



Beyond History and Memory: New Perspectives in Memory Studies[†]

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Abstract

This article outlines some recent achievements and new perspectives in contemporary memory studies. It first gives an overview of the recent handbooks and anthologies of memory studies, which testify to the institutionalisation of the young discipline. Then, it discusses the emergence of cultural memory studies, one of the most fruitful and promising trends in the memory studies of the last decade. And finally, it addresses the old debate over the relationship of history and memory, in order to propose an alternative conceptual framework for it and demonstrate the perspectives opened by a new avenue of research, mnemohistory. To conclude with, it argues that the rise of memory studies can be regarded as part of a broader change in how we nowadays see time and the interrelations of the past, the present and the future. It is plausible that these developments have irreversibly changed both the nature and outlooks of history writing.

Over the last three decades, memory studies¹ have flourished in the humanities and social sciences to such an extent that for years now, a certain confusion seems to be gaining ground over whether it would be better to forebode an imminent doom to this flowering or to interpret this abundance as a paradigmatic shift, a new promised land whence there is no turning back. I do not intend to take sides in this dilemma nor return to the already venerable tradition of criticising memory studies²; instead, in the present article, I shall try to focus primarily on how, in my view, memory studies have changed the nature of historical research and how the function of history writing could be re-evaluated in terms of cultural memory. More precisely, I shall discuss three broad avenues of research. In the introduction, I shall first survey the most important recent handbooks and anthologies of memory studies, which in my eyes mark the emergence of a kind of meta-memory studies and testify to the institutionalisation of the young discipline. Secondly, I shall discuss the emergence of cultural memory studies, one of the most fruitful and promising trends in the memory studies of the last decade. And finally, I shall take up again the old debate over the relationship of history and memory, in order to propose an alternative conceptual framework for it and demonstrate the perspectives opened by a new avenue of research, mnemohistory. In lieu of a conclusion, I shall dwell on the question of how to write history in the age of a ‘memory boom’.³

Institutionalisation and Canonisation of Memory Studies

Anyone who has followed the development of memory studies over the beginning of this millennium will presumably have had to recognise that after the early soul-seeking and rediscovery of precursors of the 1980s and the rapid expansion of the 1990s, when the number of publications and conferences dedicated to memory grew exponentially, the 2000s have been characterised primarily by the institutionalisation, organisation and systematisation of memory studies. Since the instances of this proliferation are in all probability numerous enough to fill the whole space allotted to this article, I shall have to make do here with just

a few most eloquent examples. The increasing number of study programmes, research projects and centres dedicated to memory studies is clear proof of the institutionalisation of this field.⁴ The latest development in this area is the growing cooperation between various research institutions and the creation of more or less extensive networks of all characters, such as 'In search of transcultural memory in Europe', a network linking scientists from around ten countries that gained the support of ISCH COST in the summer of 2012, or 'Mnemonics: Network for Memory Studies', created in the autumn of 2011 and bringing together the memory students of five countries.⁵

Another proof of institutionalisation and organisation is provided by the appearance of new journals and book series, the most prominent of the former being the journal *Memory Studies*, published since 2008 by SAGE publishing house with at first three, but from 2010 on, four issues per year and of the latter, the book series 'Memory Studies' launched by Palgrave Macmillan in 2010 and comprising by now around 20 titles.

Parallel with these institutional developments, memory studies have entered a period of synthesis: recent years have seen the birth of several handbooks and anthologies which, on the one hand, try to summarise (and thereby canonise) what has been done so far, while on the other hand trying to found and define the identity of the young discipline.⁶ To my knowledge, three more ambitious anthologies of memory studies have appeared so far. The first harbinger was *Theories of Memory: A Reader* (2007), compiled by Michael Rossington and Anne Whitehead in collaboration with several colleagues.⁷ Divided into three parts, the 300-page anthology aims at providing a selection of excerpts, surveying various memory theories from the classical period to the present day. Since the reader covers a broad range of issues on its limited number of pages and the selection criteria remain somewhat vague, it unfortunately fails to offer a complete overview of the development of memory studies. An even more miscellaneous and fragmented picture of memory studies is presented by *Memory: An Anthology* (2008), edited by Harriet Harvey Wood and A. S. Byatt.⁸ With editors unhampered by academic path dependencies, the book easily combines texts written by memory scholars and writers of fiction; with equal ease, it skips comments or introductions to the selected passages. The articulation is thematic rather than chronological: the book is split into two independent parts, the first of which offers some general discussions of memory (some of them specially commissioned), while the second one – responsible for its main bulk – forms a kind of thematic florilegium of literary fragments concerned with memory, from antiquity to the modern ages (all in all there are more than 150 of them). Undoubtedly, the most fundamental anthology of memory studies so far is *The Collective Memory Reader*, published after several years of editorial work by Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Daniel Levy in 2011.⁹ This meticulously selected and edited book contains 90 text excerpts, mainly from the last three decades, divided into five sections. The choice of texts is clearly marked by the fact that all three editors are sociologists; notable, too, is the relatively weak representation of German memory studies, as well as the complete absence of Russian scholars (except Lev Vygotsky), to say nothing about non-Western scientific traditions. Yet, in view of the almost unfathomable sphere of memory-related writings, one can only admire the editors' extensive reading and aspirations in having had some classical texts specially translated for this reader. A thorough overview of the state of the field is offered by the editors' long introduction, which defies emerging criticism by emphasising the necessity and promising perspectives of memory studies: 'In contrast to the critique of the "memory boom", then, our effort here begins from the premise that, far from declining in relevance, many of the analytical frameworks with which scholars have approached the issues highlighted under the rubric of memory studies represent the outlines of an increasingly important paradigm that unifies diverse interests across numerous disciplines, and consolidates long-standing perspectives within them, in perspicuous ways.'¹⁰

