

Memory and Authenticity

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Ten years ago Natalie Davis and I decided to put together a special issue of *Representations* we would call "Memory and Counter-Memory." When the issue appeared in the spring of 1989, the click of discovery, the buzz of current interest, the echo of old debates were becoming a roar; by the spring of 1993 when Stephen Greenblatt and I offered a Berkeley graduate seminar on "Pasts in the Present and the Institutionalizations of Memory," we were part of a movement questioning proprietary claims over the past by history and historians. Only a few years later the movement has become an industry, with an extensive product line and, so we might think, some worries about overproduction. Such is the short academic life-cycle at this *fin de siècle*, R to D, glimmer to glut.

The quick pace makes it easy to forget that the historical study of collective memory is already in its second or third generation, or even older, depending how the reckoning is done. Just to take French examples one could start, say, with the work of Maurice Halbwachs, then go on to the collective effort of Pierre Nora and his collaborators, before arriving at a current cluster of studies of remembering and forgetting Vichy and the Algerian war. Ian Hacking has recently argued that French positivist sciences of psychology began a "re-writing of the soul" in terms of memory in the 1870s, and Richard Terdiman has located a consciousness-raising crisis of memory in France much earlier in the nineteenth century. One way or another, a rich corpus of histories of memory exists from which we may draw some conclusions before rushing on, as it may be, like lemmings.¹

Here is a sample list of basic propositions that seem to me established or reconfirmed by the memory literature I have read off and on over several years:

As in a classic, Aristotelian distinction, memory (*mneme*) is involuntary, memory that comes up unbidden, or a deliberate act of recollection (*anamnesis*); although recent historical studies tend to blur the distinction, as the ancients also did, they are mostly concerned with memory of the selective sort.

Individual memory may be of both kinds, but collective memory is always constructed because, absent an ether of transcendental, organic, or communal memory, people can't remember things they haven't experienced.

Therefore, collective memory has no unmediated access to the past but is about the articulation of identity from the vantage of the present; it is continuously reconstructed rather than recalled pristine, and it attributes the causes and truths of things that it claims to know.

Collective memory can best be characterized as a practice or a set of practices rather than a faculty or an entity such as—these are common suggestions—a storage bin, an aviary, a wax tablet, or a palimpsest.²

To clinch these points could take whole tomes. But considering that I am fairly confident about being able to make the case, why can I also be certain of resistance and feel it in myself besides? There's evidently more to this feeling than my having listed propositions without making arguments. Even Ockham's razor needs whetting by argumentation, but the objections that come to mind go beyond reasonable arguments. To begin with, I suspect that many people, including perfectly respectable academics, want to obfuscate because memory proffers relief from humdrum history, a promise of intimacy, access to "lived experience," critiques of official complacency or duplicity, and at the same time an imagined universality that transcends everyday routines. This is nothing new, of course. Nineteenth-century historicism wanted to recall the past into the present; "living memory" was in all senses of the word a "medium" of time travel, and there were and still are many frequent flyers. My guess is that not even the most determined postmodernist sensibility can altogether resist this magic carpet.

If anything, programmatic postmodernist opposition to such flights may have something to do with some kinds of objections I'm anticipating. It is, for example, textbook Deconstruction that a positive claim hinges on some more or less encrypted Other, and this means that deconstructed versions of memory will call up, ironically or not, shadowy versions that are allegedly organic, unmediated, whole, present, etc. But there are more pressing reasons for wanting

to insist that the immediacy of memory matters. Insofar as twentieth-century traumas and horrors, to which the critical dismantling of conventional knowledge is partly a response, lie beyond the limits of representation, they have come to demarcate an auratic realm of remembering and forgetting.³ Add to this some usual suspects of modern malaise—capitalism and commodification, depersonalization and homogenization, mass media and mass culture—and we have the incentive or desire for alternatives to which memory corresponds and caters. Even irreverent critiques of the truth-claims of memory often have an elegiac quality about them, not exactly nostalgic perhaps for any particular remembered tradition so much as for the ability to believe in tradition at all.

