challenges and left the door open to civil war" (Thomson 2007:2-3), which ensued from 1991 until 2002. Forna's words are more trenchant:

> The war in Sierra Leone had begun after 30 years of exploitation of people and resources by a venal regime; it had been a slow burn (*Guardian* 2015).[6]

Indeed, the record shows that, from 1966 to 1992, five political *coups d'état* were attempted (M'cleod & Ganson 2018:10), and when the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) wrested power in 1992, "even the Shadow State had melted away" (Thomson 2007:3). The exploitation of the material resources of the nation, and the selective privilege, advancement, and restricted distribution of the goods of the nation, through the channelling of wealth for reciprocal benefit, engendered the "violent competition and collusion between forces of the NPRC regime and the Revolutionary United Front" (RUF) (Thomson 2007:3). The years of the civil war "left over 50,000 dead, 2.5 million displaced, and tens of thousands wounded [and] maimed" (Imma 2017:129), the latter largely the result of the RUF's intimidating practices of "mutilation, amputation and decapitation of innocent civilians" (Cole 2017:245).

Forna remains committed to a nation in which her Sierra Leonean father, Mohamed Forna, a physician, had served as a Minister of Finance in Siaka Stevens' government, but became disillusioned. Following his protest against the regime's exploitative policies and actions, he resigned, was tried, and then executed for treason on 19 July 1975. In *The memory of love*, she "walks a

6 Forna (2021).

thought" (Forna in *Guardian*, 2015),[7] or thoughts that extend across a period of some thirty years about the hopes, loves, silences, and betrayals – the memories – that scarred the nation during these fitful times – years of stability and of fragility through desultory seasons of economic prosperity and decline, of admirable and meretricious leadership, of protests, unrest, and, ultimately, of the indiscriminate effects of the devastating civil conflict.

4. RE-MEMBERING THE SELF

The memory of love opens with a declaration that love foreshadows loss (1). Appropriating this notion, perhaps one may propose that love's loss is the entailment of the human condition, and that *The memory of love* may be read as a novel of the tragedy of being human, because human beings are lovers who remember their loves, who recall their losses. Indeed, the characters in Forna's fictional world tell of their loves, and these loves that they remember, reflect the characters of the tellers. For to tell of themselves is to remember *themselves*; *to remember* themselves is to recall *their* loss. Therefore, in this conscious recall resides the self who re-members – who joins again the episodes of past experience together – in order to say who this self is in the present. However, one's self-telling is not only an amended and edited version through the purposeful erasure of selected past events, as well as their mere passing forgottenness, attentive and critical reflection upon one's narrative self may (probably, ought) also to question, even contest, one's account, by raising questions about one's *re-presentation of one's self* in this but not that narrative sequence, in these but not those past occurrences which, too, may not be without relevance. Such an interrogative task engenders moral concerns about *how* one remembers *what* one remembers, and also about what one deliberately has suppressed or excluded from the chapters of one's own story. Thus, moral issues arise about self-honesty and truthfulness, about self-authenticity and integrity. Considering such contentious issues of self-questioning critique recurs to one's history and seeks to reveal its patterns, to notice its loose, its lost and unravelled threads, its inchoate and fractured contradictions, and one's often egocentric and self-regarding decisions and actions, and thus, in T.S. Eliot's words, rehearsing

> ... the rending pain of re-enactment / Of all that you have done and been; the shame / Of motives late revealed, and the awareness / Of things ill-done and done to others' harm / Which once you took for exercise of virtue (Eliot 1963: Little Gidding II: ll. 138- 142).

7 Forna (2021).

By re-entering the quarry of one's memory with these imperatives – the *locus* that houses the "texts", the documents and images, the emotions and sensed apprehensions of oneself as *this* person who speaks themselves *now* in time's passing flux – the story that one tells about oneself may well recover the former elisions and suppressions and, rather, incorporate them into the always provisional, now somewhat more blemished and stained, patterning of one's self-in-process, a life in time's call towards its ending.

