

**Karin Tilmans, Frank van Vree, Jay Winter (eds.), *Performing the Past: Memory, History, and Identity in Modern Europe*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010, 368 pags.**

### **The “performative turn” in memory studies and history: its scope and possibilities<sup>1</sup>**

Since memory studies began to emerge in the nineteen eighties and nineties, specialists have striven to look for metaphors and concepts to refer to the social nature of remembrance. Pierre Nora, who was a pioneering author involved in recovering Maurice Halbwachs’s well-known work,<sup>2</sup> coined the expression “lieux de mémoire” to examine the supports where remembrance “crystallizes” (*Les Lieux de Mémoire*, 1884-92, 7 vols.).<sup>3</sup> The term was destined to have great impact because, as Nora would subsequently assert, although the mentioned work refers to the idea of France, it also invites preparation of a “European system of symbols”.<sup>4</sup> This is why in the English edition of *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, which is a version in three volumes with a different structure than the original text, the editors have preferred to talk of “realms of memory”, instead of using the terms “sites” or “places”, with which the word “lieux” is associated on other occasions in a more literal and equivocal translation.<sup>5</sup> In any case, the metaphor of “crystallization of remembrance” through certain “lieux” did not seem to convince all experts and, also in a somewhat pioneering fashion, Ralph Samuel would entitle his outstanding study on memory and popular culture in Great Britain in current times, *Theatres of memory* (1994) – a work completed with a second volume, a posthumous homage containing his main essays, published in 1998.<sup>6</sup> In this work, the image of theatre is a metaphor illustrating the variety of ways of appropriating the past that accumulates in mass culture, and their importance in comparison with any hypothetical “invention of tradition” coming from above. Furthermore, Samuel also highlights the fact that “memory, so far from being merely a passive receptacle or storage system, an image blank of the past, is rather an active, shaping force”.<sup>7</sup> Ten years later, that reference to memory, understood as an activity that is “theatrically” oriented, seems to have attained the category of definition, or at least this is the purpose of the book reviewed below.

*Performing the Past* is a set of fourteen essays on memory and its relationships with history (plus an Introduction by Jay Winter), divided into four sections, which stem from the conference *Theatres of Memory. A Conference on Historical Culture*,

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<sup>2</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1925).

<sup>3</sup> The concept of “lieux de mémoire”, in Pierre Nora, “Entre mémoire et histoire. La problématique des lieux”, in Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les lieux de mémoire*. Vol. *La République* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), pp. xxiii ff., and xxxiv ff.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Nora, “la aventura de *Les Lieux de mémoire*”, *Ayer*, 32 (1998): 30-32.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Nora (ed.), *Realms of Memory. Rethinking of the French Past*, ed. by Lawrence Kritzman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996-98), 3 vols.

<sup>6</sup> Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*. Vol. 1, *Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London, New York: Verso, 1994), Vol. 2, *Island Stories, Unravelling Britain*, ed. by Sally Alexander and Gareth Stedman Jones (London, New York: Verso, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. x.

organized by the Huizinga Institute, The Netherlands Graduate School for Cultural History (University of Amsterdam), in early 2004. The book, which is an example of the interdisciplinary nature of the studies on the realm of remembrance, in addition to two high-profile experts such as Peter Burke and Reinhart Koselleck (who died in 2006), also brings together a number of historians and experts in linguistics and comparative literature, along with a professor of political philosophy and an archaeologist from various European and US universities. The delay in its publication (attributed by editors to the difficulties involved in coordinating such a high, scattered number of authors) has not prevented the work from losing interest in the slightest: it may be considered to be a reflection of the current plural nature of studies on memory and historiography.

The present book is without doubt an ambitious work: it introduces itself as a prime example of a presumed re-orientation of memory studies (and by extension, of historical studies, *infra.*) that has been taking place in recent decades. Ann Rigney, in chapter 10, for instance, will highlight that “the fact that the present collection bears the title *Performing the Past* is indicative of a general turn towards performativity in memory studies” (p. 211). The thesis raised in this set of essays is that remembrance is not a mere “collective phenomenon” transmitted through a limited range of “social frameworks”, or that is kept in certain “lieux”, as Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora suggest. Remembrance is rather a practice in constant transformation. According to Rigney, cultural studies on memory have rendered obsolete the models that considered literary works as a “site” and “storage” vessel, in favour of others that are more dynamic, in which “cultural processes and mnemonic practices involved in the on-going production of past images and ways of engaging with them” (p. 210), acquire crucial importance.

