

## Introduction

IT SEEMS APPROPRIATE to introduce this special issue by remembering how it came about. The idea of bringing together a group of essays about historical forms of memory arose between us two years ago with the feel of an idea come at the right time. Mnemosyne, the Greek goddess of memory, was also the mother of history: perhaps she would have pointed two historians in this direction from the start. We wanted in any case to come to terms somehow with two apparently different and, on the surface at least, sharply opposed attitudes about the past that were cropping up together everywhere around us. Hardly for the first time, but, so it seemed, with particular urgency, talk about “our” cultural amnesia was tied to a fascination, even obsession, with historical memory. The new round of debates over German and Japanese war guilt and the internment of Japanese-Americans, the specter of the Holocaust, the reinvention of official memory in the Soviet Union of *glasnost*, the extravaganza of the bicentennial of the French Revolution—was the lesson of this list, admittedly as arbitrary as memory itself, that there was some surging commitment to remembering? Or was the real point that people had found it easy to forget? What about the role in our own work of reclaiming the stories of more or less forgotten people who had been losers, victims, or only ordinary folk?

By the time that we were offered space in *Representations*, it was as if we had been aiming at a collection of papers on history and memory all along. So, as we might have expected from our own experience, had other scholars: one of the pleasures of following up promising leads was finding ourselves in good company.<sup>1</sup> As a result, we were able to draw on work in progress or already complete, beginning with Pierre Nora’s introduction to his massive collaborative history of French collective memory, *Les Lieux de mémoire* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1984–). Although we were interested in different aspects and approaches, we had none of the system of the ancient and Renaissance writers who thought that the “art of memory” could encompass all knowledge. A more comprehensive issue would surely have included essays on any number of topics that are not much (or at all) discussed here—the role of memory in traditional cultures, its institutionalization in archives and museums, the psychoanalytical understanding of memory, the question of gender in the construction and recovery of a historical past, to mention only those subjects on which we actually sought out contributions. In any case, and thanks to our contributors, the special issue does represent—memorably, we believe—a wide range of ways of thinking about memory.

This small exercise in remembering has already broached a few of the larger themes of the issue as a whole—that one’s memory of any given situation is multiform and that its many forms *are* situated in place and time from the perspective of the present. To put this another way, memory has a history, or more precisely, histories. If this seems obvious, it should be remembered that fixed claims are often made in memory’s behalf. For example, nothing could be more basic to most people than the contrast between memory and forgetting—or actually be more vulnerable even to mild questioning: isn’t forgetting only the substitution of one memory for another; don’t we forget to remember, or remember to forget? The claim that memory is historical is itself subject to shifting historical boundaries. One variant of the old Nature-Culture trope contrasts the supposedly “organic” flow of memory with the historian’s more or less calculated accounts of the past; representing Nature to history’s Culture, memory either gives us unvarnished truths or, conversely, tells uncritical tales. Collapse the Nature-Culture distinction, as poststructuralist criticism has done in various ways, and both memory and history look like heavily constructed narratives, with only institutionally regulated differences between them. At issue here of course are fundamental attitudes about our relationship to the past—whether, for example, we “naturally” identify with or feel “historically” distinct from our ancestors.

It follows if memory is indeed polymorphic and historically situated that it will be called continually into question. The “counter-memory” of our title is meant to suggest that memory operates under the pressure of challenges and alternatives. A private fetish or a public injunction to forget—a decree of amnesty would be an instance of a politics of forgetting—are forms of counter-memory; for Michel Foucault counter-memory designated the residual or resistant strains that withstand official versions of historical continuity.<sup>2</sup> The precise terms and definitions are less important to us here than the working principle that whenever memory is invoked we should be asking ourselves: by whom, where, in which context, against what?

The “where” question is the most traditional and, as it turns out in our essays, the most timely of questions to ask about memory. We have learned from Frances Yates how the ancient “art of memory” involved associating some text or idea to be remembered to the image of a place. The orator recalled his speech by imagining it as a succession of “topoi” (i.e., “places” *and* “topics”) in a fictive architecture; seeing, say, an image of Hercules in the niche of such a “memory theater” prompted the appropriate texts on the Herculean attributes of strength, cunning, and so on.<sup>3</sup> These mnemonic techniques were suited to a culture in which memory and speech played the normative role since taken by generalized literacy and the printed word. Once part of a whole pattern of education based on rhetoric and intended to produce a class of model citizen-officials, they survive as patent remedies in the self-help literature of popular culture. Nevertheless, Proust’s *petite madeleine*, Maurice Halbwachs’s seminal work on the “social frames”

of collective memory, and even cognitive studies and biological research on the “location” of memory in the brain are all reminders that memory seeks its local habitations.<sup>4</sup>

