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Memory as object: a relation of proximity?

One of the ways in which modernity defines itself is through the emphasis it places on experiences of loss that it represents as pervasive and irretrievable. This is a commonplace of nineteenth-century intellectual and literary culture, in which loss itself emerges as a distinct object of thought and plays a significant role in accounts of modernity that come to be influential, if not dominant.[1] Thus, in his analysis of the politics of post-Revolutionary France, Constant laments the disadvantages of the mass societies characteristic of the modern world, where an ancient way of life, one in which individuals could flourish in social settings on a scale more proportionate to their capacities, is lost, irretrievably so.[2] Constant's argument turns on a paradox, in that the acknowledgement of loss is essential to the vision he seeks to rehearse of a modern form of politics, which, if it is to accommodate the indispensable freedom of the individual, must break with that of the ancient world. The point about loss is that it has become an enduring aspect of an identity, centred on the individual, that comes, in Constant's analysis of the modern commercial state of society, to prevail.[3] The emphasis which modernity gives to experiences of loss is

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[1] The disenchantment of loss is a Romantic topos; see Dennis Porter, *Rousseau's Legacy: Emergence and Eclipse of the Writer in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), ch. 3. Auguste Comte by contrast presents certain forms of disenchantment as salutary: they contribute to the advent of a positivist approach to knowledge, based on the exclusive description of sensory data; see *Philosophie des sciences*, ed. J. Grange (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 44.

[2] *De l'esprit de conquête et de l'usurpation*, I, xiii, in Benjamin Constant, *Écrits politiques*, ed. M. Gauchet (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 164–71. The classic account, centred on the formative period of the Third Republic, of how a national identity is fashioned at the expense of locally rooted forms of belonging is Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976).

[3] Much of the historical and political evaluation of liberalism in particular and features of modernity more generally consists in testing positive normative claims made with regard to a framework defined, in part at least, negatively: Gauchet (in the introduction to the edition of Constant cited) and Foucault (in his final lectures in the Collège de France) diverge sharply on whether or not the claim to self-limiting government in liberal theory is sustainable. The extent to which this complex intellectual framework amounts to a decisive gain continues to be a matter of debate in contemporary political theory; on the limited utility of the classic public–private distinction, see Raymond Geuss, *Public Goods, Private Goods* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); cf. Alastair Hannay, who identifies the public with the mediatized world, in the face of which the private individual, duly 'transformed',

significant for two reasons. It means that modernity is defined in part negatively, with reference to all of those things belonging to the past from which it is increasingly cut off. And the individual subject is affected by the ways in which loss connects with modernity as it comes into being: the social and cultural spaces in which as a result the subject circulates are heterogenous, alien, disproportionate.

The point about this narrative is that it might urge us to acknowledge and to begin to think seriously about forms of loss that seem significant socially. At the same time, the individual emerges as a result as the site of a complex struggle involving not only loss and identity, but also, it transpires, memory and forgetting. And the scope of the latter proves to be quite unexpected. So says Proust's Narrator, when, prompted by an encounter with a nameless Norwegian philosopher claiming to follow Bergson, he sketches a theory of forgetting in which loss is not the ultimate outcome: 'Nous possédons tous nos souvenirs, sinon la faculté de nous les rappeler'. Things come to be effaced only in the sense that they are beyond the reach of subjective human memory. But they exist independently of our capacity to remember them.[4] Forgetting could be said to be a significant force because it reveals subjective limits. Traces of the past do endure; it is merely that what we ordinarily invoke as memory is not something that we can mobilize so as to access them in a dependable way. The relation between self and world is transformed: the temporal mode in which the world exists is one of infinite accumulation of what we conventionally refer to as the past. But our frail memory cannot equip us to understand it. The possibility exists, then, that what we may happen to forget is not necessarility annihilated — and there seems to remain the counter-intuitive hope of continuing to 'possess', as the Narrator says, these objects.

If we break with a purely subjective or personal perception of forgetting, then the possibility opens up of some new relationship with objects of memory. It is this possibility as it manifests itself in the work of the two thinkers, namely Michel de Certeau and D. W. Winnicott, with whom I shall be concerned here. Though there are no clear direct links between them, each explores possible connections between the subject and culture centred on what I shall call memory-objects, in other words, objects which give scope to the possibility of complex

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becomes the bearer of responsibility for maintaining common interests, in *On the Public* (London: Routledge, 2005), ch. 8.

