# 2. Historical Memory and Collective Memory

## Autobiographical Memory and Historical Memory: Their Apparent Opposition

We are not accustomed to speaking, even metaphorically, of a "group memory." Such a faculty, it would seem, could exist and endure only insofar as it was bound to a person's body and brain. However, suppose that remembrances are organized in two ways, either grouped about a definite individual who considers them from his own viewpoint or distributed within a group for which each is a partial image. Then there is an "individual memory" and a "collective memory." In other words, the individual participates in two types of memory, but adopts a quite different, even contrary, attitude as he participates in the one or the other. On the one hand, he places his own remembrances within the framework of his personality, his own personal life; he considers those of his own that he holds in common with other people only in the aspect that interests him by virtue of distinguishing him from others. On the other hand, he is able to act merely as a group member, helping to evoke and maintain impersonal remembrances of interest to the group. These two memories are often intermingled. In particular, the individual memory, in order to corroborate and make precise and even to cover





the gaps in its remembrances, relies upon, relocates itself within, momentarily merges with, the collective memory. Nonetheless, it still goes its own way, gradually assimilating any acquired deposits. The collective memory, for its part, encompasses the individual memories while remaining distinct from them. It evolves according to its own laws, and any individual remembrances that may penetrate are transformed within a totality having no personal consciousness.

Let us now examine the individual memory. It is not completely sealed off and isolated. A man must often appeal to others' remembrances to evoke his own past. He goes back to reference points determined by society, hence outside himself. Moreover, the individual memory could not function without words and ideas, instruments the individual has not himself invented but appropriated from his milieu. Nevertheless, it is true that one remembers only what he himself has seen, done, felt, and thought at some time. That is, our own memory is never confused with anyone else's. Both the individual memory and the collective memory have rather limited, but differing, spatial and temporal boundaries. Those of the collective memory may be either more compressed or more extended.

During my life, my national society has been theater for a number of events that I say I "remember," events that I know about only from newspapers or the testimony of those directly involved. These events occupy a place in the memory of the nation, but I myself did not witness them. In recalling them, I must rely entirely upon the memory of others, a memory that comes, not as corroborator or completer of my own, but as the very source of what I wish to repeat. I often know such events no better nor in any other manner than I know historical events that occurred before I was born. I carry a baggage load of historical remembrances that I can increase through conversation and reading. But it remains a borrowed memory, not my own. These events have deeply influenced national thought, not only because they have altered institutions but also because their tradition endures, very much alive, in region, province, political party, occupation, class, even certain families or persons who experienced them firsthand. For me they are conceptions, sym-

bols. I picture them pretty much as others do. I can imagine them, but I cannot remember them. I belong to a group with a part of my personality, so that everything that has occurred within it as long as I belonged—even everything that interested and transformed it before I entered—is in some sense familiar to me. But should I wish to restore the remembrance of a certain event in its entirety, I would have to bring together all the partial and distorted reproductions concerning it that are held by all group members. By contrast, my personal remembrances are wholly mine, wholly in me.

Therefore, there is reason to distinguish two sorts of memory. They might be labeled, if one prefers, internal or inward memory and external memory, or personal memory and social memory. I would consider more accurate "autobiographical memory" and "historical memory." The former would make use of the latter, since our life history belongs, after all, to general history. Naturally, historical memory would cover a much broader expanse of time. However, it would represent the past only in a condensed and schematic way, while the memory of our own life would present a richer portrait with greater continuity.

If our personal memory is understood to be something that we know only from within, while the collective memory would be known only from without, then the two will surely contrast sharply. I remember Reims because I lived there a whole year. But I also remember that Joan of Arc consecrated Charles VII there, because I have heard it said or read it. The story of Joan of Arc has been presented so often on the stage, on the movie screen, or elsewhere that I truly have no difficulty imagining Joan of Arc at Reims. Meanwhile, I certainly know that I was not a witness to the event itself, that I cannot go beyond these words heard or read by me, that these symbols passed down through time are all that comes to me from that past. The same is true for every historical fact I know. Proper names, dates, formulas summarizing a long sequence of details, occasional anecdotes or quotations, are the epitaphs to those bygone events, as brief, general, and scant of meaning as most tombstone inscriptions. History indeed resembles a crowded cemetery, where room must constantly be made for new tombstones.



Were the past social milieu to live for us only in these historical notations, and, more generally speaking, were the collective memory composed only of dates, arbitrary definitions, and reminders of events, then it would most assuredly remain external to us. Many citizens of our vast national societies never participate in the common interests of the majority, who read the newspaper and pay some attention to public affairs. Even we who do not so isolate ourselves may periodically become so absorbed that we no longer follow "current events." Later on, we may find ourselves reassembling around such a period in our life the public events of that time. For example, what happened in France and the world in 1877, the year I was born? It was the year of the "16th of May," when the volatile political situation truly gave birth to the Third Republic. DeBroglie was in power, and Gambetta declared that "he must resign or be forcibly removed." The painter Courbet died. Victor Hugo published the second volume of *Legende des Siècles*. The Boulevard Saint-Germain was completed in Paris, and construction began on the Avenue de la République. The attention of all Europe focused on Russia's war against Turkey. Osman Pasha was forced to surrender Plevna after a long and heroic defense. I thus reconstitute a rather spacious framework, in which I feel myself quite lost. I am doubtless caught up in the current of national life, but I hardly feel involved. I am like a passenger on a boat. As the riverbanks pass by, everything he sees is neatly fitted into the total landscape. But suppose he loses himself in thought or is distracted by his traveling companions; he concerns himself only occasionally with what passes along the banks. Later on, he will be able to remember where he has traveled but few details of the landscape, and he will be able to trace his route on a map. Such a traveler may recover some forgotten memories or make others more precise, but he has not really had contact with the country through which he passed.

Certain psychologists apparently prefer to imagine historical events as auxiliary to our memory, functioning much as do the temporal partitions of a watch or calendar. Our life flows by in a continuous movement. But when we look back at what has unrolled, we always find it possible to assign its various portions to the de-

marcations of collective time. Such temporal divisions are imposed from outside upon every individual memory precisely because their source is not in any single one of them. A social time defined in this way would truly be external to the lived duration of each consciousness. We see this clearly in the case of a watch measuring astronomical time. But the same is also true of those dates on the clock-face of history: they correspond to the most noteworthy events of national life, the occurrence of which we may be unaware of, the importance of which we recognize only later. Our lives thus sit on the surface of social bodies, merely observing their alterations and putting up with their disturbances. An event takes its place in the sequence of historical facts only some time after its occurrence. Thus we can link the various phases of our life to national events only after the fact. Nothing demonstrates better how artificial and external is that operation that consists of referring to demarcations of collective life for mental landmarks. Nothing demonstrates more clearly that we really study distinct objects when we focus on either individual memory or collective memory. The events and dates constituting the very substance of group life can be for the individual only so many external signs, which he can use as reference points only by going outside himself.

Of course, the collective memory would play a very secondary role in the fixation of our remembrances if it had no other content than such sequences of dates or lists of facts. But such a conception is remarkably narrow and does not correspond to reality. For that very reason I have had difficulty presenting it in this way. However, such an approach was necessary, for this conception accords with a widely accepted doctrine. The memory is usually considered as a properly individual faculty—that is, as appearing in a consciousness reduced solely to its own resources, isolated from anyone else and capable of evoking by will or chance states previously experienced. Nevertheless, since it is impossible to deny that we often replace our remembrances within a space and time whose demarcations we share with others, or that we also situate them within dates that have meaning only in relation to a group to which we belong, these facts are acknowledged to be the case. But it is a sort of minimal concession that does not impair, in the minds of those granting it, the specificity of the individual memory.