The terms chosen by the editors to define that dynamism are “performance” and “performative”. From these concepts, which include an implicit reference to the theatrical, the editors have preferred to retain the idea that social memory is a “Heraclitean” notion (cf. p. 17 for this image). As such, this is forever being seen through its representations, which are in a constant state of transition. Thus, remembrance is a “performative act”, namely an activity that never ceases to change: “something that happens in time and place”, so that every time “we carry out the work of remembrance, the story we fashion is different from those that have come before” (p. 7). Furthermore, identities and certain social movements have a performative nature (pp. 15-19), that is, they owe their expressiveness or their *raison d’être* to the changing expressions adopted by remembrance. But, as we said, there is a bond between the performative act and the metaphor of the theatre, a relationship that other contributors of the book take care of highlighting. Ann Rigney insists, for example, on the fact that, at least in her field of studies (the remembrance of the famous Walter Scott novel *Ivanhoe*), performativity in memory does not simply refer to the general sense of agency; it means something more specific. It is pointing to the “theatricality” of the action (p. 211). And Joep Leerssen, who also studies how fictional narrative spreads and transforms, declares that that phenomenon is “a theatre of memory” (in the sense – he writes – that the readers identify themselves with the actors and imagine themselves taking part in the real-life course of events flowing into the present; see p. 237).

This idea of dynamism and performativity is clearly mirrored in the book's intermediate chapters (from 5 to 12), with an unsuspected range of supports and process of memory change.

Peter Burke begins the section with a classic topic in memory studies such as that of commemorations. The chapter tackles two examples of the “heteroglossia” or the multiplicity of voices, as the author says, endorsing Mikhail Bakhtin's well-known thesis,<sup>8</sup> which emerge as remembrance becomes transformed and spreads: those ideas corresponding to the memory of the so-called Bonfire Night – the attempt by Guy Fawkes and his fellow conspirators to blow up the Houses of Parliament, on 5 November 1605, in England – and to the fortune of the “Glorious Twelfth” in Northern Ireland, that is, the celebration of the anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne, when William of Orange defeated King James II (July 1690). More original is Jane Kaplan's topic discussed in the next chapter. This author concentrates on the “9/11 tattoos”, “memorial tattoos” that friends, comrades and relatives made themselves to pay tribute to the fire-fighters that died in the attack on the World Trade Center, and from whose symbols and drawings the present book has selected interesting samples with photos in full colour. In her article Kaplan proposes a new topic: a tattoo history to cover the cultural changes of this form of expression.

Photographs, as a support for remembrance, are not a new theme in memory studies, but Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer have discovered an interesting topic in their chapter. The authors examine what they call “street photos”, namely “portraits” of the Jewish population, from family albums, taken while walking through the city both during the previous period of the Second World War and at moments coinciding with the Holocaust. These photos, coming from the Habsburg Czernowitz (the Romanian Cernauti from 1918 onwards) and donated by the authors' parents-in-law – who consigned them to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1998 – offer new faces of the Holocaust memory and reflect the will to retain a sense of normality despite everything. Their features, which, as Hirsch and Spitzer conclude, supplement or even defy the visual landscape of atrocity of the Holocaust memory allow us “to accept the will to normality that drives these city strolls in moments of extremity” (p. 163).

In the next chapter, Alessandro Portelli comments on an original memorial version of the narratives of the murders committed by Nazis on 24 March 1944 in Rome, known as the Fosse Ardeatine massacre. The originality of the version lies in the fact that it is about an adaptation to theatre, with the title *Radio Clandestina*, undertaken by the actor Ascanio Celestini, of the work of oral history prepared by Portelli himself on that episode. The new version, which has been winning public favour since its release, led Portelli to assert that it is an especially appropriate way of fighting against “revisionism”, because “(it) helped us retrieve and understand the reason and meaning of our Resistance-born democracy” (p. 183).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

<sup>9</sup> The debate on “revisionism” of the image of the fascist regime in the media has been a topic that has worried Italian historians over the past two decades, and it is at the root of what the historian Nicola Gallerano called in the nineteen nineties “l'ups”, that is, “l'uso pubblico della storia”, the public use of history. See *La verità della storia. Scritti sull'uso pubblico del passato* (Roma: Manifestolibri, 1999).