At this point I want to shift to memory's Siamese twin, which is not (for present purposes anyway) forgetting or silence or history but authenticity. I want to do so because the notional careers of memory and authenticity overlap so closely as to be practically inseparable. Lionel Trilling's account of the notion of authenticity since Rousseau in a celebrated series of Harvard lectures could just as well apply to parallel conceptions of memory. So, for example:

At the behest of the criterion of authenticity, much that was once thought to make up the very fabric of culture has come to seem of little account, mere fantasy or ritual, or downright falsification. Conversely, much that culture traditionally condemned and sought to exclude is accorded a considerable moral authority by reason of the authenticity claimed for it, for example, disorder, violence, and unreason . . . [A] marvelous generative force [is] assigned to authenticity, which implies the downward movement through all the cultural superstructures to someplace where all movement ends, and begins. (Trilling 100)

Trilling went on to quote Wordsworth: "Points have we within all our souls / Where all stand single" (105). He could have updated these lines with the existentialists' *inauthenticity* as an alleged loss of this focus and its dissipation in the "average everyday" of mindless occupations and mass culture. In any case, memory understood as individualized and circumscribed, whether by a person or a special group, would be authenticity's analogue. It would bear authentic testimony against distortion or dilution or excision by institutional orthodoxy.

Like memory holding forth on its purity, authenticity in this sense is an easy target. I have a bulging file of authenticity jokes.

Adorno mocked an existentialist jargon of authenticity as “the Wurlitzer organ of the spirit” (17). In Umberto Eco’s travels in hyperreality, paying customers at Forest Lawns cemetery are told that the stained glass “Last Supper” is more authentic than Leonardo’s original. According to one of the greatest students of pop culture, Sam Goldwyn, “Authenticity is everything; if you can fake it, you’ve got it made” (Orvell 12). A review article on the recent Jane Austen film fad begins with a mind-boggling headline: “In the Authenticity Game, Only a Few Win.”⁴ The catch is that, like memory again, authenticity never seems to lose altogether; it’s a bottom line that is very hard to erase. David Lowenthal, the Sisyphus of a long campaign against what he calls our “mania” for authenticity, is a case in point. “In place of ignorance or philistinism,” Lowenthal wrote more than fifteen years ago, “we are now so besotted by the past that anything goes so long as it is ‘authentic.’ In what purports to be history . . . ‘authenticity’ means fidelity to feeling that swamps facts in anachronistic invention; a search for roots so engagé as to include very little of the actual past” (*The Past* 231). But no sooner has Lowenthal got uphill on faking in art and architecture than “false authenticity and inauthentic truth” slip past him in musical performances, ethnic cookery, airport art, identity politics, clothing labels, and *The Lowenthal Album*, “a leather textured library edition . . . registered in the owner’s name, serially numbered, and accompanied with a Certificate of Authenticity” (“Art and Authenticity” 646). In his most recent book Lowenthal fights the same uphill battle all over again.

In effect, strict conceptions of memory and authenticity make it difficult if not impossible to take one or the other seriously. But this is to be, so to speak, immemorial about both authenticity and memory. The strict constructions are, after all, historically shallow and short. For authenticity they arise somewhere between the late eighteenth-century question “Born Originals, how comes it to pass that we die Copies?” and various versions of a fall from some pristine state of nature and condition of the soul.⁵ The fixation on memory as a key to individual and social identity comes later, as I have noted in citing Hacking and Terdiman on the French case. In this century Halbwachs’s influential analysis of “les cadres sociaux” ‘the social framework’ within which memory hinges on “the support of a group delimited in space and time” was actually part of an argument for the moderating accountability of history. Even the widespread misreading of his work as a celebration of collective memory was delayed by

the war and his death at the hands of the Nazis.⁶ I'm not impressed by *longue durée* versions of the preeminence of memory, from Augustine or even Hesiod, because they are too generic to make specific historical sense.⁷