## The Real Interpenetration of Historical and Autobiographical Memory (Contemporary History)

As Stendhal observed:

> Now as I write my life in 1835, I make many discoveries. . . . They are like great fragments of fresco on a wall, which, long forgotten, reappear suddenly, and by the side of these well-preserved fragments there are . . . great gaps where there's nothing to be seen but the bricks of the wall. The plaster on which the fresco had been painted has fallen and the fresco has gone forever. There are no dates besides the pieces of fresco that remain, and now in 1835, I have to hunt for the dates. Fortunately there's no harm in an anachronism, a confusion of a year or two. After my arrival in Paris in 1799, my life became involved with public events and all dates are certain. . . . In 1835, I discover the shape and the "why" of past events.[1]

Such dates and the historical and national events they represent (for this is surely the sense in which Stendahl understands them) can be totally external, at least in appearance, to the circumstances of our life. But later on, as we reflect upon them, we "make many discoveries"; we "discover the shape and the 'why' of events." This might be understood in various ways. When I page through a contemporary history and review the sequence of events in France or Europe since my birth, during the first eight or ten years of my life, I indeed get the impression of an external framework of which I was then unaware and I learn to relocate my childhood within the history of my times. Even though I clarify from outside this first period of my life, however, my memory scarcely grows richer in its personal aspect. I gain no revelations of my childhood; nothing new

[1] Stendhal, *Vie d'Henri Brulard*, ed. Henri Martineau (Paris: Le Divan I, 1949), p. 151.

emerges. I did not yet read newspapers or participate in adult conversation. At present I can formulate an idea, necessarily arbitrary, of the national affairs that were of lasting interest to my parents, but I have no direct remembrances of these events or my parents' reactions to them. It seems clear to me that the first national event that penetrated the fabric of my childhood impressions was the funeral of Victor Hugo. (I was then eight years old.) I see myself at my father's side, walking towards the Arc de Triomphe de l'Etoile where the catafalque had been erected; I see myself the next day watching the funeral parade from a balcony at the corner of the Rue Soufflot and the Rue Gay-Lussac.

Had nothing, then, of my encompassing national group filtered down to me and my narrow circle of concerns until this time? Yet I was always with my parents. They were exposed to many influences. They were, in part, the people they were because they lived through that period, in a certain country under certain national and political circumstances. Perhaps I can find no trace of definite "historical" events in their overt habits, in the general tone of their feelings. But there certainly existed in France during the ten-, fifteen-, or twenty-year period following the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871 a remarkable psychological and social atmosphere unique to this time. My parents belonged to this period; they acquired certain habits and characteristics that became part of their personality and made an early impression upon me. What is at issue here is no longer mere dates or facts. Of course, even contemporary history too often boils down to a series of overly abstract conceptions. But I can fill in these conceptions, substituting images and impressions for these ideas, when I look over the paintings, portraits, and engravings of the time or think about the books that appeared, the plays presented, the style of the period, the jokes and humor in vogue.

I don't fancy that this picture of a world so recently vanished and now re-created by artificial means will become the slightly contrived background on which to project profiles of my parents—a sort of solution in which I immerse my own past in order to "develop" it, as one might a film. On the contrary, the world of my childhood, as I recover it from memory, fits so naturally into the framework of recent history reconstituted by formal study because it already bears the stamp of that history. What I discover is that by attentive effort I can recover, in my remembrances of my little world, a semblance of the surrounding social milieu. Many scattered details, perhaps too familiar for me to have ever considered connecting them and inquiring into their meaning, now stand out and come together. I learn to distinguish, in the character of my parents and the period, what can be accounted for not by human nature or circumstances common to other periods but only by the peculiarities of the national milieu at that time. My parents—indeed their friends and every adult I met then—were (like all of us) a product of their times. When I want to picture that period's life and thought, I direct my reflections toward them. This is what makes contemporary history interest me in a way the history of preceding periods cannot. Of course, I cannot claim to remember the particulars of these events, since I am familiar with them only through reading. But, in contrast to other periods, the time contemporary with my childhood lives in my memory because I was immersed within it and one facet of my remembrances is but a reflection of it.



Even when considering childhood remembrances, then, we are better off not to distinguish a personal memory that would reproduce past impressions just as they originally were and would never take us beyond the restricted circle of our family, school, and friends, from a "historical" memory that would be composed only of national events unfamiliar to us as children. We had best avoid this distinction between one memory that puts us in touch with only ourself (or with a self, really, broadened to include the group encompassing the world of the child) and another memory that enables us to penetrate into a milieu of which we were unaware at the time but within which our life actually unfolded. Our memory truly rests not on learned history but on lived history. By the term "history" we must understand, then, not a chronological sequence of events and dates, but whatever distinguishes one period from all others, something of which books and narratives generally give us only a very schematic and incomplete picture.

I will probably be accused of stripping from this form of collective memory we call "history" its impersonal character, this abstract precision and relative simplicity that makes so appropriate a framework to bolster our individual memory. If we limit ourselves to the impressions made on us by such events in history, or by our parents' attitudes toward events that later on gain historical significance, or even by the customs, the ways of speaking and acting peculiar to a period, what would distinguish these from anything else that concerned our childhood but was not retained in the national memory? How could the child evaluate the successive portions of the picture life unfolds before him? Above all, why should he be attracted by the facts and characteristics of interest to adults, especially as he lacks the many spatial and temporal terms for comparison that adults possess?

In effect, a war, rebellion, national ceremony, popular festivity, new kind of transportation, or great construction can be considered from two distinct viewpoints. They are events, unique in their kind, that alter group life. But they also dissolve into a series of images traversing the individual consciousness. The child retaining only these images would find that some stand out in his mind due to their brilliance, intensity, and unique quality. The same would occur for many images of lesser events. Imagine a child arriving at night at a railroad station crowded with soldiers. Whether they were on their way to, or back from, the trenches, or merely on maneuvers, would make no difference at all to him. Wouldn't the distant artillery of Waterloo be but muted thunder? Any being resembling such a youngster, reduced solely to his perceptions, would keep only a fragile and transitory remembrance of such a scene. To grasp the historical reality underlying that image, he would have to go outside himself and be placed within a group viewpoint, so that he might see how such an event marked a famous date because it is imbued with the concerns, interests, passions, of a nation. But at that moment the event would cease to be merely a personal impression. We have regained contact with the scheme of history. Thus my critic would conclude that the individual must rely on the historical memory. Through it, a fact external to my childhood stamps



its mark on a certain hour or day and enables me to recall those moments later on. But the mark itself is a superficial stamping from outside, unconnected with my personal memory or childhood impressions.

Underlying such an analysis, however, remains the idea that minds are as neatly compartmentalized as the organisms physically supporting them. Each of us is first and foremost sealed within himself. How to account, then, for the fact that one person communicates and adapts his thoughts to those of others? My critic might admit that the individual creates some kind of artificial milieu, external to every one of these personal thoughts, though encompassing them all—a collective space and time, a collective history. The thoughts of all persons come together within such frameworks, which assume that each has momentarily ceased to be himself. Each person soon returns into himself, introducing into his memory the ready-made reference points and demarcations brought from without. We connect our remembrances to these reference points, without any sharing of substance or closer relationship occurring between them. That is why these general and historical conceptions play only a secondary role: they actually presuppose the prior and autonomous existence of the personal memory. Collective remembrances might be laid on individual remembrances, providing a handier and surer grip on them. First, however, individual remembrances must be present, lest memory function without content. Surely there must have been a day when I met a certain friend for the first time or, as Blondel says, when I attended the *lycée* for the first time.[2] These are historical conceptions. But if I haven't inwardly preserved a personal remembrance of that first meeting or first day of class, this conception would remain up in the air, that framework would be empty, and I would recall nothing—so obvious does it seem that there is in every act of memory an element specific to it, that is the very existence of self-sufficient individual consciousness.