5. MEMORIES, LOVES, LIES, AND BETRAYAL IN *THE MEMORY OF LOVE*

"On the iron-framed bed" (1), Adrian Lockheart, an English psychologist, encounters the dying Elias Cole, his worn notebooks "[o]n top of the bedside cabinet" (1). He speaks of loss, because he speaks of love: "People are wrong when they talk of love at first sight. It is neither love nor lust. No. As she walks away from you, what you feel is loss. [Love is a] premonition of loss" (1). Cole's lament of loss began on 29 January 1969: "I saw a woman once, the loss of whom I mourned, even before I had spoken a single word to her" (5). His account of love's loss begins in the direct aftermath of autocratic rule, and the university, as one of the initial places of protest, is under the surveillance of the military. The woman whom Elias, an historian, who later becomes the Dean of Humanities (176) at the university in Freetown, saw, is Saffia, the wife of his engineering colleague, Julius Kamara. He contrives to be near her, telling "small untruths", in order to secure a lift to call at the "pink house" (31, 274), to meet her in town – words and deeds seemingly insignificant. And yet their so easily condoned ease of tongue and self-justifications indicate a willowy moral fibre. His careerism, his unquestioned motives, his unwitting or unexamined collusion with the then dean of his faculty and later with the police, and his self-, and subsequent familial, protective interests contribute to Julius' death.

Student opposition to the military coup in Sierra Leone in 1968 was buttressed by the *mai soixante-huit* protests that began in Paris and rapidly spread to campuses throughout the Western world. Julius, a charismatic figure and sympathetic to the students, addressed their gathering on 25 November of the same year, barely two months before Elias had caught sight of Saffia at the faculty wives' dinner (5). Elias, at the behest of the dean, had attended the protest meeting, upon which he had submitted a report, but the contents of which he can no longer recall. Subsequently, he provided his notebooks to the police during Julius' and his own incarceration. These documents secure his release, but they implicate Julius, and another death in detention is added to the list. Elias' assistance to, and comfort of Saffia in the

aftermath of her husband's death lead to their unsatisfactory marriage and to the birth of their daughter, with whom Elias' relationship ultimately becomes strained and fractures.

Adrian listens to this personal story within an arena of destructive politics; listens to Elias' account of himself, and its recensions and its occlusions are increasingly noticed. This is one self-narrative among the others of the primary characters: of Kai, a young orthopaedic surgeon; of Agnes, a fugerer; of Nenebah or Mamakay, the daughter of Elias Cole and the lover of both Kai and Adrian, and, of course, of Adrian himself, a seconded foreigner, whose initial frustration is educated into a partial understanding of the depths of woundedness in the memories that are the selves of those implicated in, and affected by the bleeding scars of a nation's people, and that also become his own. Indeed, they love; these characters *do* love; they love in love's memory of love's lost loves to their shame, their guilt, and their blindness.

Of these characters, Nenebah or Mamakay's narrative is embedded to a greater extent in those of the other main characters collectively than theirs are in hers. She and Kai are young students in love, and it is a physical and emotional commitment that engenders speech – lightly, perhaps, but not beguilingly – about a future together, and it allows them to imagine a home and children. But the relationship ends. One night, after the long hours at the hospital, Kai – compulsively driven to work, quite literally, for reasons to distract him – lies "on his back, staring at the stars ... He is drunk":

> Nenebah. He would have liked to touch her. Just to hold her hand in his. To feel her skin ... How easily they spoke of love. And yet, when she'd needed the certainty of his feeling for her, he'd let her slip away, never able to bring himself to tell her about the ways in which he'd been changed. He'd been incapable, and in being incapable *he'd let Nenebah believe the problem lay with her* (384-385; added emphasis).

After reporting on Agnes to Dr Attila, the chief of the city's psychiatric institution, Adrian and Attila's deputy, Ileana, "wind up at the Ruby Rooms", what once, in Elias Cole's past, Adrian recognises as the "Talk of the Town" (230). There, he meets Mamakay, Ninebah's "house name" that she was called after her great-aunt, Mama Kay (232), and a relationship ensues. Adrian abandons his flat to Kai, who has made it his after-hours place "to crash", because it is close to the operating theatre. Since it was either late at night or in the early mornings that Adrian and Kai shared company, hours that Adrian now spends with Mamakay – first, moving in with her, and later renting a house (399), a home for "their child" – the triangular relationship remains obscured to the men for some time, until, that is, Kai, about to cross the courtyard to the flat, sees Nenebah emerging from the door, followed by Adrian:

> He sees Adrian's hand at her back, and the answer of her slight smile, he sees that they are together. He does not know how, but he knows this beyond doubt. He stands in the courtyard while the rain falls lightly on his shoulders. And he is drowning (343).