Before the later eighteenth century, memory was often conceived and used as a matter of teachable rules and routines. Today's advertisements on "building your memory and empowering your life" offer much the same instruction. There is nothing particularly mysterious or self-enclosing about the old arts of memory as we have come to understand them, thanks to Frances Yates, first of all, and now to Mary Carruthers and Lina Bolzoni.⁸ Even so, studies of pre-modern mnemonics have been only glancingly integrated and absorbed in accounts of modern memory. Pierre Nora, for instance, after acknowledging Frances Yates for his borrowed notion of "*lieux de mémoire*," proceeds as if the terminology were new and deploys it only for what he regards as the emptied-out "memory places" of our time. But these are not at all like the full *topoi* or *loci* of the ancient, medieval, and Renaissance arts of memory, where memory worked in and through physical sites generating references that could be variously assembled and taken apart in making an oration or a text. It is misleading to say, as Hacking does dismissively, that "the whole point is to provide instant recall of any body of desired facts, things, or texts" like a computer (Hacking 202). The *ars memorativa* was an art of invention, both in the old sense of coming on or into something (*invenire*) and in the sense of discovering something new.

The old art of memory does not entail the kind of nostalgic essentialism that affirms the reality of an origin by proclaiming its loss. Yates was especially concerned with memory images, arranged as in "theaters" of memory and, in hermetic traditions, capable of figuring the harmonies between earthly and transcendental spheres. Carruthers sees memory as nothing less than a master modality of medieval culture. While she shows it encompassing everything from heraldic devices to illuminated manuscripts, stained-glass windows, and church gargoyles, she insists that writing was not at odds with or detached from the mnemonic imaging. Medieval mnemonics did not distinguish "between writing on the memory and writing on some other surface"; rather than being an external support or implement of memory, the activity of writing was a kind of memorization itself, or at least intimately bound up with it. So, on the one hand, "the symbolic representations we call writing are no more than cues

or triggers for the memorial 'representations' . . . upon which human cognition is based"; on the other hand, "anything that encodes information in order to stimulate the memory to store or retrieve information is 'writing,' whether it be alphabet, hieroglyph, ideogram, American Indian picture-writing, or Inca knot-writing" (Carruthers 31-32).

As might be expected by now, there were parallels in older theories and practices of authentication. Whereas we are likely to regard something as authentic insofar as it is categorically unique and self-referential and ipso facto irreproducible, authenticity in an older sense, and in many non-Western cultures, is *produced* by attestation, the witness of tradition, the appeal to assent. Authentication in this sense is a process, a function of discussion and evaluation, neither merely subjective nor conclusive once and for all.

I'm not sure how plausible this sounds. It will not inspire confidence that there are especially good examples in the canon law on the authentication of relics and saints' lives. The procedures include assembling documents, lists, charters, and monuments of whatever kind capable of throwing light on the relics or lives in question; their examination by what we would call expert witnesses, deliberation on the case, including the arguments of the Devil's Advocate; the achievement of a degree of probability consistent with good conscience and moral conviction about the outcome. If contrary facts emerge, then the veracity of relic may be bracketed, though it may continue to enjoy the respect to which past usage entitles it.⁹ In the view of perhaps the greatest of all Catholic authenticators, "it is not authority that makes for authenticity, it is authenticity that makes authority in virtue of a conception according to which authority is never but a matter of assessed witnessing." It is "une persuasion et conversation commune que l'on a de quelques faits. . . ." 'an opinion and shared conversation that one has about some facts' (Mabillon 162). This is from the Benedictine Jean Mabillon, who is commemorated next to Descartes in the Panthéon, no doubt to the surprise of both had they known about it.