[2] Charles Blondel, "Critical Review of Maurice Halbwachs' *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire*," *Revue philosophique 101* (1926), p. 296.

## Lived History in Childhood

But such a distinction—between a memory employing no frameworks, or at best only words and a few conceptions borrowed from practical life, to order its remembrances, and a collective or historical framework without any memory, because it is never constructed, reconstructed, and preserved in the memory of the individual—is not very plausible. As soon as a child leaves the stage of purely sensory life and becomes interested in the meaning of images and scenes that he perceives, it can be said that he thinks in common with others, that his thought is divided between the flood of wholly personal impressions and the various currents of collective thought. He is no longer enclosed within himself, for his thinking now commands entirely new perspectives which he knows are not his alone. Nor has he gone outside himself and perforce compartmentalized his mind to accommodate these series of thoughts common in his group, because these new outwardly oriented concerns have always interested the "inner man" in one way or another and are not entirely foreign to his personal life.

From the balcony of his grandfather's home in Grenoble, Stendhal as a child witnessed the Day of the Tiles, a mass uprising at the start of the French Revolution.

> Some forty-three years later, the image is as clear as ever in my mind. A journeyman hatter, stabbed in the back by a bayonet, so I heard, was walking in great pain supported by two men over whose shoulders his arms were laid. He wore no coat, his shirt and buff or white pants were soaked with blood. I can still see him. The wound from which the blood was pouring out was in the small of his back, about opposite the navel.
>
> They were helping him to walk with great difficulty to his room on the sixth floor of the Périer house. He died on reaching it. . . .
>
> I saw the poor wretch on each landing of the Périers' staircase, which was lighted by big windows overlooking the square.
>
> This memory, naturally, is the clearest I have from those days.[3]

[3] *Vie d'Henri Brulard*, p. 121.



This is an image all right, but an image centered within a scene of a mass revolution that Stendhal himself witnessed. How often must he have heard that story told later on, especially since this uprising apparently initiated a turbulent and decisive period in politics. In any case, even were he unaware of the place this day would have in history (at least in Grenoble's history), he could surmise from the extraordinary activity in the street, and from the gestures and comments of his relatives, that this event went beyond the circle of family and neighborhood. Another day during this period, he sees himself in the library, listening to his grandfather, who is in a room full of people. "But why such a crowd? What was the occasion? The image does not tell me that. It's no more than an image." Nonetheless, would he have preserved such a remembrance (as he did of the Day of Tiles) were it not fitted within a framework of enduring concerns that emerged within him at this time, concerns that already involved him in a more extensive current of collective thought?

The remembrance may not be immediately caught up in such a current, and some time may elapse before the meaning of the event is understood. What is essential is that the meaning should soon become clear, while the remembrance is still fresh. Then we see radiating from and about the remembrance its historical significance, as it were. The attitude of adults who are also present confirms that an event that has attracted our notice merits retention. We remember it because others about us are interested in it. Later on we will better understand why. Caught at first within the main current, perhaps the remembrance had been sidetracked by the greenery along the riverbank. Currents of collective thought flow through the child's mind, but only in the long run do they gather in everything belonging to them.

One of my earliest remembrances is of a small hotel where Russians stayed. It was located opposite our house on Rue Gay-Lussac, next to a convent, on the present site of the oceanographic institute. I remember them in their fur caps, sitting by the door with their wives and children. Despite their strange features and dress, I might not have watched them so much had not passers-by stopped,

and my own parents come out on the balcony to look at them. Bitten by rabid wolves, these inhabitants of Siberia settled in Paris near the Rue d'Ulm and the École Normale to receive treatment from Pasteur. For the first time I heard that name and pictured to myself the existence of scientists who make discoveries. I have no idea how much I understood of such matters. Perhaps I fully understood it only later. But I do not believe that this remembrance would have remained so clear in my mind had not this image oriented my thought to new horizons, toward unknown regions from which I felt gradually less distant.

Such disturbances of a social milieu, which cause the child to suddenly get a glimpse of the political and national life beyond his own narrow circle, are infrequent. When he finally joins serious adult conversation or reads the newspapers, the child will feel himself discovering an unknown land. But this will not be the first time that he has come in contact with a social milieu more extensive than his family or his small circle of playmates and parents' friends. Parents and children each have their own interests. The boundaries separating these two zones of thought are, for many reasons, not surmounted. But the child does come in contact with a class of adults whose level of thought approximates his own—servants, for example. The child readily converses with them, taking revenge against the silence and reserve to which his parents condemn him in matters that he is "too young" to know about. Servants may talk freely to and with the child, who understands because they often communicate in a childlike manner. Almost all that I learned and could understand of the Franco-Prussian War, Paris Commune, Second Empire, and Third Republic came from a good old woman, full of superstition and prejudice, who blindly accepted the picture of events and regimes painted by popular imagination. She informed me of the vague rumors that like the backwash of history, spread among the peasants, workers, and common people. My parents could only shake their heads in disbelief at hearing such tales. In those moments I gained an understanding, however confused, of the human milieus disturbed by these events, if not of the events themselves. Even today my memory evokes that first historical framework of childhood along with my earliest impressions. In any case, this was the way I first pictured events just before my birth. If I now recognize how inaccurate these stories really were, I can only affirm that I took a sympathetic interest in those troubled waters and that more than one of those confused images still managed to enframe, even as it deformed, some of my remembrances from that time.



## The Living Bond of Generations

The child is provided access to an even more distant past by his grandparents. Perhaps grandparents and grandchildren become close because both are, for different reasons, uninterested in the contemporary events that engross the parents. As Marc Bloch says:

> In rural societies, the young are quite frequently left entrusted during the day to the care of the "old." The father is occupied in the field and the mother is preoccupied with the many household tasks. The child receives as much, and even more, of the legacy of various customs and traditions from them as from his parents.[4]

The grandparents and the elderly are clearly products of their own times. The child doesn't immediately perceive and distinguish those characteristics in his grandfather due solely to age from those stamped on him by that society, now extinct, in which he lived and grew up. The child, on arriving in the city, neighborhood, and home of his grandfather, vaguely senses that he is entering a different territory. It is not foreign to him, however, for it agrees very well with the character of the oldest members of his family. He is aware that, for his grandparents, he somewhat replaces his parents, who should have remained children and not become totally involved in contemporary life and society. Their stories, oblivious of the times and linking the past and future together across the present, could not help but intrigue him, just as stories about himself might.

[4] Marc Bloch, "Mémoire collective, traditions et coutumes," *Revue de synthèse historique*, Nos. 118–120 (1925), p. 79.

What becomes fixed in his memory are not just facts, but attitudes and ways of thinking from the past. We may regret having not taken fuller advantage of this unique opportunity to gain direct contact with a period that we would otherwise have known only from outside, through history books, paintings, and literature. Be that as it may, the personage of an aged relative seems to grow in our memory as we are told of a past time and society; instead of remaining a shadowy figure, he then emerges with all the clarity and color of a person who is the center of a portrait and who sums up and epitomizes it.