[4] *A la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. J.-Y. Tadié, 4 vols (Paris : Gallimard, 1987–89), III, 374–75. At a later point, the Narrator is more pessimistic in the face of loss, asking sceptically of 'l'érudition' whether it can succeed in overcoming even 'un sur mille de ces oublis qui vont s'entassant?' (IV, 301). Bergson characterizes memory as a feature of complex past–present interactions; see *Matière et mémoire* (Paris: PUF, 1946), 269–71. For an account of the virtuality of memory, derived in part from Bergson, and of its potential to generate an image of time, see Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2: l'image-temps* (Paris: Minuit, 1985), in particular, 129–64. On the significance of forgetting in Proust's novel, see James H. Reid, *Proust, Beckett, and Narration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), ch. 1.

exchanges between forms of memory which, on the one hand, are ephemeral elements of embodied local practice and those which, on the other, can be analysed and documented as features of cultural memory within a wider social or cultural scene. What we might understand by forgetting and loss undergoes something of a revision: they form part of a process whose temporal framework is not necessarily that of human life. If we suspend for a moment the point of view of the individual human subject, then what we think to be lost exists simply in a space external to us which is governed by its own dynamic, one from which we may be excluded. The problem that we face is twofold: how to characterize this space; and how to reinvent a subjective response to it.

Certeau argues that a characteristic concern of the human sciences is with the occluded object. The object impinges on the observer in such a way as to define his or her identity within a larger space; more specifically, the essentially negative orientation of his or her stance within it: 'il y a sans nul doute, liée au métier d'ethnologue ou d'historien, une fascination de la limite ou, ce qui est presque identique, de l'autre'.[5] In the work of Certeau and that of others influenced in turn by him, memory and loss are connected through processes which are above all social. Thus, for instance, Marc Augé claims that in the contemporary world the accumulation of artefacts of memory derives from our exclusion from a past which is in fact lost.[6] The problem of the occluded object emerges, then, historically; we use memory as a cultural medium in response to temporal features of the societies we inhabit. At the same time, these temporal features can give rise to specific practices of memory: some merely perpetuate loss, in effect, by displacing it, while others may in some as yet undefined way compensate for our apparent losses.[7]

Certeau gives some prominence to loss as an effect of modernity, in particular that of tradition. The effacement of tradition as a socially cohesive force means that social spaces are now characterized by the proliferation of 'pratiques signifiantes' which are fundamentally heterogeneous.[8] Such a transformation calls, then, for a semiotic approach, within the context of which Certeau himself presents memory as something fundamentally ambiguous. Most obviously, it can serve as a means of institutionalizing meaning: discourses of popular culture typically amount to claims for continuity of memory

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[5] *L'Écriture de l'histoire* (Paris : Gallimard, 1975), 56–57.

[6] *Non-lieux : introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* (Paris : Seuil, 1992), 37.

[7] Certeau seeks to explore how practices of history can be informed by the attempt to respond in some way to the kinds of exclusion that result from loss: 'l'histoire est en cela, même si elle n'est que cela, le lieu privilégié où le regard s'inquiète', in *La Culture au pluriel*, third edition (Paris: Seuil, 1993), 71.

[8] See *La Culture au pluriel*, 11–13.

which are in fact problematic.[9] Thus, for instance, the attempt to document practices of the past as forms of popular culture is exposed to the risk of the scholastic fallacy: effective cultural practices are irretrievably abstracted from the circumstances of the historical agents who performed them, with the result that the observer's account amounts to something of a fiction.[10] Now, what an insistence on continuity of memory in just such a process can reveal is precisely the element of violence that a process of abstraction like this can imply. Certeau ultimately argues that what any history organized along these lines cannot but omit amounts to a 'géographie de l'*oublié*', the residue of what may now no longer be assimilated.[11] In other words, only by acknowledging the partiality which inevitably affects historical explorations of the past can we say something about the ways in which memory is institutionalized.

But, less obviously, a series of allusive and seemingly unsystematic mentions of memory point to the possibility that it may at the same time play a different role within culture. What Certeau seeks to show is that memory can be a factor that shapes a temporality in which the actions of the singular subject can be said to have a creative dimension. He takes care to make the point that the creative subject is not to be confused with the atomized individual posited by the analytical discourses characteristic of modernity: there is to be no 'retour aux individus'. If the individual, in an increasingly disseminated world, 'perd sa place', so as to become a '*sujet*', it is as a response to a process like the emergence of modernity sketched at the outset. The innumerable subject is characterized by a marginality that is 'massive', that of a majority which is silent in the sense that it can be detected only through 'une activité non signée, non lisible, non symbolisée'. The ephemerality to which Certeau gestures is intrinsic to the kind of cultural activity that owes its paradoxical existence to the sense that it borders on being lost. Creativity results from 'une suite indéfinie d'actes concrets' which are realized in particular, unpredictable circumstances; and, because indefinite and unpredictable, these acts exist only as traces which will always tend to be on the verge of being