Side by side with these anthologies stand collectively authored handbooks, the number of which continues to rise.¹¹ Three of their number stand out as especially comprehensive accomplishments.¹² First, there is *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (2008), edited by German literary scholars Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning.¹³ Although faithfully to its title, the book focuses primarily on the cultural aspects of collective memory, it nevertheless offers a comparatively representative overview of the more important trends and topics of memory studies in general. Prepared by the collective efforts of 41 authors, the voluminous handbook is divided into six sections; true to its subtitle, the whole venture is indeed international and interdisciplinary, containing the contributions of scholars from almost ten disciplines and six countries. The book does not pretend to be a conceptually coherent treatment, offering instead diverse perspectives on memory studies as seen by eminent scholars from different disciplines. The substantial introduction by Astrid Erll creates an apposite framework for the book while also stressing that ‘This handbook is based on a broad understanding of cultural memory, suggesting as a provisional definition “the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts.”’¹⁴ The editors also deserve credit for their wish to seek for a common denominator of memory studies on the level of concepts rather than topics – probably following Mieke Bal’s recommendation who ten years ago wrote that ‘interdisciplinarity in the humanities [...] must seek its heuristic and methodological basis in *concepts* rather than *methods*’.¹⁵ The second representative handbook of memory studies, *Gedächtnis und Erinnerung: Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch* (2010)¹⁶ edited by Christian Gudehus, Ariane Eichenberg and Harald Welzer, has likewise been produced by German scholars. The book is more systematic and coherent, as well as more comprehensive than its antecedent – although focused on the collective social and cultural dimension of memory, it also discusses its biological and psychological foundations. The first of the book’s four parts (‘Grundlagen des Erinnerns’) indeed offers a cross section of works on the foundations of memory, whereas the second part (‘Was ist Gedächtnis/Erinnerung?’) gives six answers from six different perspectives to the question, what is memory? The third part (‘Medien des Erinnerns’) analyses the media of remembering, from written texts to the human body; and the fourth (‘Forschungsgebiete’) points out the perspectives of memory studies in eight fields of research, including history, philosophy, sociology, literary studies and such. Also in 2010, almost simultaneously with the encyclopaedic German work, the latest memory studies handbook to date – the bulky *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, edited by Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwartz – was published in New York.¹⁷ The most ambitious of the three as to its scope, the volume, prepared with the collaboration of 36 mainly English-speaking authors attempts, according to its editors, ‘to guide readers through the interdisciplinary fields of memory research’ and ‘to bring into the open what, intellectually and politically, is at stake in contemporary debate.’¹⁸ The diverse and rich contents are presented in three parts, each in its turn subdivided into smaller sections. The first part, ‘Histories’, contains articles on memory-related issues both in various historical periods and in the works of several 20th-century thinkers (from Bergson to Deleuze). The second and main part of the handbook (‘How Memory Works’) is dedicated to how memory functions, both on the individual and the collective level; and finally the third part (‘Controversies’) discusses some memory-related debates and controversies, from slavery and the traumas of WW II to modern gender issues. While reading this pithy handbook (as well as the other two discussed above) does not necessarily impress the reader with any great clarity as to the aims and homogeneity of memory studies, it does produce a sense that despite their great popularity, memory studies have not lost its ability to raise ever more questions, find new perspectives and offer ingenious concepts.¹⁹ In all probability, it is neither reasonable nor desirable to expect the evolution of memory studies into a clearly delimited discipline with a common epistemological ground.