Just after this, Adrian also links Mamakay/Nenebah and Kai (344-346). Earlier, he had asked her about her other relationships, and she had spoken only of one: "'Would you have married him?'. 'Yes', she replies. There is no hesitation" (301).

Adrian, who "built up a steady private practice alongside his position as a senior clinical psychologist at a London hospital" (65), and who, earlier, undertook some pioneering work in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD),[8] is married to Lisa, and together they have a daughter, Kate.[9] But, later, with his career somewhat directionless, he applies to an international health agency, which leads to a posting to Sierra Leone (66), the country where his grandfather, District Commissioner Silk (166), once had served. Although "[h]e did not come here expecting to find happiness" (297, 362), his future now commits him to this country, for it is here, Mamakay insists, that their child be raised. In his ensuing familiarity with this place, graced memories begin to accumulate, even in the midst of the attenuated lingering, yet still pervasive trauma of its people; and of a city in which the streets bear the stress marks of embattled scuffles and the buildings image porous flesh in their pockmarked walls. Freetown's teeming liveliness – cacophonous and dusty, umber burned and *débris* cluttered – flays him and insinuates itself:

> Through Mamakay the landscape of the city has altered for Adrian. For the first time since he arrived, the city bears a past, exists in another dimension other than the present. Places he passes, the Mary Rose, the water pump, already hold memories (255).

Among those whom Adrian counsels is a forty-three-year-old woman, Agnes. Through Agnes' silences, Adrian discovers a life that, like Mamakay's, Adecali's,[10] and his own, is also shaped by a past, and is answerable to

8 Adrian had published a paper that featured in a compensation lawsuit owing to an explosion on an oil rig off the coast of Aberdeen in Scotland. His interest led to him practise "eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing", a method of treatment developed by an American psychologist, Francine Shapiro (65-66).

9 Adrian is identified as forty-one years old (161), married to Lisa, with a daughter, Kate, who is writing her "eleven-plus" examination (160).

10 "Adecali had belonged to the rebel Sensitisation Unit. The Unit's task was to enter a town marked for invasion ahead of the fighting contingent of the rebel army and by their methods to ensure the villagers' future capitulation ... Adecali's job, his particular job, was to burn families alive in their houses" (372; see also 310).

others. But he also learns that there is a form of accountability – of *responsible* response – that bears a costly burden, and it is not a burden that can be shouldered by the other, and that, on occasions, must be borne in silence. For the suffering weight cannot necessarily be shifted to another under a summary conviction that "the truth" must be told at all costs, and that others must hear it. Rather, to be *responsive*, to be *responsibly* accountable to ..., may call upon oneself to deepen one's own woundedness, to bleed a scarred self for the other/s and for as long as is necessary: to take up one's cross (Mk. 8:34), in theological terms.

Agnes walks. She is said to be spirit-possessed, able to cross over from this world into the spirit world, but when "crossed" (114-115), she is in neither place, she is "travelling between worlds" (129). Consulting the diagnostic manuals, Adrian relates Agnes' behaviour to the late nineteenth-century "fugerers" observed by a French psychiatrist. They travelled, often not remembering how or even, at times, where. During a lucid period, Agnes tells Adrian of the first of her walks that took place roughly a year earlier. It began with dreams in a reality that was inescapable, her dirty feet evidence of sleepwalking in the yard barefooted, perhaps. She woke with a headache and "a blurred patch in the centre of her vision. Then suddenly everything turned black, leaving only a circle of light" (162). Anxious, her crushing skull, her voice displaced, her actions were as if in a waking-dream. Her daughter, Naasu, was not at home[11] when Agnes departed. Only a fragmentary memory of her travels remained when she was found by Naasu "five days later" and some "forty miles from home". After she returned, she "slept for two whole days" (163). "[O]n the premise that something occurred during the war" to "trigger" these wanderings (168), following a meeting with Agnes in the home of Naasu, and a subsequent attack on Adrian by her son-in-law during a day away from the city in the town of Lake Loko (219) with Kai and Abass;[12] ultimately, Kai and Abass are told of the triggering cause of Agnes' condition.