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[9] See Morag Shiach, *Discourse on Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), ch. 1. I have developed further my analysis of the difficult relationship between memory and popular culture, in 'Common Culture and Creativity: Forgetting and Memory in the Cultural Theory of Michel de Certeau', in E. Caldicott and A. Fuchs, ed., *Cultural Memory: Essays in European Literature and History* (Oxford — Bern — New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 311–24.

[10] On the social dimension of the problem of knowledge and on how elites take their own models (typically derived from the current state of a complex and changing process) to be equivalents of the real, see *L'Invention du quotidien*, I, 294–95. On the scholastic fallacy, which consists in equating the agent's understanding of his or her world with the interpretative grids of the observer, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Raisons pratiques: sur la théorie de l'action* (Paris : Seuil, 1994), 223–24.

[11] *La Culture au pluriel*, 63.

forgotten, just as the kind of research that engages with it can only 'lutte[r] avec l'oubli'.[12]

In brief, memory can be a way of talking about ways of being, in all their multiplicity, in a world of objects, in all their plurality. And, paradoxically, what is by definition an ephemeral process gives particular salience to memory. Thus, the innumerable *manières de faire* with which Certeau is characteristically concerned endure only to the extent that their medium is a form of memory which exists at the very margins of institutionalized frameworks of meaning, namely a 'mémoire sans langage'.[13]

There is a strategic dimension to Certeau's far-reaching but characteristically elliptical attempt to theorize memory: it is motivated by the aim of pre-empting the kinds of recuperation to which it is exposed. But it is precisely the exposure of memory to a limitless cultural space that transforms its identity and, potentially, the identities of those who come to be exposed to it as it operates in this mode. Thus, memory, operating as a distinctive process that is at once mental and social, individual and transindividual, can establish what we take to be a momentary fusion of the present and the infinity of lived experience, taking the form of a spectacular temporal compression, 'une présence à la pluralité des temps et [qui] ne se limite donc pas au passé'.[14] The emergence of such a relation is of immense significance in that it conditions the very possibility of cultural action. We can work with or work through what is already there, something which Certeau can, it would appear, only capture by way of recourse to a neologism — 'permaner' — so as to explain how cultural activity results from an oscillation between what 'permanates' and what can in some sense be momentarily invented in the here and now.[15] The paradox is that this cultural activity, though characteristically ephemeral, overcomes forgetting, effaces loss.

Memory, in brief, comes to be transformed by being identified with a theoretical project which is concerned above all with the ceaseless renegotiation of our relation with and access to culture, as distinct from the institutionalized medium through which canonical or historically documented forms of what we take to be the culture of the past come to be preserved, recorded, transmitted. Memory, considered as one of several possible agencies implicated in the space between the

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[12] *L'Invention du quotidien*, I, xxxv; xliii; 115; 133; xlii. Certeau's engagement with such features of the everyday remains intractably exposed to the problem of how to document them; see Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 218–19. For an extended account of the Certeau's agent-centred hermeneutics of effective social practices, see also Jeremy Ahearne, *Michel de Certeau: Interpretation and its Other* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995).

[13] *L'Invention du quotidien*, I, 65. Compare the 'mémoire silencieuse et repliée' of the walkers, the *Wandersmänner*, in the unquantifiable city (I, 158)

[14] *L'Invention du quotidien*, I, 320 n.7.

[15] See *La Culture au pluriel*, 211.

embodied individual subject and the limitless collectivity, is revised in several ways — as object (it is as much the ephemeral as the monumental) and as a set of practices (it is as much an open-ended, though elusive and unpredictable, cultural process as it is a form of social containment). And the attempt to identify the different ways in which memory can be activated contributes in turn to an overt move in the direction of redefining what we might mean by culture: Certeau's concern is ultimately with the almost insoluble task of characterizing the unmappable totality of everyday life.