Of all his family, why did Stendhal happen to remember his grandfather so clearly and to sketch his portrait so vividly? Didn't Stendhal see him as personifying the end of the eighteenth century? The grandfather had known some of the *philosophes* and had helped him to truly comprehend that pre-Revolutionary society for which Stendhal never lost his fondness. If Stendhal had not linked in his earliest thoughts the person of that old man with the works of Diderot, Voltaire, and d'Alembert and a whole body of interests and feelings transcending the restricted and conservative boundaries of a small province, then the grandfather would have never been, for Stendhal, the esteemed and oft quoted relative that he was. Perhaps he would have been remembered with equal accuracy, but he certainly would not have occupied so important a place in the writer's memory. It is that "lived" eighteenth century suffusing his thought that restores to Stendhal the in-depth likeness of his grandfather. Collective frameworks of memory do not amount to so many names, dates, and formulas, but truly represent currents of thought and experience within which we recover our past only because we have lived it.

History is neither the whole nor even all that remains of the past. In addition to written history, there is a living history that perpetuates and renews itself through time and permits the recovery of many old currents that have seemingly disappeared. If this were not so, what right would we have to speak of a "collective memory"? What service could possibly be rendered by frameworks that have endured only as so many desiccated and impersonal historical conceptions? Groups that develop the reigning conceptions and mentality of a society during a certain period fade away in time, making room for others, who in turn command the sway of custom and fashion opinion from new models. The world we shared so deeply with our grandparents may have suddenly vanished. We may have very few extrafamilial remembrances of that intermediate period between the older world before our birth and the contemporary national period that so engrosses us. It is as if, during an intermission, the old people's world faded away and the stage were filled with new characters. Nonetheless, let us see if we cannot find a milieu, a state of past thought and sensibility, that has left all the traces necessary for its provisional recreation.



Many times I have thought that I perceived, in that group composed of my grandparents and myself, the last reverberations of romanticism. By "romanticism" I mean a particular type of sensibility, not identical with that of the figures included in the late-eighteenth-century artistic and literary movement so named, though no longer clearly distinguished from it either. Though somewhat dissipated in the frivolities of the Second Empire, it held on tenaciously in the more remote provinces (and it is there, indeed, that I have rediscovered its last vestiges). It is quite legitimate to try to reconstruct this milieu, to reconstitute that atmosphere about ourselves through books, engravings, and paintings. Our primary concern is not with the great poets and their work. In fact, their writings affect us in ways quite different from those in which they affected contemporaries. We have made many discoveries about them. Rather, this mentality, which permeated everything and showed itself in multifarious ways, is locked up as it were in the magazines and "family literature" of the time. As we page through such publications, we seem to see the old folks once again, with the gestures, expressions, poses, and dress of period engravings; we seem to hear their voices and recognize the very expressions they used. Of course, these "family museums" and popular magazines are accidental leftovers to which we might never have had access. Nonetheless, if I do reopen these books, or if I do rediscover these engravings, pictures, and portraits, I am not driven by scholarly

curiosity and love of what is old to consult them in a library or view them in a museum. I discover them in my own home, in my parents' and friends' homes, on the wharves, and in the windows of antique shops.

In addition to engravings and books, the past has left many other traces, occasionally visible, in present-day society. We see it in people's appearance, the look of a place, and even in the unconscious ways of thinking and feeling preserved by certain persons and milieus. Ordinarily we don't notice such things. But we need alter our attention only slightly to see the outcroppings of the older strata underlying modern customs.

We may have to go some distance to discover those islands of the past so genuine in their preservation as to make us feel as though we have suddenly been carried back fifty or sixty years. One day in Vienna, I was invited to visit the family of a banker. In their home I had the feeling of being in a French salon of the 1830s. It was not so much the furniture or décor as the quite singular social atmosphere—an intangible something of the conventional and formal, like a glimmer from the *ancien régime*. On another occasion, I arrived in a part of Algeria where the Europeans lived some distance from each other. Forced to travel by stagecoach, I observed with curiosity men and women who seemed familiar, who resembled the people on engravings from the Second Empire. I conjectured that the French citizens who had come to settle this remote and isolated area after the conquest, and their descendants, had to live on a fund of ideas and customs dating from that period. In any case, each of these images (whether real or imaginary) became connected in my mind with remembrances from similar milieus, in the one case, of an aged aunt sitting in such a salon and, in the other case, of a retired officer who had lived in Algeria during colonization. We can easily make similar observations without ever leaving France, Paris, or even our home town. Our urban areas have been transformed in the last fifty years. But there is more than one district in Paris, more than one street or block of homes, that contrasts sharply to the rest of the city and preserves its original appearance. Moreover, the residents resemble the locale. Indeed, in every period there is an intimate relationship between the habits and mentality of a group and the appearance of its residential areas. There was a Paris of 1860, with an image closely bound to the society and customs of its time. To evoke it we must do more than search out the plaques commemorating the homes where its famous personages lived and died or read a history of the city. An observer will note many features of the past in the city and people of today, especially in those areas that have become havens for the crafts and, during certain holidays, in the small shop and working class areas of Paris (which have changed less than the rest of the city). But the Paris of bygone days is perhaps best recognized in the very small provincial cities. Here the types of people, even the dress and speech patterns, once encountered on Rue Saint-Honoré and the great promenades of Balzac's Paris have not yet disappeared.



Our grandparents leave their stamp on our parents. We were not aware of it in the past because we were much more sensitive then to what distinguished generations. Our parents marched in front of us and guided us into the future. The moment comes when they stop and we pass them by. Then we must turn back to see them, and now they seem in the grip of the past and woven into the shadows of bygone times. In a few deeply moving pages Marcel Proust describes how, in the weeks following his grandmother's death, his mother suddenly seemed to him to become identified with the deceased's traits, expression, and overall appearance. She acquired the image of the grandmother, as if the same type of person were reproduced in two successive generations. Is this merely a physiological change? If we recognize our grandparents in our parents, is it because our parents are growing old and quickly fill the empty places in the sequence of generations? Rather, it may be because our attention has changed focus. Our parents and grandparents represent for us two distinct and clearly separated periods. We do not perceive that our grandparents were more closely associated with the present, our parents with the past, than we imagined.

I became aware of the world about a decade after the Franco-Prussian War (1870). The Second Empire was a distant period corresponding to a society almost extinct. Now twelve to fifteen years

separate me from the Great War. I suppose that, for my children, the pre-1914 society of which they know nothing recedes similarly into a past not reached by their memory. But, for me, there is no break in continuity between these two periods. I see the same society, doubtless changed by new experiences, relieved of older prejudices and concerns, enriched with novel elements, but still the same. Of course, there is a larger or smaller portion of illusion in my views as well as in my children's. A time will come when, looking about me, I will recognize only very few who lived and thought as I did before the War. A time will come when I will understand, as I have sometimes uneasily, that new generations have pushed ahead of my own, that a society whose aspirations and customs are quite foreign to me has taken the place of the one to which I was most intimately attached. And my children, having changed point of view, will be astonished to suddenly discover that I am so distant from them and so close to my parents in interests, ideas, memories. They and I will then be, doubtless, under the influence of a converse illusion: I am really not so distant from them because my parents were not really so distant from me. Depending on age and also circumstance, however, we are especially struck either by the differences between generations, as each retires into its own shell and grows distant from the other, or by the similarities, as they come together again and become as one.