At the market in the local town, Agnes, with her two younger daughters, Yalie and Marian, and her friend Binta sit at their stalls when the rebels appear, led by a Colonel JaJa. Two bamboo-encaged soldiers are shot in front of the local people, and Ja-Ja orders the bodies to be removed. Agnes' husband is among those to do so, but elderly and recovering from a recent operation, he struggles, is knocked back, and falls. "The old man's fingers grasped at the Colonel's clothing"; JaJa turns, steps away, and then stops. He returns and shoots him in the chest. Yalie runs to her father, but she is pulled back as JaJa

11 All the subsequent fugues also occur when Naasu is *not* at home (168).

12 The boy, Abass, the son of Kai's cousin (122), and Kai are closely bonded with a deep mutual affection. The novel portrays Kai as a parent both to Abass and later also to the daughter of Adrian and Mamakay/Nenebah (444).

hacks off his head and tosses it to the child, "who instinctively reache[s] out to catch it" (309).

After over two years in a refugee camp in Guinea, where the Red Cross is unable to prevent the deaths of Yalie, in a third cholera epidemic, and Marian, of a poisoned cut in the foot, Agnes is located and reunited with Naasu, now her only remaining child (310-311). She informs Naasu that

> her father and sisters were dead and in her choice of words let Naasu believe they had all died in the camp together. Naasu ... beautiful and healthy ... wearing elegant clothes,

informs her mother that she is married to a man who has sheltered her, who cares for her and, to Agnes' tears, indicates that she is with child. They travel back to Agnes' home where, with pride, Naasu introduces her husband, who is none other than JaJa (312).

The burden of knowing the truth and being compelled to silence, referred to above, is, for Agnes, the only "truth" to live. For she cannot inform Naasu, in love and pregnant, that JaJa executed her father. Therefore, when Naasu is away, Agnes walks in a necessary amnesia, a forgetfulness that diverts memory. A partial therapy is "to cross", to enter the "between zone", in which her en-souled memories momentarily may be discarded in hearing only the sacrificial beat of her own footsteps as a wandering pilgrim.

Kai, probably the most morally admirable character in the novel, is also the victim of a particularly traumatic event, and its embedded proleptic cause emerges when Adrian and Kai drive to the Ocean Club for a beer. Adrian, now familiar with Freetown, embarks upon the route across the bridge, in order to avoid the traffic. Kai, in anxiety – a "vein stands out on his neck, a node visible beneath the skin. He doesn't look at Adrian but stares straight ahead through the windscreen. He looks terrified" (256) – insists that Adrian take the coastal road. The event is recounted towards the end of the novel after Mamakay/Nenebah dies during the birth of a daughter, "chubby and bronze, her hair a mass of black ringlets" (442).

Compulsive in his work and ravaged by nightmares, Kai finally submits to Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) that, "on occasion", Adrian had "practised ... upon his private patients" in London (66).[13] They return to the unspeakable – the sealed – events, which asks of the other: "[H]ow could you ever understand?" (423).

On 24 January, when "the RUF rebels overran Freetown in 1999" (Cole 2017: 238), Kai and Nurse Balia were abducted from the hospital and taken to

13 See n. 8.

> an old, partly burned government building. The patients were all fighters. Young, adolescent, their arms, legs and guts full of metal ... A heavy wooden door served as the operating table. For hours Kai worked with Balia at his side. They worked well together, efficiently, though Balia's hands never stopped shaking (429).

The seventeen-year-old commander, Captain Amos, tells them that they will be released the following morning. During the night, young fighters enter the room. Kai is taunted in the darkness. He is told that, unless he engages in sexual intercourse with Balia, they will rape him (431). "I couldn't ... She didn't ..." (427) were the incomplete, yet conclusive, phrases that Kai had uttered to Adrian at the beginning of the treatment. Balia is shot; Kai is raped (Imma 2017:143; Norridge 2012:29).[14] Aware that the battle for the city is being lost, the rebels prepare to retreat (431, 433). Naked, Kai carries the dying nurse to a vehicle, cradling her in the back as they drive towards "the peninsula bridge":