Winnicott's theorization of culture is comparable, in that it hinges on the shifting space of contact between what he terms the individual and the 'collective', and different, in that what ultimately lies at the centre of his account is a modified notion of experience. The problem with which Winnicott finds himself confronted is the paucity of psychoanalytical theory applied to cultural experience, a deficit that prompts him to bring psychoanalysis into contact with more traditional or more established disciplines, like philosophy or theology.[16] The framework within which he approaches this issue is that of the transitional object. The transitional object derives its value from the fact that its essentially paradoxical nature can productively be 'accepted and tolerated' (xii).[17] Acceptance and tolerance of the paradoxical transitional object matter because it infuses the individual's immersion in the world of experience — not in some abstract way, but, as Winnicott tentatively suggests, because the experience of the individual can be 'infinitely enriched' by means of a link which, he will argue, is creative and, by extension, cultural.

The dimension of culture which is critical (though mentioned by Winnicott only in passing) is its temporality: it embraces past and future alike (xii). Just how this might happen is what we must consider; but we can see at the outset that on this point his theory converges with that of Certeau. This is an extension, Winnicott says, of the basic issue of the uses to which objects can be put. This extension into the space of culture leads Winnicott to formulate a theory based on proximity to the object field, the issue being ultimately the scope of what might be termed culture to be defined and in turn theorized as such.

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[16] *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1991), xi; this book (first published in 1971) includes the famous analysis of transitional objects written twenty years earlier and a number of subsequent treatments of creativity and culture. Further references are given in parentheses.

[17] The paradox is that 'a baby creates an object but the object would not have been created as such if it had not already been there' (*Playing and Reality*, 71). By recourse to 'split-off intellectual functioning', it would be possible to resolve the paradox, but its value would be destroyed as a result. On the uses of paradox to characterize a psychoanalysis of objects more generally, including the paradox of a theory of so vast an object as culture that is typically tentative and indirect, see Malcolm Bowie, 'Psychoanalysis and Art: the Winnicott Legacy', in L. Caldwell, ed., *Art, Creativity, Living* (London: Karnac, 2000), 11–29.

Winnicott's essential move is a gesture towards a psychoanalytically informed theory of culture centred on the interplay between two realities, the psychic, in the first place, and the external, in the second, The model he develops appears perfectly simple: he makes an appeal to experience, or, more specifically, 'a colouring of the whole attitude to external reality' (65). It amounts, then, to a way of being in the world of external shared reality which is strongly marked existentially: the creative dimension of the self–world interaction thus understood 'more that anything else […] makes the individual feel that life is worth living' (65). We could conclude that subjectivity is decisively shaped by creativity as experienced by the individual, a view that derives some support from Winnicott's claim that just such a notion of creativity, derived from the primary concept of play, is a universal feature of the self–world relation (67). It is dynamic in that it 'belongs to the approach of the individual to external reality' and, except to the extent that illness inhibits it, is pervasive in that every element of such interactions is governed by this creative potential (68). A loss of creativity would amount to the loss of the sense that life is 'real or meaningful' (69). To understand the universality of creativity, we must recognize its attitudinal basis, something that is ultimately derived from the experience of the infant vis-à-vis the object. What the psychic mechanisms of projection and introjection ultimately show is that '*play is in fact neither a matter of inner psychic reality nor a matter of external reality*' (96), but rather of how the two come into contact through experience.

If this model purports to be an account of the interaction of psychic and external realities, then the question arises of just how it can sustain generalizations regarding salient features of external reality as such; or, conversely, how we might advance generalizations concerning features of psychic and external realities alike which then have a bearing on the universal processes of creativity identified by Winnicott. The search for these is a tentative element of his enquiry; indeed, its tentativeness is discernible precisely in the care with which he here and there makes use of the word 'culture'. Within Winnicott's thinking on this problem, conducted in individual papers over a period of two decades, a number of threads emerge.

First, our symbolic capacity is linked to a paradoxical form of separation, one which is not absolute, but is rather 'a form of union' (98). What first activates the symbolic dimension is the good enough mother, whose availability suffices to keep alive a mental representation of an image of the object. For the restoration of the infant's ego structure allows him or her to construct for future use 'a symbol of union', by virtue of which even the experience of separation can yield benefits (97). Winnicott argues that important agencies develop as a result. An infant who is spared the experience of madness — an experience of separation that precipitates a collapse in the '*personal continuity of existence*' — acquires a symbolic capacity which draws on his

or her organization of memories. In other words, it presupposes a memory system (97).