It will come as no surprise, then, that without any prompting from us our contributors are especially concerned with what Pierre Nora, explicitly referring to classical mnemonics, calls *lieux de mémoire*. The literary confession, the nineteenth-century “discovery” of the “maladies of memory,” the commemorative monument, the ethnographical record—these are all “places” where memories converge, condense, conflict, and define relationships between past, present, and future. To be sure, such a scatter of settings does not map any very clear or consistent pattern. But this is Pierre Nora’s point: we distinguish *lieux de mémoire*, he insists, because we no longer live in a world suffused with memory or fully committed to overarching ideological narratives—so, for example, The Triumph of Western Civilization, of the Nation-State, of the Proletariat, etc.—defining what is supposed to be memorable. Memory could be sensed practically everywhere in a thoroughly traditional society; it would be hard to find anywhere in a consistently postmodern culture where all past moments would be equidistant, equally available and remote, from the present. The problematic of “places” is still (or is once again) a “modernist” one: memory is a parasite or intruder that must nevertheless be preserved if there are to be Ancients to justify the Moderns’ critiques of the present and programs for the future.<sup>5</sup>

Simonides of Ceos supposedly invented the classical *ars memoriae* by visualizing the places occupied by the victims of a disaster of which he was the only survivor. Memory is of course a substitute, surrogate, or consolation for something that is missing, and the papers here are more or less explicitly preoccupied with rupture and loss. If Richard Terdiman is right, Musset’s *Confession* announces, precisely in the attempt to overcome them, the paradigmatic disjunctions of a modern crisis of memory in the generation after the French Revolution—history and reminiscence, society and self, historiography and psychology, or, in more abstract terms, “determination” and “freedom.” Instead of absolution, the juxtaposition of a narrative of confession and the history of the postrevolutionary generation leads to the dissolution of the self, the present, and the past in a pathological circuit of memory from which there is no escape. The memory disorders of the “maladie d’un enfant du siècle” enacted in Musset’s text spread in Michael Roth’s essay to the medical literature and the clinic; preoccupied with “maladies de la mémoire,” French doctors late in the nineteenth century can only define the normal by what it is not. Nathan Rapoport’s Ghetto Monument was actually built over a devastating loss in the ruins of Warsaw, and as James Young shows, it has served as a rallying point against forgetting for different, often radically opposed, causes. In Renato Rosaldo’s essay on “imperialist nostalgia” the agents of a dominant culture conjure up fond recollections of the old ways that they are in one way or another responsible for destroying. It is the soft light of

remembrance itself that abets the loss of memory and therefore the evasion of responsibility.

If memory is an index of loss, and notoriously malleable besides, how can we remember truly? The obstacles are formidable—sheer forgetfulness, suggestibility, censorship, hindsight, conflicting recollections, the force of interests that frame whatever we remember. If we call on memory to inform or confirm present convictions, it may become an all too obliging mirror; if we do not, it becomes, or at least pretends to be, merely antiquarian. We can say, as is often said, that identity depends on memory, whether we mean by that a core self that remembers its earlier states or, poststructurally, the narratives that construct (and deconstruct) identities by comparing “once upon a time” and “here and now.” The identity-defining functions of memory are real enough, but can we separate contents from functions? For that matter, if memory is shaped by mythologies, ideologies, and narrative strategies why should we even try to remember what actually happened in the past? And yet if we give up trying, where does this leave history except as a special category of fiction?

The main burden of Steven Knapp’s essay is skeptical. As he understands it, the case for the relevance of the “actual past” to present concerns tends to confuse and conflate analogy and explanation. One can have analogies without needing real history and historical explanations without generating relevance, but both operations cannot logically be collapsed into one as seems to happen in the claim that the truth about the past matters to action in the present. Knapp extends his skeptical critique by taking the example of the logic of punishment, especially collective punishment. It is not, he argues, the past event that justifies the subsequent punishment; it is rather the shared sense of an imagined collective future that confers ethical value on the actual collective past. Where Pierre Nora charts islands of memory in his opening essay, collective memory seems here to be itself afloat in a sea of false logic and expediency. One line of argument, countering a familiar lament these days, suggests that we have all too much sense of history, if only because we have no more direct relationship to the past than a “historical” one; the other implies that we have very little sense of real history, and not much need for it in any case.