> They reached the bridge and stopped. Someone with a gun ordered Kai down. He stumbled, dragging Balia with him. They ordered him to stand by the metal railing. He felt the cold against the small of his back, remembered his nakedness. The driver was climbing back into the vehicle. Kai felt a moment of hope. The driver's companion was making his way around the other side of the vehicle, opening the door, preparing to climb inside. Kai stood holding Balia. He watched. He waited. He saw the man stop and retrace his steps ... He came back around the vehicle, approaching Kai with sudden determination. Kai knew what was coming. He saw the man pull the gun out of his belt, raise his arm and take aim. Kai closed his eyes. He leaned his body backwards, holding tight on to Balia, backwards over the railing, until he felt himself topple under the weight of their combined bodies. He kicked out. Something thudded into them. A bullet. He could not tell whether he had taken it or Balia. He was falling ... He has lost his hold of Balia, feels her body tumble past him. He is falling. Then comes the sting of the water ... The sting of the water to tell him that he is alive (433-434).

6. CONCLUSION: TRUTHFUL FICTIONS OF THE SELF

The bones of the question of self-identity rattle a person's skeletal breath in such situations. They fracture it. They refuse dissembling, no matter how much one may wish to erase them. One may well feel compelled, with St Augustine, to ask: *Quis ego et qualis ego?* (*Confessions* IX. 1) – "Who am

14 Both Imma (143) and Norridge (29) state this forthrightly (143). Also note Kai's impotence (286-287).

I and what am I?". But these questions may only be asked – only thought, reasoned, and spoken of – with regard to, and in the awareness of being a being-in-time, and being *this* particular person. For thoughtful reflection takes place within a specific embodied, physical and changing, material self, whose understanding endeavours to grasp one's self in time's movement by recalling and remembering and, in the quest of self-knowing, by undertaking an interrogation of the self: "Who and what am I?". The answers that proffer some degree of intelligibility emerge through the intellect's searching of one's memory itself, as one seeks to articulate and order, more comprehensively, the being *who is this memory*, whose presence is present in time's now of the very asking of these questions. For *what* this memory is – its *essential* content – is *who* this memory is; and *who* this memory is – the person constituted by this memory – is the very being who asks the questions in time's present presence, in search of authentic selfhood.[15] As Augustine, in Book X (17) of the *Confessions*, exclaims: "*Magna vis est memoriae, nescio quid horrendum ... profunda et infinita multiplicitas*" ("How powerful is memory; I do not know the extent of its awe-inspiring and terrifying, profound and infinite complexity"). Then, in a crucial admission, he immediately declares: "*hoc animus ego, et hoc ego ipse sum"* (This is my mind, and this is me") – this is my understanding's attempt to make sense of, to know, who I am now.

Indeed, memory's breadth and depth persistently shape one's life for the time of one's life; and to return to its episodes and events is more than merely to observe oneself. For when one endeavours to understand oneself, then not only are one's words and actions interrogated, but so too are one's silences and by-standings. And these frequently are attentively fetched by "fiction's truths" and are forcibly conveyed in its narratives: in "the silent lie" of Elias Cole, his "fragmentation of ... conscience", as indeed of "the outside world['s]" (410, 424-425); in the responsibility to speak: "Do we have to keep quiet?" asks Abass (313), after listening to the revelations about Agnes, Naasu, and JaJa; in Kai's trauma, so that, to advert again to Augustine, *intus eras et ego foris* (*Confessions* X. 27), Kai may no longer attempt to repress by excluding and placing "outside" what is of himself "inside", and rather to acknowledge his scarred and traumatised internal self-constitution.

A crucially suggestive sound heard by Kai and noted in the article's title, reverberates in the damaged lives of all the characters in this novel. When violated and clinging to the life-ebbing body of Nurse Balia in the back of the vehicle, Kai sees the "[d]awn ... coming, a glow upon the sky", he hears a sound that echoes across some two-thousand years as the signal reminder of

15 For an anthropological examination of the embodied, somatic nature of the memory of an individual, its communal aspects, and the notion of identity, see Yelvington (2002:237-240, in particular).

humanity's wilful self-impairment: "A cock crowed". As the narrative continues, it was, then, as now, "a sound so ordinary" – "*so ordinary*" because it signifies the condoned ordinariness of human betrayals "so ordinary it seemed to come from another world" (433) – "*another world*", because betrayal always denies being there, of speaking those particular words, of making that specific gesture: Οὐκ οἶδα τὸν ἄνθρωπον ("I do not know the man"), says Peter of Jesus (Mt.26:72). Similarly, Elias' self-justifications in his betrayals of Julius, of Saffia in marriage, and of his daughter's trust; Adrian's betrayal of Lisa, his wife, of deflecting his later awareness of Mamakay's enduring love of Kai, and of his friendship through a partly conscious avoidance of Kai during his year in love; and of Kai, of so nearly turning his back upon his nation and its need and joining his close friend, Tejani, in exile,[16] and by allowing Nenebah both to believe and to die thinking that *she* was the cause of their relationship ending. The reasons for the denials, the silences, the words that equivocate, one's own misdirected gaze, one's gestures elsewhere, and one's easier path taken often seem so "reasonable", so justifiable.