Second, a model of culture as a generalized way of being is distinctive in that it takes the form of phenomena which, because they have no instinctual backing, are not climactic (98). The paradox is that non-climactic experiences devoid of instinctual backing lack nothing in intensity: playing is both exciting and precarious because of the vivid tension between a subjective experience of near-hallucination and objective perceptions of shared reality (52).[18] Different from phenomena that originate in bodily functioning, or from those that relate to what Winnicott terms 'environmental actuality', they are infinitely variable, because based on interactions.[19]

This is the framework within which Winnicott voices his more overt, though speculative, generalizations with regard to culture. The accentuation of experience is essential, in that he is concerned to develop concepts of creativity and by extension of culture which are universal (and therefore distinct from the range of received high cultures to which we might otherwise refer). For this reason, he hesitates, as we have seen, about using the word 'culture' at all. It would seem that culture is to be understood in psychoanalytic terms as the effect of what may happen in a 'potential space' which embraces the individual and his or her environment, subsuming the place originally occupied by the object (100). Moving beyond the properly psychoanalytic concern with health, Winnicott posits the conclusion that a special role of culture as such is to 'provide the continuity in the human race that transcends personal experience': the mechanism that allows some continuity between the subject and shared cultural experiences being play (100). To characterize the potential space, he invokes what might at first seem a problematic category, given the salience of loss within modernity, that of an 'inherited tradition'. But he carefully characterizes it as a space which can only operate on the basis of a kind of social reciprocity, in that we are motivated to draw on it only if we recognize it as '*somewhere to put what we find*'. Clearly, the sphere in which we play is here vastly expanded and, even if we think of it as embodying entities as complex as traditions, the place it gives to the subject is no less vital.[20]

One issue remains, which is that of the peculiar temporality of culture. Winnicott's discussion of this aspect of experience is no more than indicative, but very suggestive, I think. He applies to the idea of inherited tradition the original subject–object model of separateness

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[18] Bowie describes what results as an intermediate space of 'experiencing', in 'Psychoanalysis and Art', 14.

[19] Cf. Adam Phillips's account of the contingencies to which intersubjective relations are prey (extending, as they do, over genetic, biographical and subjective factors), in *Going Sane* (London: Faber, 2006), ch. 2.

[20] See again Bowie on the ingenuity of this generalized model of play in its uses of objects, and in turn on its hermeneutic potential when applied to art, in 'Psychoanalysis and Art', 28.

and union, in other words, of union in separation, concluding that we accept tradition as the basis on which we can be inventive: '*it is not possible to be original except on the basis of tradition*' (99). This claim brings us full circle: our uses of objects, like the infant's use of the transitional object, are of value because they embody not only our own creativity, but also cultural links which embrace past and future alike. On this point, Winnicott is, though very brief, quite explicit: if we value playing and cultural experience, it is because 'these link the past, the present, and the future; *they take up time and space*' (109).

What, then, of loss? Certeau, I think, adumbrates a relation to temporality that is not so driven by constant reference back to the past: the problem of loss is attentuated as a result, all the more so because this understanding of how we can be in some sense present to past, present and future alike derives from an expanded conception of memory, one linked to ephemeral forms of creativity.[21] In Winnicott's account of play, loss is significantly downplayed, in that the relation between memory and its objects is no longer thought of disjunctively: subjectivity is shaped by exposure to a cultural space which, like Certeau's, is multi-temporal and which, while not given, can be accessed through play, as we have seen. We seem to witness a break with the optic of loss and perhaps to discern hints at the scope of a future-oriented memory, at once uncannily familiar, but proximate only if we can finds ways of acknowledging how the subject happens to engage with it. A speculative theoretical stance vis-à-vis culture common to both thinkers generates an account of time as one crucial element of just such an intersubjective space. Here the break characteristic of modernity with highly determinate forms of tradition is fully assumed, even as that concept itself comes to be reinvented within a holistic temporal framework.

Recommended reading

Berio, Luciano, *Remembering the Future* (Cambridge, MA — London: Harvard University Press, 2006)
Derrida, Jacques, *Mal d'archive: une impression freudienne* (Paris : Galilée, 1995)
Dosse, François, *L'Histoire en miettes: des 'Annales' à la 'nouvelle histoire'* (Paris: La Découverte, 1987)
Gauchet, Marcel, *Le Désenchantement du monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985)
Hacking, Ian, *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge, MA — London: Harvard University Press, 2002)
Halbwachs, Maurice, *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris: PUF, 1952)
Margalit, Avishai, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge, MA — London: Harvard University Press, 2002)

[21] A conception that can clearly be linked to more systematic attempts to understand memory on something like this basis; see Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Hartog, François, *Régimes d'historicité: présentisme et expériences du temps* (Paris: Seuil, 2003)
Ricœur, Paul, *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2000)
Rudnytsky, Peter L., ed., *Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces: Literary Uses of D. W. Winnicott* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993)