Either way, history and memory are placed in sharp opposition, an opposition that was already ancient when it resurfaced in the pioneering studies of collective memory in this century. For Maurice Halbwachs, rejecting Henri Bergson’s conception of remembering as a personal, subjective experience, memory was socially constructed and present-oriented, an instrument of reconfiguration and not of reclamation or retrieval. Precisely for this reason, it was important both that collective memory be attentively studied and that it be relentlessly exposed. Against memory’s delight in similarity, appeal to the emotions, and arbitrary selectivity, history would stand for critical distance and documented explanation.<sup>6</sup>

In the logic of these oppositions the skeptic about the reliability of memory becomes the true believer in the objectivity of history.

Taken together, the essays in this issue suggest that if there is a gap between memory and history there are also ways of negotiating it. One way is through the historical study of memory itself. Renato Rosaldo proposes that we inoculate ourselves against the more treacherous illusions of memory by exposing ourselves to their spell. James Young gives us a historical account of a commemorative monument that enables us both to remember its origins and to recognize how many different memories have overlapped and collided in the monument's history. The collision of memories points in turn to the way in which memory can challenge the biases, omissions, exclusions, generalizations, and abstractions of history. Suppressed or misdated in the official record, the Soviet massacre of Polish officers in the woods of Katyn in 1940 could only be remembered in Poland until a joint Polish-Soviet commission charged with filling in historical "blank spots" recently declared it to be history. Local memories are sources for writing the local histories ignored by historians of dynastic monarchy and the nation-state; the private sphere and the practices of everyday life define and conserve alternatives to the official memory of public historiography. Much of the "new" social history written in recent years about marginal and otherwise forgotten people depends on the return to (and of) such counter-memories. One of the most important features of these fruitful exchanges is the methodological diversity represented in this issue, where the reader will find memory treated in terms of experience, ideas, images, forms of textuality, and philosophical investigation.

Rather than insisting on the opposition between memory and history, then, we want to emphasize their interdependence. This does not necessarily mean that the relationship is or should be a balanced or stable one. If anything, it is the tension or outright conflict between history and memory that seem necessary and productive. The explosive pertinence of a remembered detail may challenge repressive or merely complacent systems of prescriptive memory or history; memory, like the body, may speak in a language that reasoned inquiry will not hear. However illogically, as Steven Knapp would have it, people do worry about the fit between what actually happened and received narratives about the past. The process of adjusting the fit is an ongoing one, subject to continual debate and exchanges in which memory and history may play shifting, alternately more or less contentious roles in setting the record straight. Sometimes this task is best performed by the unreflective, erratic operations of memory, sometimes by rules of recording and interpretation that, since the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, belong to historical discourse.

We can formulate something of our own sense of obligation to the record on the model of a covenant or of credit. An obligation to remember truly, we might say, is as binding as the fact that other generations live on in our very blood and

descend from our own. To forget the past willfully is to threaten the fragile links that, however tenuously, guard us from oblivion. History and memory, like credit, are both expansive; they are extended, and often overextended, on faith; but they can be periodically checked against the record and called into account too. It seems fitting to remember here by way of conclusion that the problems and prospects addressed by this special issue are open-ended.

## Notes

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1. See *Women and Memory*, ed. Margaret A. Lourie, Donna C. Stanton, and Martha Vicinus, *Michigan Quarterly Review* 26, no. 1 (Winter 1987); Yosef H. Yerushalmi, Nicole Loraux et al., *Usages de l'oubli* (Paris, 1988); and *Politiques de l'oubli*, a special number of *Le Genre humain* (October 1988); conferences that came to our attention while we were working on the issue include "History and Memory in European Romanticism" at Stanford University, 1–2 May 1987, and "Memory, Cognition, and the Production of Images" at Johns Hopkins University, 8 April 1988.
2. See Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, N.Y., 1977), esp. 139–64.
3. Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago, 1966); for recent work see B. Roy and Paul Zumthor, eds., *Jeux de mémoire: Aspects de la mnémotechnie médiévale* (Montreal and Paris, 1986); and Patrick H. Hutton, "The Art of Memory Reconceived: From Rhetoric to Psychoanalysis," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48 (1987): 371–92.
4. See, e.g., the extensive survey by Henry L. Roediger III, "Memory Metaphors in Cognitive Psychology," *Memory and Cognition* 8, no. 3 (1980): 231–46.
5. See the excellent survey and analysis by Helga Geyer-Ryan and Helmut Lethen, "The Rhetoric of Forgetting: Brecht and the Historical Avant-Garde," in *Convention and Innovation* (Amsterdam, forthcoming).
6. Patrick H. Hutton, "Collective Memory and Collective Mentalities: The Halbwachs-Ariès Connection," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques* 15, no. 2 (Summer 1988): 311–22.