'Cultural turn' in memory studies

Contemporary memory studies are rooted in sociology, particularly the works of Maurice Halbwachs, the (re)discovery, (re)publication and (re)reading of which became the main source of inspiration and legitimation for the new discipline in the 1980s and 1990s.²⁰ As recently as 1998, Jeffrey Olick and Joyce Robbins cast their influential overview of the studies of collective memory in a clearly sociological framework and even termed the new discipline 'social memory studies'.²¹ Yet, regardless of the continuing presence of the social dimension, it seems that over the last decade, memory studies have been dominated by a 'cultural turn', with the more innovative and attractive ideas originating from cultural theorists and cultural historians. The most important shapers of this turn have most probably been the German scholars, Aleida and Jan Assmann, coming from English studies and Egyptology, respectively, who in the 1990s worked out a new influential model of analysis for memory studies, centred on the concept of 'cultural memory'. Naturally, the Assmanns do not build their analyses from thin air but base them on their precursors' achievements, notably – besides Halbwachs – on the work of the German art historian Aby Warburg²² and the Estonian Russian semiotician Juri Lotman.²³ The cultural approach to the study of memory departs from a simple premise: shared memories of the past are not accidentally produced by social groups but a consequence of cultural mediation, primarily of textualisation and visualisation. Even though collective memory circulates orally too (a process called 'communicative memory' by Jan Assmann), its character is definitively shaped by all kinds of cultural mediation channels, such as texts, images, objects, buildings, rituals and such. The latter constitute a kind of 'objectified culture, designed to recall fateful events in the history of the collective'.²⁴ Or, to quote Jan Assmann's definition of cultural memory in his programmatic article of 1988: 'The concept of cultural memory comprises that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose "cultivation" serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image.'²⁵

At the end of 2011, Cambridge University Press simultaneously published the English translations of both Assmanns' master works on memory studies, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization* by Jan Assmann, and *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization* by Aleida Assmann, thereby making their work easily accessible to a broader international public.²⁶ Jan Assmann's book consists of two independent parts. While the first part proposes a conceptual framework for the study of cultural memory, the second part illustrates the openings described there via four case studies, namely of the written cultures of ancient Egypt, Israel, the Hittites and Greece, in the context of their relations with politics, religion and identity. Already in the introduction, Jan Assmann offers a good explanation as to why we need the concept of 'cultural memory': 'We need a term to describe these processes [of collective remembering and forgetting – M.T.] and to relate them to historical changes in the technology of storage systems, in the sociology of the groups concerned, in the media and in the structures of storage, tradition, and the circulation of cultural meaning – in short, to encompass all such functional concepts as tradition forming, past reference, and political identity or imagination. That term is cultural memory.'²⁷ Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory has, in turn, been elaborated and specified by his wife Aleida Assmann, both in her above-mentioned *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization* (first published in 1999) and the more recent *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik*, published in 2006.²⁸ On the basis of the diverse cultural heritage of modern and contemporary Europe, Aleida Assmann proceeds with a discrete analysis of the functions, media and storage of memory and proposes a number of significant conceptual distinctions. First, she distinguishes the three dimensions of memory called respectively neuronal, social and cultural memory.²⁹ While the first of the three belongs to the domain of individual memory, the latter two are part of

collective memory. 'Social memory', as conceived of by Aleida Assmann, is more or less synonymous with Jan Assmann's 'communicative memory' – it stays alive for 80–100 years, on average, and is handed on biologically, via communication. 'Cultural memory', on the other hand, is communicated with the help of material means, it is temporally unlimited, and signs and symbols are employed for handing it on.³⁰ But A. Assmann goes on to divide cultural memory, in its turn, into two: 'functional memory' and 'storage memory'. The former is 'group related, selective, normative and future-oriented'³¹ and operates mainly in the form of various symbolic practices (traditions, rites, canonisation, etc.); the latter, in contrast, is embodied in all kinds of material representations (books, images, films, museums, archives); it is 'the "amorphous mass" of unused and unincorporated memories that surround the functional memory like a halo'.³² In other words, those two aspects of cultural memory can be conceived of in the key of actualisation and non-actualisation, with the interactive relationship between the two constituting the mainspring of the dynamics of cultural memory: 'In functional memory, unstructured, unconnected fragments [of storage memory – M.T.] are invested with perspective and relevance; they enter into connections, configurations, compositions of *meaning* – a quality that is totally absent from storage memory.'³³

In recent years, Astrid Erll, compatriot of the Assmanns and one of the editors of the handbook *Cultural Memory Studies* discussed above, has attempted to elaborate their theory of cultural memory so as to invest it with even greater generalising power. Erll received her degree in English studies and began early on to conceive of literature as a medium of cultural memory,³⁴ publishing several important studies on this topic.³⁵ Next, her research interests broadened to encompass other media of cultural memory, resulting in the publication of several articles³⁶, edited volumes³⁷ and the book series 'Media and Cultural Memory' (from 2004, running to 14 titles as of present) launched by the Walter de Gruyter. In 2011, Erll's *Memory in Culture* – a significantly expanded version of her *Kollektives Gedächtnis und Erinnerungskulturen*, published in German in 2005 – was published in English.³⁸ On the one hand, the book offers a sound introduction into contemporary memory studies; on the other hand, it constitutes an original contribution to the theory of cultural memory, proposing on the basis of literature a wide-ranging semiotic model for the analysis of remembering processes in culture. In her new book, like in *Cultural Memory Studies*, Erll proceeds from a very comprehensive conception of cultural memory, defining it as 'the sum total of all the processes (biological, medial, social), which are involved in the interplay of past and present within sociocultural contexts'.³⁹ She justly emphasises the medial character of cultural memory; various media are indispensable for its existence: 'Whatever we know about the world, we know through media and in dependence on media. The images of the past which circulate in memory culture are thus not extrinsic to media.'⁴⁰