## Reconstructed Remembrances

To a much greater extent than is commonly believed, therefore, the life of the child is immersed in social milieus through which he comes in touch with a past stretching back some distance. The latter acts like a framework into which are woven his most personal remembrances. This is what I have endeavored to show in the previous analysis. Later on, his memory will ground itself on this lived past, much more than on any past learned from written history. Although at first he may not distinguish this framework from the conscious states placed within it, he gradually effects a separation between his little inner world and the surrounding society. Since both sorts of elements were intertwined from the beginning and seemed to comprise part of his childhood self, the most that can be said is that every element answering to the social milieu may later come forth as an abstract and artificial framework. In this sense lived history is clearly differentiated from written history: it possesses everything needed to constitute a living and natural framework upon which our thought can base itself to preserve and recover the image of its past.



But I must now pursue this further. As the child grows, and especially as he becomes an adult, he participates (at first unawares) in a more distinctive and reflective way in the life and thoughts of the groups to which he belongs. How could he help changing this idea of his past? How could his newly acquired conceptions—conceptions of facts, reflections and ideas—help reacting on his remembrances? As I have said many times, a remembrance is in very large measure a reconstruction of the past achieved with data borrowed from the present, a reconstruction prepared, furthermore, by reconstructions of earlier periods wherein past images had already been altered. Of course, if we presume memory to be a resumption of direct contact with certain past impressions, then a remembrance would, by definition, be distinguished from these ideas of varying precision whereby our reflections, assisted by others' stories, admissions, and evidence, make a determination of what our past must have been. Even were it possible to evoke directly a few remembrances, we could not distinguish such cases from those in which we imagine what happened. Hence we can consider remembrances as so many representations resting, at least in part, on testimony and reasoning. But the social or, if you prefer, "historical" facet of our memory of our own past is then much more extensive than we think. Having been in contact with adults since childhood, we have acquired quite a few means of retrieving and making precise our many remembrances that otherwise would have been partially or totally forgotten.

At this point we are faced with a previously noted objection that merits further examination. Can we restore entirely a remembrance

of an event that did occur, but of which we have kept no impressions, merely by reconstructing a historical conception of it? For instance, I know with certainty, from reflection and from what I have been told, that there was a day when I attended the *lycée* for the first time. Nonetheless, I have no personal and direct remembrance of that event. My remembrances have become confused because of my having spent so many days there. Perhaps due to the excitement of the first day, "I have not memory of periods or moments when I felt too strongly," as Stendhal says in his autobiographical *Life of Henri Brulard*. Having restored the historical framework of that event, does it suffice for me to say that I have recreated a remembrance of it?

Of course, had I absolutely no remembrance of that event, had I to rely totally on a historical conception of it, then it could be concluded that an empty framework can never fill itself out all alone. It would be abstract knowledge at work, and not the memory. But, without actually remembering a given day, one can recall a certain period. Nor is it quite accurate to say that the remembrance of a period is simply the sum of the remembrances from each day. As events grow distant, we have a habit of recalling them in organized sets. Although certain remembrances may stand out clearly, many kinds of elements are included and we can neither enumerate each nor distinguish them from one another. Having successively attended primary schools, private boarding schools, and *lycées*, and being each year in a new class, I have a general remembrance of all these opening days of class that includes that particular day I first entered a *lycée*. Therefore I cannot say that I remember that specific return to school, but neither can I say that I no longer remember it. Moreover, a historical conception of my entrance into the *lycée* is not abstract. First of all, I have since read a number of factual and fictional accounts describing impressions of a child who is entering a class for the first time. It may very well be that, when I read them, the personal remembrance that I had kept of similar impressions became intertwined with the book's description. I can recall these narratives. Perhaps in time I have preserved and can retrieve, without being certain as to what is what, my own transposed impressions.



Whatever it may be, an idea thus "filled out" is no longer a mere schema without content. Let me add that I know and can retrieve a good deal more of that first *lycée* I attended than merely the school's name or map location. I was there each day during that time and have since returned several times. Even had I not visited it again as an adult, I am acquainted with *lycées* that my children have attended. I recall many features of that family milieu that I left on going to class, not because I remained in contact with a family in general but because I remained in touch with my family, a living and concrete group entering quite naturally into the picture I recreate of my first day of class. What objection can be raised, therefore, to the fact that I manage to recreate the general atmosphere and character of my first day of class by reflecting on what it must have been like? It is doubtless an incomplete and wavering image and certainly a reconstructed one. But how many of the remembrances that we believe genuine, with an identity beyond doubt, are almost entirely forged from false recognitions, in accordance with others' testimony and stories! A framework cannot produce of itself a precise and picturesque remembrance. But, in this case, the framework has been buoyed up with personal reflection and family remembrances: the remembrance is an image entangled among other images, a generic image taken back into the past.

## Shrouded Remembrances

If I want to reassemble and make precise remembrances that would enable me to restore the look and character of my father as I knew him, I would likewise say that it would be quite useless to review the historical events of the period in which he lived. Nevertheless, if I meet an old acquaintance of his who gives me details and circumstances of his life of which I was unaware, or if my mother enlarges upon and fills in the picture of his life, clarifying portions that were obscure to me, do I not now have an impression of descending back into the past and augmenting a whole body of remembrances? We are not dealing in this case with a simple retrospective illusion. It is

not as though I had rediscovered a letter of his that I read when he was alive, and that these new remembrances, owing to recent impressions, become juxtaposed to the original remembrances without becoming confused with them. Rather, the remembrance of my father as a whole is transformed and now seems to me to conform more to reality. The image I have of my father continuously evolved over time, not only because my remembrances of him while he lived accumulated but also because I myself changed and my perspective altered as I occupied different positions in my family and, more important, in other milieus. Nevertheless, will it be said that there is one image of my father that must take precedence over every other—namely, the image of him that was fixed at death? But how many times had it already been transformed before this moment? Besides, death may end physiological life, but it does not abruptly halt the current of thoughts unfolding in the social circles of the person whose body has been buried. For some time after, he will be considered as still alive and remain a part of daily life, as we imagine what he would have said or done in various situations. It is on the day after death that those closest to him focus most intensely on his person. At this time also, his image is least fixed and is continually transformed depending on the part of his life evoked. In reality, the image of a departed one is never frozen. As it recedes into the past, the image changes as certain features are effaced and others accentuated according to the perspective from which he is viewed—that is, depending on the new conditions in which we turn our attention upon him. I am inclined to retouch his portrait as I learn new things about my father from those variously connected with him, as I pass new judgment on the period in which he lived, and as I become more capable of reflection and possessed of more terms for comparison. Thus the past as I once knew it is slowly defaced. New images overlay the old—just as relatives closer in time are interposed between ourselves and our more distant ancestors—so that we know of the former only what the latter tell us. The groups to which I belong vary at different periods of my life. But it is from their viewpoint that I consider the past. As I become more involved in each of these groups and participate more intimately in its memory, I necessarily renovate and supplement my remembrances.



Of course, all this presupposes two conditions. First, my remembrances, before I entered these groups, were not fully clarified in all aspects; until now, so to speak, I did not fully perceive or understand them. Second, remembrances of these groups must have some connection with the events constituting my own past.

The first condition is satisfied by the fact that many of our remembrances date back to times when immaturity, inexperience, and inattention obscured the meaning of various facts or hid the nature of different persons or objects. We remained, as it were, overly concerned with the children's group even as we had become partially and loosely attached to the adult group. The result was a sort of chiaroscuro effect in the mind. What interested adults fascinated us also, only because we felt the adults were interested; and it remained in our memory as so many puzzles or problems that we did not yet understand but felt we could eventually solve. We may not even have noticed these unsettled aspects and zones of obscurity, but we did not forget them either, for they both surrounded and helped us to pass among our clearer remembrances. When a child falls asleep in his own bed only to awake aboard a train, he finds security in feeling that he remains under the watchful care of his parents in either place, even though he cannot understand how or why they have done what they have when he was asleep. There are many degrees of such ignorance. In one sense or another, we neither attain total clarity nor remain totally in the dark.