If memory constitutes the self – if it is one's narrative self until time's now – then it includes those whom one has loved and continues to love, because they are present in any recounting *to* oneself *of* oneself. They are of one's memory and, in this sense, remain "a power that endures ... a memory of love" (185). The issue is *how* are these loves to be livingly memorialised – that is, as informants that are integral to, and constitutive of one's life. How is one to "bear witness" to them, which is one of primary reasons Forna provides for writing her novels? How is one to respond to them truthfully, so that one's own life may "endure ... with a power", "a memory of love" (185) and not of deceits and betrayals in the life of another?

What "bearing witness" may require of fiction, one suggests, is to confront the reader with the possibility of living an aspirational Socratic "examined life" that is worthy of being human (*Apologia*, 38a), by portraying characters and situations that pose Murdoch's (1970:52; original emphasis) troubling questions: "What is a good man [*sic*] like? How can we make ourselves morally better? *Can* we make ourselves morally better?" Awkwardly, moral questions direct one's attention initially to one's immediate relational others, to those whom one loves and, rather unsettlingly, asks whether they are worthy of this love. If they are, then what kind of love are they worthy of? Just as one loves

16 Emigration from native countries that have contributed significantly to the education and acquisition of the skills of its citizens is an ethical issue less than enthusiastically examined. Kai had applied to work in the USA, and his visa had been accepted on the day before Nenebah/Mamakay's death: "Yesterday he [Kai] had gone into town to an Internet café and sent an email to Tejani ... Everything was done, he told Tejani, the process complete ... Kai's application had been accepted. His visa had come through" (412).

persons, and those who are dead and yet continue to exert an influence upon one – upon who one is, what one says, and how one acts and interacts with others – so fictional characters may challenge one's "real loves" and question the depths of one's emotional bonds with them. Fiction's mirror facilitates the inquiry as to whether, in fact, they do contribute to one becoming "morally better" in ways that enhance truthfulness and, importantly, also provides critical assessments of one's conduct. Moreover, through defamiliarisation strategies, a reader distant in education, profession, and location may enter other and foreign "worlds" – a Wall Street stockbroker or an English country parson may be transported to trading kindnesses in Freetown's civil conflict, and these "truthful others" of fiction may challenge the reader to undertake a fundamental examination of their seemingly ethically responsible New York or Oxfordshire self.

Thus, to love those who are the present of one's past may well demand that one reconsider the responsibility of the self and of those who are constitutionally interwoven, inter-texted with, and intra-texted within oneself, by asking: What is the content of one's own memory that one gifts to others and to the future? What self is one – rather than "leaving behind" – *handing on*? Such questions, at least when faced somewhat brutally and honestly, probably engender shame rather than *hubris*. If they were to suggest some momentary hint of one's marginal contribution to future lives, then one may be reminded of the need to exercise an attentive watchfulness about the motives and intentions of one's words and actions, in order to ensure that they do not retain the residual and persistent stubbornness of self-interest, of forms of subtle coercion that primarily seek to fulfil one's own desires and needs echoed in the dawn-heralding sound of a cock crowing.

To acknowledge that these self-examining inquiries of on-going self-stripping, to recur to Williams (1990:1), are essential to one's integrity is to recognise that one's life, from inceptive cry to final breath, is a partial and damaged life, an existence that demands the perennial scrutiny of one's willed and known, and unwilled and unknown yet self-impacting, frangible human condition. Implicit in this realisation is the recognition that, disconsolately, one is *unable* to eradicate these deficiencies oneself; that not only does one require assistance, but that knowing that one requires assistance is also to know that other, similarly blemished, human beings are able to provide aid to one if only within their own remit of restricted human capabilities, and that there reside acknowledged and unacknowledged self-investments in their counsel of one, just as there do in one's own provision of counsel to them. This disconcerting awareness compels the commitment to an ascetic of moral work so as to live and love more virtuously in humanly stammering and halting ways. By practising the daily task of "search[ing] ... in the debris of the past" of