The reflection set out below is especially suggestive, too. Here, Jan Assmann examines in what way music spurs or draws on memory. The analysis on the manner Mozart's last opera *The Magic Flute* uses memory will not be easy to understand for a layperson unaware of the complexities of musicology, since it is highly technical, but some of the reflections that the author raises on the ways memory forms part of musical pieces, and what the difference is with the kind of remembrance that a narrative or a film include, are highly interesting for any expert in memory studies (see pp. 187-189). Jan Assmann's essay is followed by two chapters, we have already mentioned, where the role of memory in literary work is examined: those of Ann Rigney and Joep Leerssen. The first deals with the fortune Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* gained as part of US Southern heritage after the civil war of 1861-65; and the second revolves around the manner in which Flemish and Dutch memories, and the respective narratives that back them up, have been given shape to the Low Countries' identity throughout the nineteenth century.

The last chapter of this part is perhaps the most interesting of all of the essays reviewed so far. Here, Frank Van Vree examines how the Holocaust, in its origins, was confirmed. In other words, what were the first pieces of footage that served as incontrovertible proof for the Nuremberg Trials? And later the author concentrates on the characteristics and difficulties of the film, *Nuit et Brouillard* (Night and Fog) by Alain Resnais (1955), which is to be considered the first filmed memory to include the idea of the "univers concentrationnaire". According to Van Vree, Resnais's work and the footage in the post-war "defy" all those people that have considered the Holocaust beyond representation (p. 279).

The book closes with a section of a complementary nature but for that no less interesting (Section Number 4). It gathers three works related to the implications of memory. On the one hand, Frans Grijzenhout analyses the paradoxes and varieties of the idea of "revolutionary museum", the institution born with the French revolution, when performing the past; on the other hand, Stanilaw Tyszka's essay consists of quite an innovative study on the ways that "restitution politics" in East Europe affected memories after the fall of Communism in the nineteen nineties. The section ends with a study by Chiara Bottici, in which the author reflects upon the varieties and typologies that "politics of memory" has adopted in order to endorse the European identity.

Almost all of the mentioned works quoted above offer suggestive reflections on memory and even propound typologies as intending to demonstrate, with new concepts, that Halbwachs' belief in the existence of a "collective memory" is a notion too vague to be used by cultural and historical studies today. Typologies on memory can be found too in the works of Peter Burke (p. 106), Jan Assmann (pp. 187-188), and Chiara Bottici (pp. 343 ff.). However, it is in the first section, which is entirely devoted to theoretical reflection, that one can find some deep insights; a section that, in exchange, contains the most heterogeneous contributions.

In the first of the three chapters of this part, Aleida Assmann devotes her whole essay to establishing a typology of memories to leave behind Halbwachs' erstwhile concept of "collective memory". She distinguishes up to "four formats of memory" (individual, social, political, and cultural), which she illustrates through the analysis of memories of the German population expelled from the East European countries after the

Second World War. That typology is without doubt a useful research tool: individual memory has a fragmentary nature and covers up to three generations; social memory is more generational and “undergoes a perceptible shift after periods of around thirty years”; on the other hand, political and cultural memories are “trans-generational” memories; but political memory is, above all, anchored in signs, places, monuments, rites, which periodically reactivate individual remembrance and enhance collective participation. Instead, cultural memory is that kind of remembrance referring to what a society considers to be salient and vital in order to achieve a common orientation, and it is kept in institutions such as school curricula, remembrance days, etc. (see pp. 42-44). Reinhart Koselleck’s essay, which comes next, strays from the line of the other contributions, which owe most – Peter Burke’s being the exception – to “post-structuralist” trends. But the writing Professor Koselleck contributes here has a classic character and fits nicely into any catalogue of theoretical reflections. Koselleck makes a reflection closely related to his well-known analysis on historicity or on the “history of concepts”: what are the general factors that mould the “repetitive structures” in history, without which individual events would not be understandable?<sup>10</sup> In this way, the author calls the roll of a series of assumptions, factors destined to play a crucial role in the development of those repetitive structures: natural preconditions that make human life possible, biological conditions of human nature, human institutions, ways of thinking that allow us to think of singular events as structures susceptible to being repeated (prophecies, prognosis, planning of coming events, etc.), language, etc.