Contemporary cultural memory studies stress primarily the dynamics, intermediality and performativity of remembering. Ann Rigney, who has been instrumental in helping the German cultural memory theory take root in English-speaking academic circles, could perhaps be singled out as one of the most devoted and inventive researchers of these topics. In an important article of 2005, she succinctly highlights the three essential aspects of cultural memory mentioned above: 'Cultural memory can thus be described as a "working memory" which is continuously performed by individuals and groups as they recollect the past selectively through various media and become involved in various forms of memorial activity, from narrating and reading to attending commemorative ceremonies or going on pilgrimages.'⁴¹ These aspects are again brought together in her recent book, *The Afterlives of Walter Scott: Memory on the Move* (2012).⁴² While empirically, the book sets out to analyse Walter Scott's posthumous career in various English cultural media (texts, images, theatre, cinema, architecture, etc.), it simultaneously constitutes one of the most important theoretical contributions to

cultural memory studies made in the recent years. Paraphrasing Ferdinand de Saussure's one-time appeal for a new science with 'the life of signs in society' for its object, Rigney proposes a new goal – to study 'the life of texts in society'. 'This calls for a study of reception that goes beyond the matter of literary value and beyond the medium of writing in order to show the multiple appropriations of Scott's work in a whole range of cultural practices. Above all, it means going beyond the analysis of discrete cultural products to the examination of the migration of stories across cultural spheres, media and constituencies and its effect on social relations.'⁴³ Rigney claims to defend 'a radically dynamic approach to cultural memory (seeing it as always in motion)⁴⁴ in her book and bases her analysis of literature as the central medium of cultural memory on two interrelated aspects: 'mobility' (literary works migrate across media and reading constituencies) and 'monumentality' (literary compositions provide stable points of reference in calibrating collectively held values).⁴⁵ She also emphasises the need to analyse cultural memory 'in performative terms, as a way of recollecting the past and shaping its image using a whole range of media, rather than merely in preservative terms, as a way of transmitting unchanged something inherited from an earlier age'.⁴⁶ The cultural memory studies of recent years have, in my opinion, created a new interpretative context, which also opens up a new angle from which to better understand the meaning of history in human society.

History, Memory and Mnemohistory

The great popularity of memory studies has presented historians with serious challenges. Some perceive them as aggression, others – including myself – rather as the opening of new avenues. Ever since the nineteenth century, history as a discipline has been constituting itself through separation, both from literary fiction and from popular memory.⁴⁷ Halbwachs himself paid tribute to this traditional differentiation by opposing, in his treatment, collective memory as a social construct to history as an objective science.⁴⁸ Debates over the relation of history and memory are by now numerous enough to fill a small library, but regardless of all the diversity they can overwhelmingly be reduced to the formula 'history or/as memory'.⁴⁹ Some find it necessary to defend the clarity of their discipline's frontlines,⁵⁰ while for others, history equates with memory and they don't see much reason to cling to this pedantic differentiation.⁵¹

In my view this old debate stands in need of re-conceptualisation, since the concepts of 'history' and 'memory' can hardly be regarded as of the same category. While the former refers to a specific way of studying and representing the past that has evolved in Western culture over the last few centuries, the latter signifies the general relations of the past and the present in a particular socio-cultural context. Therefore, I find the concept of 'cultural memory' most useful in trying adequately to articulate the relations of history and memory.⁵² In terms of cultural memory, history is a cultural form exactly like, for instance, religion, literature, art or myth, all of which contribute to the production of cultural memory. And the writing of history should be treated as one of the many media of cultural memory, such as novels, films, rituals or architecture. The reduction of history writing to a mere medium of cultural history through which a certain social group shapes its relations with the past does not mean that history writing should give up its scientific pretensions or the epistemological attitudes and disciplinary techniques it has evolved over the past couple of centuries. History writing is simply a very specific medium of cultural memory with its own rules and traditions – one of the most important for as comprehensive an understanding of the past as possible, but certainly not the only or necessarily the most influential one.