Another example is more familiar, though not necessarily better understood. I'm thinking of proof "beyond a reasonable doubt" in Anglo-American law. Without reading Barbara Shapiro and other legal historians, we might take it for granted that reasonable doubt refers to doubts of reason by standards of demonstrative and logical certainty. Such are the standards toward which post-Cartesians are drawn, despite real experience and better judgment. The point is

that human affairs are actually too complicated and uncertain for such demonstrations, and too morally fraught besides to be treated like geometry or physical science. Together with the need for local knowledge, this is, among other reasons, why Common Law mandates juries. In one classic formulation, “reasonable doubt” is

not merely possible doubt; because everything relating to human affairs . . . is open to some possible or imaginary doubt. It is that state of the case, which, after the entire comparison and consideration of all the evidence, leaves the mind . . . in that condition that the jurors cannot say they feel an abiding conviction of moral certainty of the truth of the charge . . . [that] the evidence establishes the truth of the facts with a reasonable and moral certainty; a certainty that convinces and directs the understanding, and satisfies the reason and judgment. . . . (Shapiro 24-25)

The judgment of conscience was not understood to be merely willful or prescribed by custom. It was supposed to be a rational decision, linked to the understanding and not just to the passions. Conscience had high commission and authority because its deliberations mattered more than abstract reason or physical science. Hence the “common rule of authentic evidence” formulated at least by the late seventeenth century was a cat’s cradle of criteria at once pragmatic and fairly precise. It called for examining “the nature of the evidence within common fame, tradition, and the writings of persons who related them, together with the number, concurrence, veracity and private characters of those persons . . . so that [without actually being eyewitnesses] they were bound by all the rules of historical faith, and right reason, to give credit to this [or that] history” (Shapiro 11).

Now my sketchy account will hardly convince anyone “beyond a reasonable doubt” or otherwise. But it may be enough to suggest ways out of the impasse of treating memory and authenticity so narrowly that we are obliged either to turn cynical or to give up on them altogether. These involve process, solicit varieties of evidence, call for public and professional accountability. They entered the historian’s tool kit long ago under the old-fashioned title “historical erudition” with quaint subtitles such as philology, diplomatic, and codicology. Perhaps this is the fantasy of an early modern historian, but it seems to me that the old *érudits* have something to show us still.¹⁰ Having already made a “linguistic turn,” they could insist on

close reading and definition, while also taking it for granted that language generated copious meanings that had to be interpreted and contextualized. They were not, for all that, soft on reality, among other reasons, because they also worked with marks, shards, and traces as indices of distant pasts. They did not have easy lumping words such as "culture," "society," "experience," or, as Ian Hacking thinks he has shown, "memory" to fudge the differences. They were interdisciplinary besides: having relatively little evidence, they had to use whatever material or method came to hand. Again *avant la lettre*, they were "dialogic" and "self-reflexive," as Professor La Capra would want the up-to-date historian to be, because their work was a conversation among contending citations and the citizens of the *respublica literarum*. The texts they wrote did not ride high over the ballast of footnotes but were interrogated and open to interpellation in the work and play of cross-referencing, digression, excursus, and quotation.

It's tempting to conclude with the postmodern mantra "back to the future." But I don't believe that's ever possible or, even if it were, necessary. After all, the kinds of attention and the skills I've dwelt upon have not been repressed awaiting a return so much as marginalized, literally so when consigned to the sidelines as preliminary and propadeutic or relegated to our footnotes or, more likely in the current publishing economy, endnotes. My proposal, in the end, is a modest one: that historians and other students of history and memory bring to the front and center the critical erudition of assessment, research, and accountability that lie on the sides and bottom of our work.

Notes

1. For France and a very large literature, I limit myself to citing: Pierre Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire*; Ian Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory*, 198-209; Richard Terdiman, *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis*. The most important surveys include Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*; John R. Gillis, *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, 1994); Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory, vol. 1: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*; and David Lowenthal's two books, *The Past is a Foreign Country* and *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*.

2. See Roediger.
3. See Friedlander.
4. *New York Times*, Sunday, March 13, 1996, H-15.
5. See, for instance, Marshall Berman, *Rousseau and the Politics of Authenticity* and *All That's Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of the Modern*.
6. See Halbwachs 84.
7. See Hutton.
8. See Yates, *The Art of Memory*; Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study in Medieval Culture*; Lina Bolzoni, *La stanza della memoria: modelli letterari e iconografici nell'età della stampa*.
9. See Dooley.
10. I develop this view in the introduction to *The New Erudition*, 1-12.

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