We may be able to picture some episode from our past not needing addition, correction, or further clarification. But then we may meet someone else who witnessed or participated in that event. As he recalls and recounts it, we become less certain that we are not mistaken on the sequence of occurrences, relative importance of various aspects, or the general meaning of the event. For it is well-nigh impossible for two persons who have seen the same event to describe it in exactly the same way when recounting it later on.

Let us turn once more to the life of Henri Brulard. Stendhal recounts that he and two friends, as children, shot a pistol at the Tree of Fraternity. The story is a succession of uncomplicated scenes.

But his friend, R. Colomb, continually pointed out factual errors as he annotated the manuscript.[5]

> The soldiers were almost touching us and we took refuge in the doorway of my grandfather's house, but we could be seen very easily; everybody was at the windows. Many had brought candles and the light shone out.

(But Colomb writes: "Error. All this occurred four minutes after the shot. By that time, all three of us were in the house.")

Stendhal then continues his narrative, recounting how he and one other, perhaps Colomb, had climbed the stairs and taken refuge in the home of two "deeply devout old milliners." The police came. These Jansenist old maids lied, saying that the boys had spent the whole evening there. (Colomb notes: "Only H.B. [Stendhal] entered the home of the Misses Caudey. R.C. [Colomb] and Mante fled through a passage in the attic and managed to reach Main Street.")

> We listened carefully, and when we could no longer hear the police, we departed and continued upstairs toward the passage.

(Colomb writes. "Error!")

> Mante and Treillard, who were more agile than me, . . . told us the next day that when they reached the door on Main Street, they found it blocked by two guards. The boys began to comment on the charm of the young ladies with whom they had spent the evening. The guards asked them no questions and they made their escape.
>
> Their story seems so real to me that at this point I could not be certain that it was not Colomb and I who went out talking about the charm of the young ladies.

(In reality, as Colomb writes, "Treillard was not with us three." And "R.C., having a chest cold, put liquorice in his mouth so that his coughing would not attract the attention of those searching the house. . . . R.C. recalls that there existed in this attic a passageway which was connected to a service staircase leading to Main Street. Remembering this fact saved the two friends. When they got to the street, they saw two men whom they assumed were police officers

[5] *Vie d'Henri Brulard*, pp. 365–369.



and they began to calmly and innocently talk about the fun times they had just had.")

> As I write this, the image of the Tree of Fraternity appears before my eyes. My memory is making discoveries. I think that I can see the Tree of Fraternity surrounded by a wall two feet high, faced with hewn stone, and supporting an iron grill five or six feet high.

(Colomb writes, "No.")

It is worthwhile to note in such an example how portions of a narrative which seemed so much clearer than others suddenly change character and become so obscure and uncertain as to allow contradictions when confronted by the remembrances of another witness. Stendhal had filled the gaps in his memory with his imagination. In his story everything seemed believable, and the same light played across the whole surface. But the cracks were revealed when it was viewed from another angle.

Conversely, there is no such thing as an absolute void in memory. No area of our past is so emptied of memory that every image projected there will discover only pure and simple imagination or impersonal historical representation, without ever catching hold of any element of remembrance. We forget nothing, but this proposition may be understood in different ways. According to Bergson, our past in its entirety remains in memory, and only certain obstacles, notably the behavior of the brain, prevents our evoking any and every segment. In any case, the images of past events rest fully formed in the unconscious mind like so many printed pages of books that could be opened, even though they no longer are. In my view, by contrast, what remains are not ready-made images in some subterranean gallery of our thought. Rather, we can find in society all the necessary information for reconstructing certain parts of our past represented in an incomplete and indefinite manner, or even considered completely gone from memory.

When we accidentally meet persons who have participated in these same events, co-actors or witnesses, or when we are told or otherwise discover something about such past happenings, how does it happen that we use these materials to fill in apparent gaps in

memory? What we take for an empty space is, in reality, only a somewhat vague area that our thought avoids because so few traces remain. As soon as a precise path to our past is indicated, we see these traces emerge, we link them together, and we see them grow in depth and unity. These traces did exist, therefore, but they were more marked in others' memory than in our own. Certainly we do the reconstructing, but we do so following guidelines laid down by our other remembrances and the remembrances of other people. These new images are triggered by what would remain, without them, other remembrances, undefined and inexplicable though nonetheless real. Similarly, when we travel through older districts of a large city, we experience particular satisfaction in recounting the history of its streets and houses. The area provides many new ideas that, nonetheless, seem quite familiar because they agree with our impressions and fit easily into the present scene. Indeed, the scene seems by itself to evoke them, and what we imagine seems to be an elaboration of what we have just seen. The picture unfolding before us was charged with meaning, which remained obscure although we divined something of it. The character of persons among whom we have lived must be discovered and explained in the light of all the experience we gain in subsequent periods of our life. As this new picture is projected over the facts as we already know them, we see features revealed that then take their place among these facts and receive a clearer meaning. In this way memory is enriched by hitherto alien additions that, once they have taken root and regained their place, are no longer distinguished from other remembrances.

## Distant Frameworks and Nearby Milieus

As I have already stated, the remembrances of these groups must have some connection with the events constituting my past if my memory is to be strengthened and completed by the memory of others. Indeed, each of us is at once a member of several groups of varying size. Suppose we turn our attention to the larger groups—



for example, the nation. Although our life, and our parents' and friends' lives, are encompassed within national life, the nation as such can't be said to be interested in the destiny of each of its members. Let us assume that national history is a faithful résumé of the most important events that have changed the life of a nation. It differs from local, state, or city histories in retaining only facts of interest to the citizens as a whole or, if you prefer, citizens as members of the nation. For history of this type, however detailed it may be, to help us conserve and retrieve remembrances of a definite person, he would have to be a historical personage. There are surely times when all men in a country forget their own interests, families, and smaller groups to which their outlook is ordinarily limited. There are events of national import that simultaneously alter the lives of all citizens. Rare as such events might be, they could still offer everyone a few temporal landmarks. Ordinarily, however, the nation is too remote from the individual for him to consider the history of his country as anything else than a very large framework with which his own history makes contact at only a few points. In many novels tracing the destiny of an individual or a family, knowledge of the period during which the action occurs is quite unimportant, and their psychological content would not be lost if the story were set in another period. Inner life would seem to be intensified as it is isolated from those historical circumstances that are paramount in the historical memory. If an author has situated his novel or play in a remote time, hasn't this been an artifice usually intended to set aside the frameworks of contemporary events in order to give us a better feeling for how much the interplay of emotions is independent of historical events? If the historical memory is understood as the sequence of events remembered in national history, then neither it nor its frameworks represent the essence of what I call collective memory.

But between individual and nation lie many other, more restricted groups. Each of these has its own memory. Changes in such a group more directly affect the life and thought of members. The lawyer remembers cases he has presented. The doctor remembers sick people he has cared for. Each recalls fellow professionals with

whom he has had contact. As each thinks about all these people, doesn't he go back far into his own personal life? He evokes many thoughts and concerns tied up with the person he once was, the fortunes of his family, and various friendships, with whatever constitutes his personal history. Of course, all this is but one aspect of his life. However, as I have repeatedly noted, each man is immersed successively or simultaneously in several groups. Moreover, each group is confined in space and time. Each has its own original collective memory, keeping alive for a time important remembrances; the smaller the group, the greater the interest members have in these events. Whereas one may easily be lost in the city, village inhabitants continually observe one another. The group memory faithfully registers everything that it can about each member, because these facts react on this small society and help change it. In such milieus all persons think and remember in common. Each has his own perspective, but each is connected so closely to everyone else that, if his remembrances become distorted, he need only place himself in the viewpoint of others to rectify them.