But a broader understanding of history as a specific symbolic form through which knowledge of the past is handed down in a culture⁵³ sets the scene for a shift of the historian's gaze, allows

him to broaden historiography's range from a study of the events of the past to that of their later impact and meaning. The recognition of this shift has given rise to a new approach in the study of history, called 'mnemohistory' (*Gedächtnisgeschichte*, in German) by Jan Assmann. The term was coined by Assmann in his 1997 book *Moses, the Egyptian*, where he defines it as follows: 'Unlike history proper, mnemohistory is concerned not with the past as such, but only with the past as it is remembered. It surveys the story-lines of tradition, the webs of intertextuality, the diachronic continuities and discontinuities of reading the past.'⁵⁴ Mnemohistory is interested not so much in the factuality as in the actuality of the past – not in the past for its own sake but in its later impact and reception. 'Mnemohistory is reception theory applied to history', writes Assmann, 'but "reception" is not to be understood here merely in the narrow sense of transmitting and receiving. The past is not simply "received" by the present. The present is "haunted" by the past and the past is modelled, invented, reinvented, and reconstructed by the present.'⁵⁵

In the perspective of mnemohistory, then, the key question of historical research is not about the original significance of past events, but rather about how these events emerge in specific instances and are then translated over time, and about their everyday actualisation and propagation. More precisely, mnemohistory asks questions such as: What is known of the past in the present? Why is it that some versions of the past triumph, while others fail? Which events or other phenomena from the past are selected and how are they represented? How is the past used in order to legitimise or explain the happenings in the present? Why do people prefer one image of the past over another? and such.⁵⁶ The notion of mnemohistory allows one to move beyond the otherwise often unresolvable questions of 'what really happened' to questions of how particular ways of construing the past enable later communities to constitute and sustain themselves.⁵⁷ This is not to say, however, that mnemohistory cannot adopt a critical attitude towards the ways of remembering it studies; rather, it is precisely mnemohistorical analysis that allows us best to highlight the logic shaping the nature of cultural memory and thereby also our historical horizon.

Needless to say, I do not intend to argue that this field of historical research has never been explored before. At least since the 1970s, quite a number of different studies have been made into the mnemohistory – *avant la lettre* – of past events, persons and other phenomena. One of the earliest examples is *Le Dimanche de Bouvines* by Georges Duby published in 1973. In this book, Duby claims that the significance of the famous Battle of Bouvines in 1214 lies not in its military importance but in the traces that it left and the way in which they were interpreted later on: 'Without these traces the event is insignificant'.⁵⁸ Thus, the metamorphoses that the memory of the battle has undergone themselves become objects of historical study on an equal footing with the actual course of events in its confined temporal frame. Recent years have also seen the publication of the first studies explicitly classifying themselves under the rubric of mnemohistory, such as Alain Gowing's *Empire and Memory: The Representation of the Roman Republic in Imperial Culture* (2005), a mnemohistorical study of 'the ways some imperial Romans remembered the Republic over time'.⁵⁹ However, it seems to me that although empirically rather widely explored, the field of mnemohistory is still waiting for a sound and systematic conceptualisation and theorising.⁶⁰

Mnemohistory enables the historian better than before to encompass the two levels he is simultaneously working on: the historicisation of the phenomenon of the past and the historicisation of his own work. The intertwining of these two levels is one of the most important lessons of classical hermeneutics, or, as Wilhelm Dilthey put it: 'We are historical beings first, before we are observers of history, and only because we are the former do we become the latter.'⁶¹ The theoretical foundations of mnemohistory rest largely on hermeneutical philosophy, primarily on the works of Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose concept

of *Wirkungsgeschichte* anticipates *Gedächtnisgeschichte* in more than one sense. Gadamer unequivocally emphasises that ‘real historical thinking must take account of its own historicity’, inferring from this the need for a new, hermeneutical treatment of history: ‘A hermeneutics adequate to the subject matter would have to demonstrate the reality and efficacy of history within understanding itself. I shall refer to this as “history of effect” [*Wirkungsgeschichte*].’⁶² For Gadamer, like for mnemohistorians, the history of the interpretations of an event constitutes the self-unfolding of the event itself. In this sense, not only does effective history affect the way in which the past is understood, it also ‘determines in advance what presents itself as worthy of inquiry and as an appropriate object of investigation’.⁶³

Conclusions: Writing History Under the New Regime of Historicity

According to the diagnosis of François Hartog, the proliferation of memory studies in particular and the social ‘memory boom’ in general can be regarded as symptomatic of a much more general epistemological shift, the emergence of a new regime of historicity. The concept of a ‘regime of historicity’ refers to a specific way of articulating the categories of the past, the present and the future prevailing in a given society.⁶⁴ Whereas over the past couple of centuries, the dominant Western regime of historicity was future-oriented, the orientation has shifted over the last decades – the symbolic starting point selected by Hartog being the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 – with the future clearly relinquishing its position as the main tool for interpreting historical experience and giving way to a present-oriented regime of historicity that Hartog calls ‘presentism’. To exemplify the dawn of the ‘era of presentism’, he recounts a number of instances such as the highlighting of heritage, museums, commemorations, witnesses and victims; yet, one of the most significant in his view is the ever growing importance of memory issues, particularly in historical research.⁶⁵ A presentist regime of historicity thus implies a new way of understanding time, an abandoning of the linear, causal and homogeneous conception of time characteristic of the previous, modernist regime of historicity. It has made possible a shift of the historian’s gaze so that the past no longer appears as something final and irreversible but persists in many ways in the present. It is generally accepted that the past as a distinct object of study is by no means a natural given; the distancing of past and present does not simply result from the passing of time but is something that must be actively pursued and performed. According to Reinhart Koselleck, the gap that separates our time from earlier ones was first apprehended in late eighteenth century, when an understanding of a secular periodisation of history (supplanting the earlier treatment of time in mythical or theological categories) began to take root.⁶⁶ In a recent book, *The Birth of the Past*, Zachary Schiffman argues that the roots of this new apprehension go back to Renaissance humanism, but it took the Enlightenment and particularly Montesquieu to lay the foundation for a truly comprehensive vision of the past (as qualitatively separated from the present).⁶⁷ This intellectual revolution is in many ways a prerequisite for modern historical research, or as Michel de Certeau puts it: ‘The writing of history takes place within that gap yawning between the past and the present.’⁶⁸