We have saved Chris Lorenz’s chapter till last, deliberately, because this is what marks, in our opinion, the limits of the presumed “performative turn” claimed by the editors. One can agree that memory studies may be subject to a “turn” towards the performative realm – with the reservation about the fact that expressions such as “turns”, “new” and “paradigms” have become such an abusive way to refer to current historiographical change that it is not easy to delimit the extent to which they have been transformed into a rhetorical formula.<sup>11</sup> Thus, what is not so clear is that the aforesaid “performative turn” was also taking place in the historical studies; and, to be faithful to the truth, Professor Lorenz’s work, albeit very interesting, has not been successful in changing our mind.

His essay might be defined as an attempt to explain from a post-structuralist standpoint the implications, for academic historians, of the “memory boom” undergone by current society. This is also done by Aleida Assmann and we might agree with her that the historian should renounce seeing himself as a figure that monopolizes the representations of the past – although, as the author points out, it is true that historians are destined to develop a momentous role to examine those representations in a rigorous manner (p. 39).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantic of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 107-14.

<sup>11</sup> In one way, there is no lack of reason in Gérard Noriel’s irony when he wrote that “the present paradigms do not often last longer than their authors, and some only last as long as it takes to read a book, or even as long as a presentation”. See *Sur la “crise” de l’histoire* (Paris: Belin, 1996), p. 124.

<sup>12</sup> We can remember here the thesis of Antoon De Baets, who considers that a “responsible history” is today more necessary than ever, since democracy (and in particular the Network), in addition to creating the best conditions for the writing and teaching of history, means that, paradoxically, the possibility of



In his essay, Chris Lorenz, who has written the most ambitious of all the chapters reviewed so far, follows François Hartog's theory of the so-called "régimes d'historicité" to expound the reasons for that loss of monopoly by the historians, and their implications.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately history of historiography studies prove that changes in the ways of writing history are more complex than that of explanations resulting from "post-structuralism". In his work Lorenz considers that the current collapse of the modern "regime of historicity" is associated with the disappearance of three factors which have remained closely linked to "academic historiography" until the nineteen seventies: 1) the idea of national history; 2) a "discourse on objectivity" which would be a by-product of the idea of nation; and 3) a "rectilinear" conception of time, in agreement with premises 1 and 2, which would in turn be a secularized version of the Christian time conception. The boom of memorial studies would stem from the disintegration of these three elements and the emergence of a new "presentism" (François Hartog), which will – Lorenz adds – be based upon experiences of traumatic past, a "past which does not want to pass", namely the Holocaust and other similar experiences. As a result of that "collapse", a history "in pieces" characterized by disintegration would have been born (p. 86).

However this assertion may ignore the fact that historians, in their research, prove to be more eclectic than expected, one can agree on the importance on the category of "the present". In fact, what has been called "history of the present" ("contemporary history", "histoire du temps présent", "Zeitsgeschichte", etc.), is a clear proof of the changes in current historiography: the bias that the first generations of professional historians showed against recent history have gone; the current ideas of objectivity have virtually nothing in common with those expressed by nineteenth-century historians; and memory studies, drawing on the remembrance of traumatic experiences, have become a new speciality today.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, to any reader interested in the writing of history, the following question proves to be unavoidable: was nineteenth-century historiography the by-product of the three aforementioned factors as expounded by the author? The studies in the history of historiography and in social thought confirm that this was not at all the case (in this matter, Lorenz's essay takes a retrospective look at the clichés of Post-structuralism).

What the author names "the discourse of 'objective' history" is not a by-product of the state-nation. What is more, insisting on the existence of a unique "discourse" on objectivity in historiography throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries proves to be a clear simplification.<sup>15</sup> The idea of historiographical objectivity can be traced in the

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"abuses of history" is all the greater. See *Responsible History* (London: Berghahn Books, 2009), pp. 46-48.

<sup>13</sup> François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité, Présentisme et expériences du temps* (Paris: Seuil, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Julio Aróstegui, *La historia vivida. Sobre la historia del presente* (Madrid: Alianza, 2004), pp. 19-193; and Ángel Soto, *El presente es historia. Reflexiones de teoría y método* (Santiago de Chile: Centro de Estudios Bicentenario, CIMAS, Facultad de Comunicación de la Universidad de los Andes).