## The Ultimate Opposition Between Collective Memory and History

The collective memory is not the same as formal history, and "historical memory" is a rather unfortunate expression because it connects two terms opposed in more than one aspect. Our preceding analysis suggests these conclusions. Undoubtedly, history is a collection of the most notable facts in the memory of man. But past events read about in books and taught and learned in schools are selected, combined, and evaluated in accord with necessities and rules not imposed on the groups that had through time guarded them as a living trust. General history starts only when tradition ends and the social memory is fading or breaking up. So long as a remembrance continues to exist, it is useless to set it down in writing or otherwise fix it in memory. Likewise the need to write the history of a period, a society, or even a person is only aroused when the subject is already too distant in the past to allow for the testimony of those who



preserve some remembrance of it. The memory of a sequence of events may no longer have the support of a group: the memory of involvement in the events or of enduring their consequences, of participating in them or receiving a firsthand account from participants and witnesses, may become scattered among various individuals, lost amid new groups for whom these facts no longer have interest because the events are definitely external to them. When this occurs, the only means of preserving such remembrances is to write them down in a coherent narrative, for the writings remain even though the thought and the spoken word die. If a memory exists only when the remembering subject, individual or group, feels that it goes back to its remembrances in a continuous movement, how could history ever be a memory, since there is a break in continuity between the society reading this history and the group in the past who acted in or witnessed the events?

Of course, one purpose of history might just be to bridge the gap between past and present, restoring this ruptured continuity. But how can currents of collective thought whose impetus lies in the past be re-created, when we can grasp only the present? Through detailed study historians can recover and bring to light facts of varying importance believed to be definitely lost, especially if they have the good fortune to discover unpublished memoirs. Nevertheless, when the *Mémoires de Saint-Simon*, for example, were published at the beginning of the nineteenth century, could it be said that French society of 1830 regained contact, a living and direct contact, with the end of the seventeenth century and the time of the Regency? What passed from these memoirs into the basic histories, which have a readership sufficiently widespread to really influence collective opinions? The only effect of such publications is to make us understand how distant we are from those who are doing the writing and being described. The barriers separating us from such a period are not overcome by scattered individuals merely devoting much time and effort to such reading. The study of history in this sense is reserved only for a few specialists. Even were there a group devoted to reading the *Mémoires de Saint-Simon*, it would be much too small to affect public opinion.

History wanting to keep very close to factual details must become

erudite, and erudition is the affair of only a very small minority. By contrast, if history is restricted to preserving the image of the past still having a place in the contemporary collective memory, then it retains only what remains of interest to present-day society—that is, very little.

Collective memory differs from history in at least two respects. It is a current of continuous thought whose continuity is not at all artificial, for it retains from the past only what still lives or is capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive. By definition it does not exceed the boundaries of this group. When a given period ceases to interest the subsequent period, the same group has not forgotten a part of its past, because, in reality, there are two successive groups, one following the other. History divides the sequence of centuries into periods, just as the content of a tragedy is divided into several acts. But in a play the same plot is carried from one act to another and the same characters remain true to form to the end, their feelings and emotions developing in an unbroken movement. History, however, gives the impression that everything—the interplay of interests, general orientations, modes of studying men and events, traditions, and perspectives on the future—is transformed from one period to another. The apparent persistence of the same groups merely reflects the persistence of external distinctions resulting from places, names, and the general character of societies. But the men composing the same group in two successive periods are like two tree stumps that touch at their extremities but do not form one plant because they are not otherwise connected.

Of course, reason sufficient to partition the succession of generations at any given moment is not immediately evident, because the number of births hardly varies from year to year. Society is like a thread that is made from a series of animal or vegetable fibers intertwined at regular intervals; or, rather, it resembles the cloth made from weaving these threads together. The sections of a cotton or silk fabric correspond to the end of a motif or design. Is it the same for the sequence of generations?

Situated external to and above groups, history readily introduces



into the stream of facts simple demarcations fixed once and for all. In doing so, history not merely obeys a didactic need for schematization. Each period is apparently considered a whole, independent for the most part of those preceding and following, and having some task—good, bad, or indifferent—to accomplish. Young and old, regardless of age, are encompassed within the same perspective so long as this task has not yet been completed, so long as certain national, political, or religious situations have not yet realized their full implications. As soon as this task is finished and a new one proposed or imposed, ensuing generations start down a new slope, so to speak. Some people were left behind on the opposite side of the mountain, having never made it up. But the young, who hurry as if fearful of missing the boat, sweep along a portion of the older adults. By contrast, those who are located at the beginning of either slope down, even if they are very near the crest, do not see each other any better and they remain as ignorant of one another as they would be were they further down on their respective slope. The farther they are located down their respective slope, the farther they are placed into the past or what is no longer the past; or, alternatively, the more distant they are from one another on the sinuous line of time.

Some parts of this portrait are accurate. Viewed as a whole from afar and, especially, viewed from without by the spectator who never belonged to the groups he observes, the facts may allow such an arrangement into successive and distinct configurations, each period having a beginning, middle, and end. But just as history is interested in differences and contrasts, and highlights the diverse features of a group by concentrating them in an individual, it similarly attributes to an interval of a few years changes that in reality took much longer. Another period of society might conceivably begin on the day after an event had disrupted, partially destroyed, and transformed its structure. But only later, when the new society had already engendered new resources and pushed on to other goals, would this fact be noticed. The historian cannot take these demarcations seriously. He cannot imagine them to have been noted by those who lived during the years so demarcated, in the manner of

the character in the farce who exclaims, "Today the Hundred Years War begins!" A war or revolution may create a great chasm between two generations, as if an intermediate generation had just disappeared. In such a case, who can be sure that, on the day after, the youth of society will not be primarily concerned, as the old will be, with erasing any traces of that rupture, reconciling separated generations and maintaining, in spite of everything, continuity of social evolution? Society must live. Even when institutions are radically transformed, and especially then, the best means of making them take root is to buttress them with everything transferable from tradition. Then, on the day after the crisis, everyone affirms that they must begin again at the point of interruption, that they must pick up the pieces and carry on. Sometimes nothing is considered changed, for the thread of continuity has been retied. Although soon rejected, such an illusion allows transition to the new phase without any feeling that the collective memory has been interrupted.

In reality, the continuous development of the collective memory is marked not, as is history, by clearly etched demarcations but only by irregular and uncertain boundaries. The present (understood as extending over a certain duration that is of interest to contemporary society) is not contrasted to the past in the way two neighboring historical periods are distinguished. Rather, the past no longer exists, whereas, for the historian, the two periods have equivalent reality. The memory of a society extends as far as the memory of the groups composing it. Neither ill will nor indifference causes it to forget so many past events and personages. Instead, the groups keeping these remembrances fade away. Were the duration of human life doubled or tripled, the scope of the collective memory as measured in units of time would be more extensive. Nevertheless, such an enlarged memory might well lack richer content if so much tradition were to hinder its evolution. Similarly, were human life shorter, a collective memory covering a lesser duration might never grow impoverished because change might accelerate a society "unburdened" in this way. In any case, since social memory erodes at the edges as individual members, especially older ones, become isolated or die, it is constantly transformed along with the group itself. Stating when a



collective remembrance has disappeared and whether it has definitely left group consciousness is difficult, especially since its recovery only requires its preservation in some limited portion of the social body.