Recent years have, however, seen the publication of a number of works trying to reconsider the traditional relations of the past and the present, thus opening up the prospects for a new kind of history writing in the age of presentism.⁶⁹ Instead of the ‘irreversible past’, the focus now is on a ‘persisting or haunting past’. The object of examination no longer is mere ‘history as what is irremediably gone’, but ‘history as ongoing process’.⁷⁰ Berber Bevernage has persuasively written: ‘A persisting “past” does not simply deconstruct the notions of absence and distance; rather, it blurs the strict delineation between past and present and thereby even questions the existence of these temporal dimensions as separate entities.’

Therefore, I hope the reflection on the notion of the irrevocable will provoke us to rethink or reconsider two simple but fundamental questions: what does it actually mean for something or someone to be “past”, and how do things, persons, or events become past?⁷¹ The new approach no longer sees temporal distance from past events as a drawback but as an advantage insofar as it allows one better to understand the events’ various layers of meaning and impact on the present. Anachronism is no longer a taboo that the historian must fear but a tool that he can employ for his own benefit.⁷² History is no longer a ‘projected stream leaving the past behind but bends and twists in a disorderly manner, interrupting the expectations of the “have been” and the becoming. The past proliferates more than ever in the present’.⁷³ Strictly speaking, though, this notion is not completely new, since the later ramifications of past events and the intermittent and plural nature of time first came to be highlighted already in the 1920s and 1930s in Germany, in the works of Franz Rosenzweig, Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, the (re)discovery of which has significantly inspired the memory and history studies of recent decades.⁷⁴ Each in his own way but mainly relying on the Jewish Messianic conception of time, they questioned the teleological and progressivist notion of time, proposing instead a time woven together from unexpected breakages and catastrophes and unyielding to the explanatory models of traditional history. The presentist regime of historicity no longer takes as self-evident the historicist principles astutely criticised, among the first, by Walter Benjamin: ‘Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary.’⁷⁵ According to Benjamin (and here he follows Aby Warburg’s line of thinking), we are surrounded by a symbolic afterlife (*Nachleben*, in German) of the past, which continuously influences our own historical imagination. In his monumental unfinished *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin proposes a new definition of historical knowledge, which may prove to be the best characterisation of historiography in the age of presentism: ‘Historical “understanding” is to be grasped, in principle, as an afterlife of that which is understood; and what has been recognized in the analysis of the “afterlife of works”, in the analysis of “fame”, is therefore to be considered the foundation of history in general.’⁷⁶

Thus, on a general level, memory studies can be regarded as part of a broader change in how we see time and the interrelations of the past, the present, and the future. It is plausible that these developments in general, as well as the meteoric rise of the concept of memory in particular, have irreversibly changed both the nature and outlooks of history writing.⁷⁷

Short Biography

Marek Tamm’s research is located at the intersection of mediaeval studies, memory studies and historical theory. He has authored three books and of some 60 essays and articles published in Estonian, in English and in French, and edited six collections of articles. After receiving a B.A. from the University of Tartu, he completed his graduate training at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales and in Tallinn University. He is an associate professor of cultural history at the Estonian Institute of Humanities and senior researcher in mediaeval studies at the Institute of History, both at Tallinn University. His recent publications include *Crusading and Chronicle Writing on the Medieval Baltic Frontier: A Companion to the Chronicle of Henry of Livonia*, co-edited with L. Kaljundi and C. S. I Jensen (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011); ‘Inventing Livonia: The Name and Fame of a New Christian Colony on the Medieval Baltic Frontier’, *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung* 60 (2011); ‘Conflicting Communities of Memory: War Monuments and Monument Wars in Contemporary Estonia’, in *Nation-Building*

in the Context of Post-Communist Transformation and Globalization, ed. by R. Vetik (Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 2012); 'In Search of Lost Time: Memory Politics in Estonia, 1991–2011', *Nationalities Papers* (forthcoming); 'How to Justify a Crusade? Conquest of Livonia and the New Crusade Rhetoric in the Early Thirteenth Century', *Journal of Medieval History* (forthcoming). He is currently preparing an edited volume *Afterlife of Events: Perspectives of Mnemohistory* for Palgrave Macmillan.