<sup>15</sup> We refrain from refuting the assessment that the ancient conception of time was necessarily cyclic and that the modern one stems from the secularization of Christian time. The first thesis was already rejected by Arnaldo Momigliano. See, for instance, "El tiempo en la historia antigua", in *Ensayos sobre historiografía Antigua y moderna* (México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1983), pp. 155-75. The second aspect, which was launched by authors such as Benedetto Croce and Karl Lowitz, has been

philosophy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in the emergence of modern sciences and, for the historians' case, in the authors of the age of the Enlightenment. These were the ones who, considering that society functioned following the rules of "mechanics" and were willing to demythologize the erstwhile narratives and histories, were in good condition to reflect on the objectivity of historical knowledge for the first time. This means that they were the first to raise problems beyond rhetoric, beyond the old Humanist genre, of Ciceronian origin, of the "ars historica", and beyond the dictum that the historian "ne quid vere non audeat" (must not be obliged to say anything other than the truth) (Cicero).<sup>16</sup> Suggesting that the historian could lie, that he often did it, and, above all, discussing its consequences was what helped authors most to break with the old belief that the historian, as guardian of (official) memory, should necessarily work in the service of some lord or power.

Nineteenth-century professional historiography can be considered as the inheritor of that trust of intellectuals, developed in the age of the Enlightenment, in explaining events and processes, but with two further components: 1) the public uses of the national history and of remembrance, which emerge in the era of liberal revolutions; and 2) the development of what was called at the end of the nineteenth century "la méthode historique". Thus, once the century had gone, professional historians were firm believers in the fact that national devotion was compatible with objectivity. But, what was the reason? Because they considered that the complexities of the "historical method" was enough of an antidote to avoid the so-called "biased" or "party" history.<sup>17</sup> But this nationalistic discourse was not taken on board by the most outstanding historians as quickly as one might imagine. Leopold Ranke's case was illustrative. His sense of objectivity did not come from the idea of nation, as Lorenz supposes (p. 73). In fact, Ranke was never a modern nationalist. His idea of objectivity emanates from his religious beliefs, from his conception of history as a discipline capable of discovering the "leading ideas" behind the facts.<sup>18</sup> And as for the thesis that the Marxist sense of objectivity derives from the idea of nation, because Marxist historians saw themselves as "half priests and half soldiers" of their (socialist) "nation" (p. 73), the adduced reasons cannot be more forced. By examining socialist doctrines in the nineteenth century, one can observe that all their interest in introducing themselves as a "science" built upon their concern with social prognoses, "laws of social development", and their interest in going beyond the idea of "nationality". In the famous Pagnerre's *Dictionnaire politique* (1842) "the socialists" were defined as those men who "were at the same time philosophers, legislators, devotees to religious revelation, economists,

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rejected by modern specialists in historiography. See for example, Guy Bourdé and Hervé Martin, *Les écoles historiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1983), pp. 48-49; Philippe Ariès, *El tiempo de la historia* (Paidós: Buenos Aires, 1988), pp. 96-146 ; or Krzysztof Pomian, *El orden del tiempo* (Madrid: Júcar, 1990), pp. 60-65, etc.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Girolamo Cotroneo, *I tratattisti dell' "Ars Historica"* (Napoli: Giannini editore, 1971).

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, the forewords of the main historical journals in the nineteenth century to observe this paradox. See Fritz Stern (ed.), *The Varieties of History. From Voltaire to the Present* (London: Macmillan, 1970), pp. 171-77.

<sup>18</sup> See Leopold von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, ed. by Georg. G. Iggers (London, New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 11, 15, 66, 87.

and moralists”, and that “(broke) the narrow circle of nationality to germinate through it the terrestrial unity”.<sup>19</sup>

But this “discourse of ‘objective’ history”, to which Lorenz makes reference, when did it start waning? Of course, this took place long before the nineteen seventies. In fact, from the interwar period onwards, it is possible to find historiographical reflections that play down the idea of an “absolute” objectivity. What is more, the practice of so-called social and economic history lies in a conception of the political uses of history and sense of objectivity other than those of the first generations of professional historians. The thesis that historiography over the past two centuries has always kept the same idea of objectivity is nothing more than an attempt to justify the demolition of any concept of objective history, and honestly, we believe that this is a luxury historians cannot afford.

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<sup>19</sup> E. Duclerc et Pagnerre (ed.), *Encyclopedie du langage et de la science politiques* (Paris: Pagnerre, 1843), p. 886. Quoted by Gian Mario Bravo, *Historia del socialismo, 1789-1844* (Barcelona: Ariel, 1976), p. 57.