## History, Record of Events; Collective Memory, Depository of Tradition

In effect, there are several collective memories. This is the second characteristic distinguishing the collective memory from history. History is unitary, and it can be said that there is only one history. Let me explain what I mean. Of course, we can distinguish the history of France, Germany, Italy, the history of a certain period, region, or city, and even that of an individual. Sometimes historical work is even reproached for its excessive specialization and fanatic desire for detailed study that neglects the whole and in some manner takes the part for the whole. But let us consider this matter more closely. The historian justifies these detailed studies by believing that detail added to detail will form a whole that can in turn be added to other wholes; in the total record resulting from all these successive summations, no fact will be subordinated to any other fact, since every fact is as interesting as any other and merits as much to be brought forth and recorded. Now the historian can make such judgments because he is not located within the viewpoint of any genuine and living groups of past or present. In contrast to the historian, these groups are far from affording equal significance to events, places, and periods that have not affected them equally. But the historian certainly means to be objective and impartial. Even when writing the history of his own country, he tries to synthesize a set of facts comparable with some other set, such as the history of another country, so as to avoid any break in continuity. Thus, in the total record of European history, the comparison of the various national viewpoints on the facts is never found; what is found, rather, is the sequence and totality of the facts such as they are, not for a certain country or a certain group but independent of

any group judgment. The very divisions that separate countries are historical facts of the same value as any others in such a record. All, then, is on the same level. The historical world is like an ocean fed by the many partial histories. Not surprisingly, many historians in every period since the beginning of historical writing have considered writing universal histories. Such is the natural orientation of the historical mind. Such is the fatal course along which every historian would be swept were he not restricted to the framework of more limited works by either modesty or short-windedness.

Of course, the muse of history is Clio. History can be represented as the universal memory of the human species. But there is no universal memory. Every collective memory requires the support of a group delimited in space and time. The totality of past events can be put together in a single record only by separating them from the memory of the groups who preserved them and by severing the bonds that held them close to the psychological life of the social milieus where they occurred, while retaining only the group's chronological and spatial outline of them. This procedure no longer entails restoring them to lifelike reality, but requires relocating them within the frameworks with which history organizes events. These frameworks are external to these groups and define them by mutual contrast. That is, history is interested primarily in differences and disregards the resemblances without which there would have been no memory, since the only facts remembered are those having the common trait of belonging to the same consciousness. Despite the variety of times and places, history reduces events to seemingly comparable terms, allowing their interrelation as variations on one or several themes. Only in this way does it manage to give us a summary vision of the past, gathering into a moment and symbolizing in a few abrupt changes or in certain stages undergone by a people or individual, a slow collective evolution. In this way it presents us a unique and total image of the past.

In order to give ourselves, by way of contrast, an idea of the multiplicity of collective memories, imagine what the history of our own life would be like were we, in recounting it, to halt each time we recalled some group to which we had belonged, in order to examine



its nature and say everything we know about it. It would not be enough to single out just a few groups—for example, our parents, primary school, *lycée*, friends, professional colleagues, social acquaintances, and any political, religious, or artistic circles with which we have been connected. These major spheres are convenient, but they correspond to a still external and simplified view of reality. These groups are composed of much smaller groups, and we have contact with only a local unit of the latter. They change and segment continually. Even though we stay, the group itself actually becomes, by the slow or rapid replacement of its members, another group having only a few traditions in common with its original ones. Having lived a long time in the same city, we have old and new friends; even within our family, the funerals, marriages, and births are like so many successive endings and new beginnings. Of course, these more recent groups are sometimes only branches of a larger group growing in extent and complexity, to which new segments have been joined. Nevertheless, we discern distinct zones within them, and the same currents of thought and sequences of remembrances do not pass through our mind when we pass from one zone to another. That is, the great majority of these groups, even though not currently divided, nevertheless represent, as Leibnitz said, a kind of social material indefinitely divisible in the most diverse directions.

Let us now consider the content of these collective memories. In contrast to history or, if it is preferred, to the historical memory, I do not claim that the collective memory retains only resemblances. To be able to speak of memory, the parts of the period over which it extends must be differentiated in some way. Each of these groups has a history. Persons and events are distinguished. What strikes us about this memory, however, is that resemblances are paramount. When it considers its own past, the group feels strongly that it has remained the same and becomes conscious of its identity through time. History, I have said, is not interested in these intervals when nothing apparently happens, when life is content with repetition in a somewhat different, but essentially unaltered, form without rupture or upheaval. But the group, living first and foremost for its

own sake, aims to perpetuate the feelings and images forming the substance of its thought. The greatest part of its memory spans time during which nothing has radically changed. Thus events happening within a family or to its members would be stressed in a written history of the family, though they would have meaning for the kin group only by providing clear proof of its own almost unaltered character, distinctive from all other families. Were a conflicting event, the initiative of one or several members, or, finally, external circumstances to introduce into the life of the group a new element incompatible with its past, then another group, with its own memory, would arise, and only an incomplete and vague remembrance of what had preceded this crisis would remain.

History is a record of changes; it is naturally persuaded that societies change constantly, because it focuses on the whole, and hardly a year passes when some part of the whole is not transformed. Since history teaches that everything is interrelated, each of these transformations must react on the other parts of the social body and prepare, in turn, further change. Apparently the sequence of historical events is discontinuous, each fact separated from what precedes or follows by an interval in which it is believed that nothing has happened. In reality, those who write history and pay primary attention to changes and differences understand that passing from one such difference to another requires the unfolding of a sequence of transformations of which history perceives only the sum (in the sense of the integral calculus) or final result. This viewpoint of history is due to its examining groups from outside and to its encompassing a rather long duration. In contrast, the collective memory is the group seen from within during a period not exceeding, and most often much shorter than, the average duration of a human life. It provides the group a self-portrait that unfolds through time, since it is an image of the past, and allows the group to recognize itself throughout the total succession of images. The collective memory is a record of resemblances and, naturally, is convinced that the group remains the same because it focuses attention on the group, whereas what has changed are the group's relations or contacts with other groups. If the group always remains the same, any changes must be



imaginary, and the changes that do occur in the group are transformed into similarities. Their function is to develop the several aspects of one single content—that is, the various fundamental characteristics of the group itself.

Moreover, how would a memory be possible otherwise? It would be paradoxical to claim that the memory preserves the past in the present or introduces the present into the past if they were not actually two zones of the same domain and if the group, insofar as it returns into itself and becomes self-conscious through remembering and isolation from others, does not tend to enclose itself in a relatively immobile form. The group is undoubtedly under the influence of an illusion when it believes the similarities more important than the differences, but it clearly cannot account for the differences, because the images it has previously made of itself are only slowly transformed. But the framework may be enlarged or compressed without being destroyed, and the assumption may be made that the group has only gradually focused on previously unemphasized aspects of itself. What is essential is that the features distinguishing it from other groups survive and be imprinted on all its content. We might have to leave one of these groups for a long time, or the group may break up, its older membership may die off, or a change in our residence, career, or sympathies and beliefs may oblige us to bid it farewell. When we then recall all the times we have spent in the group, do these remembrances not actually come to us as a single piece? So much so that we sometimes imagine the oldest remembrances to be the most immediate; or, rather, they are all illuminated in a uniform light, like objects blending together in the twilight.