yesterday, in order "to see not only what was lost but what there is still to be found" (Mendelsohn, cited by Blustein 2008: 240), confronts the speech and action of one's yesterdays with the challenge to learn from its mistakes, and to endeavour to revise and reconstitute one's speech and action of today and tomorrow. For, unexamined, what is in one's memory of "the lost" errors of the past continues to pervert the attempts to speak and act more humanely. And fiction's gift to the gift of memory's construction of the moral self resides in its imaginative characterisations and metaphorised landscapes that, both by their terrifyingly cruel and pitiless, and by their joyful and earnest, narratives, place before one a redemptive hope that a story may rescue one, may redeem, possibly, even may save one, as that ancient story which contains an account of a cock crowing claims.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Augustine

2016. *Confessions II.* LCL 27. Edited and translated by Carolyn J.B. Hammond. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Blustein, J.

2008. *The moral demands of memory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511818615

Cole, E.

2017. Interview with Aminatta Forna, 16 June 2017. *Journal of the African Literature Association* 11(2):238-245. https://doi.org/10.1080/21674736.2017.1375660

Elliot, T.S.

1963. Collected poems 1909 – 1962. London: Faber and Faber.

England, F.E.

2020. *Fictions of God*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock.

Forna, A.

2010. *The memory of love*. London: Bloomsbury.

2021. Don't judge a book by its author | Books | *The Guardian*. [Online.] Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/feb/13/aminatta-forna-dont-judge-book-by-cover [23 August 2021].

Imma, Z.

2017. Rewriting the SLTRC: Masculinities, the arts of forgetting, and intimate space in Delia Jarrett-Macauley's *Moses, citizen and me* and Aminatta Forna's *The memory of love*. *Research in African Literatures* 48(2):129-151. https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafrilite.48.2.10

Harton, F.P.
1932. *The elements of the spiritual life: A study in ascetical theology*. London: SPCK.

Kirk, K.E.
1931. *The vision of God*. *The Christian doctrine of the* Summum Bonum. The Bampton Lectures for 1928. London: Longmans, Green and Co.

Lash, N.
1986. *Theology on the way to Emmaus*. London: SCM.

Lukes, S.
1986. Introduction. *Power*. Edited by Stephen Lukes. Oxford: Blackwell.

M'cleod, H.,and Ganson, B.
2018. The underlying causes of fragility and instability in Sierra Leone. *LSE-Oxford Commission on State Fragility, Growth and Development*, April 2018.

Mikkonen, J.
2021. *Philosophy, literature and understanding*. *On reading and cognition*. London: Bloomsbury. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350163997

Moore, M.E.
2013. *Kenotic politics*. *The reconfiguration of power in Jesus' political praxis*. London: Bloomsbury.

Murdoch, I.
1970. *The sovereignty of God*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Norridge, Z.
2012. Sex as synecdoche: Intimate languages of violence in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a yellow sun* and Aminatta Forna's *The memory of love*. *Research in African Literatures* 43(2):-. https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafrilite.43.2.18

Rieff, D.
2016. *In praise of forgetting*. *Historical memory and its ironies*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Sykes, S.W.
2006. *Power and Christian theology*. London: Continuum.

Thomson, B.
2007. Sierra Leone: Reform or relapse? Conflict and governance reform. *A Chatham House Report*, June 2007. London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs.

Ulanov, B. & Ulanov, A.
1982. *Primary speech*. *A psychology of prayer*. London: SCM.

Williams, R.D.
1990. *The wound of knowledge. Christian spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the cross*. Second, revised edition. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.

2014. *The edge of words. God and the habits of language*. London: Bloomsbury.

Yelvington, K.A.
2002. History, memory and identity: A programmatic prolegomenon. *Critique of Anthropology* Vol. 22(3):227-256. https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X02022003757

Zournazi, M. & Williams, R..
2021. *Justice and love. A philosophical dialogue*. London: Bloomsbury. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350090392

Keywords	*Trefwoorde*
Memory	Geheue
Love	Liefde
Moral self	Morele self
Selective memory	Selektiewe geheue