Notes

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¹ Here and below, this term refers only to the studies of collective memory carried out in humanities and social sciences.

² Without any pretense to exhaustiveness, may some chrestomatic articles be listed here: Maier, 'A Surfeit of Memory?'; Gedi and Elam, 'Collective Memory: What is It?'; Klein, 'On the Emergence of *Memory*'; Koselleck, 'Gibt es ein kollektives Gedächtnis?'; Berliner, 'The Abuses of Memory'; Rosenfeld, 'A Looming Crash or a Soft Landing?'.
³ See Winter, 'The Memory Boom'; Blight, 'The Memory Boom'.

⁴ Some new and more important research centres would include, for instance, The Frankfurt Memory Studies Platform, <<http://www.memorystudies-frankfurt.com>>; Centre for the Study of Cultural Memory, University of London, <<http://www.igrs.sas.ac.uk/centre-study-cultural-memory>>; Center for Interdisciplinary Memory Research, University of Essen, <<http://memory-research.de>>; Memory Studies Research Area, University of Stavanger, <<http://www.uis.no/category.php?categoryID=6486>>. The number of research projects and study programmes related to memory studies is too great and the information concerning them too widely scattered to list them here. A good survey of one innovative curriculum in the University of Washington, however, is given by Roediger and Wertsch, 'Creating a New Discipline of Memory Studies', 19–20.

⁵ In addition, several other often web-based networks of memory studies can be mentioned, such as the Danish Network for Cultural Memory Studies, <<http://memory.au.dk>>; Towards a Common Past: A Nordic Research Network in Memory Studies, <<http://www.cfe.lu.se/towards-a-common-past>>; Historical Justice and Memory Research Network, <<http://www.historicaljusticeandmemorynetwork.net>>; Memoreg: History and Memory – the Regional Dimension, <<https://www.memoreg.org>>. Since 2007, there is also the Internet listserve H-Memory (Michigan State University).

⁶ Parallely to that, it is notable that ever more frequently the authors that have made significant contributions to memory studies are reaching the stage where they bring the scattered fruits of their work together into one book. One of the most prominent examples is Pierre Nora's two-volume selection of his scientific and popularising articles, published in fall 2011: Nora, *Présent, nation, mémoire*; Nora, *Historien public*.

⁷ Rossington and Whitehead (eds.), *Theories of Memory*.

⁸ Harvey Wood and Byatt (eds.), *Memory: An Anthology*.

⁹ Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Levy (eds.), *The Collective Memory Reader*.

¹⁰ Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Levy, 'Introduction', *The Collective Memory Reader*, 5.

¹¹ Even before the appearance of voluminous collective handbooks, there were some happily conceived surveys of the evolution and prospects of memory studies by one or two authors, amongst which I would like to highlight Olick's and Robbins' detailed review article of social memory studies ('Social memory studies'), Misztal's more comprehensive appraisal, *Theories of Social Remembering* and Cubbit's study that exceeds the promise of its title, *History and Memory*.

¹² But these are definitely not the only general treatments systematising this research are; for example, the anthology edited by Boyer and Wertsch, *Memory in Mind and Culture*, which tries to bring the studies of individual and collective memory together into one framework, could certainly be classified here.

¹³ Erll and Nünning (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies*.

¹⁴ Erll, 'Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction', *Cultural Memory Studies*, 2.

¹⁵ Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities*, 5. Similar recommendations were given to memory studies already in 1997, at the height of their popularity by Alon Confino, see Confino, 'Collective Memory and Cultural History', 1387.

¹⁶ Gudehus, Eichenberg, Welzer (eds.) *Gedächtnis und Erinnerung*. Putatively this book – at least insofar as the title is concerned – can be linked with a 10 years earlier lexicon of memory studies, Pethes and Ruchatz (eds.), *Gedächtnis und Erinnerung*.

¹⁷ Radstone and Schwartz (eds.), *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*.

¹⁸ Radstone and Schwartz, 'Introduction: Mapping Memory', *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, 1.

¹⁹ More handbooks of memory studies are certain to be published in the future; thus, for instance, the *Ashgate Research Companion to Memory Studies*, presumably due in 2014, is being currently prepared by Siobhan Kattago (Tallinn University).

²⁰ Halbwachs's lasting importance is proven by the continuing republication of his works, provided with thorough introductions and comments: Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*; Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective*; Halbwachs, *La topographie légendaire*; Halbwachs, *Les classes sociales*. See also Jaisson and Baudelot (eds.), *Maurice Halbwachs*.

²¹ Olick and Robbins, 'Social memory studies'.

²² One cannot omit here reference to one of the most original and fundamental of recent Warburg treatments, which also brilliantly demonstrates the importance of Warburg's works for contemporary culture studies in general and cultural memory studies in particular: Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante*. But see also Emden, 'Nachleben': Cultural Memory in Aby Warburg and Walter Benjamin'; Johnson, *Memory, Metaphor and Aby Warburg's Atlas of Images*.

²³ Juri Lotman is definitely an author whose voluminous work, accessible in the main part only in Russian, abounds with yet undiscovered openings for furthering cultural memory studies. Thus, for instance, his articles from the mid-1980s, 'Memory in the light of culture studies' (Память в культурологическом освещении) and 'Cultural memory' (Память культуры), see Лотман, *Сэмюэл Фэра*, 614–21; 673–76, are direly needed in English, too. (In my contribution to the *Ashgate Research Companion to Memory Studies* I hope to open the significance of Lotman's works in the context of contemporary cultural memory studies.)

²⁴ Kansteiner, 'Finding Meaning in History', 182.

²⁵ Assmann, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', 132.

²⁶ Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*; Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization*. The German originals are respectively: Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, and Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume*.

²⁷ Assmann, *Cultural Memory*, 9. After that, Assmann has published several articles on the theory of cultural memory, the more influential of which appeared in the anthology *Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis*, partially also translated into, *Religion and Cultural Memory*; but also some works on the Egyptian religious and historical heritage as remembered in later cultures, such as Ancient Greece and Enlightenment Europe, as well as in West European culture in general, see Assmann, *Weisheit und Mysterium*; *Erinnertes Ägypten*; *Religio Duplex*. A pretty good overview of J. Assmann's work is given by Schraten, *Zur Aktualität von Jan Assmann*, a more critical insight, in English, into Assmann's theory of cultural memory is Winthrop-Young, 'Memories of the Nile'. There is also a recent attempt at applying the Assmann's theory to the interpretation of the Spanish Civil War: Sondergeld, *Spanische Erinnerungskultur*.

²⁸ Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit*.

²⁹ In another article A. Assmann has added also a fourth type or format of memory – political memory, see Assmann, 'Four Formats of Memory'.

³⁰ Probably in response to the critics who have pointed out that the Assmann's binary scheme leaves it unclear how the 'communicative' (or 'social') and 'cultural' memory relate to each other, J. Assmann has recently proposed a third memory type, 'connective memory' (*Bindungsgedächtnis*), linking the communicative and cultural memories, see Assmann, *Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis*, 108–33. See also Assmann, 'Communicative and Cultural Memory'.

³¹ Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization*, 123; see also Assmann, *Der lange Schatten*, 54–8.

³² Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization*, 125.

³³ Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization*, 127. In the same spirit, A. Assmann has also developed a differentiation between 'cultural working memory' (the canon) and 'cultural reference memory' (the archive), or in other words between the active and passive side of cultural memory. See Assmann, 'Canon and Archive'.

³⁴ Erll, 'Literatur und kulturelles Gedächtnis'.

³⁵ Erll, *Gedächtnisromane*; Erll, *Prämediation – Remediation*; the latter is also available in English abridgement: Erll, 'Re-writing as Re-visioning'.

³⁶ See for instance, Erll, 'Literature, Film, and the Mediality of Cultural Memory'.

³⁷ Erll and Nünning (eds.), *Medien des kollektiven Gedächtnisses*; Erll and Wodianka (eds.), *Film und kulturelle Erinnerung*.

³⁸ Erll, *Memory in Culture*; Erll, *Kollektives Gedächtnis und Erinnerungskulturen*.

³⁹ Erll, *Memory in Culture*, 101.

⁴⁰ Erll, *Memory in Culture*, 114.

⁴¹ Rigney, 'Plenitude, Scarcity and the Circulation of Cultural Memory', 17. In a previous article she argued in similar terms: Rigney, 'Portable Monuments', 366.

⁴² Rigney, *The Afterlives of Walter Scott*.

⁴³ Rigney, *The Afterlives of Walter Scott*, 12.

⁴⁴ Rigney, *The Afterlives of Walter Scott*, 9.

⁴⁵ Rigney, *The Afterlives of Walter Scott*, 13. See also Rigney, 'The Dynamics of Remembrance'; Erll and Rigney, 'Introduction: Cultural Memory and its Dynamics'.

⁴⁶ Rigney, *The Afterlives of Walter Scott*, 17–8; also 107. One of the very first authors to argue for an analysis of collective remembering in performative terms was Paul Connerton in his *How Societies Remember?*; more recently, Connerton has expanded his analysis to include not only memory, but also forgetting and grief, see his *How Modernity Forgets and The Spirit of Mourning*. The performative character of cultural memory has been advantageously opened by Koshar, *From Monuments to Traces*. The same spirit of a 'performative turn' inspires the recent substantial, if heterogeneous anthology: Tilmans, van Vree, and Winter (eds.), *Performing the Past*.

⁴⁷ These differentiations naturally operated mainly on a declarative level, in fact nineteenth-century history also paid great tribute both to the then dominant (national) collective memory and to the techniques of composition employed by historical novels, see for instance, Krzoska and Maner (eds.), *Beruf und Berufung*; Carvalho and Gemenne (eds.), *Nations and Their Histories*; Berger, 'On the Role of Myths and History'; Baár, *Historians and Nationalism*; Berger and Lorenz (eds.), *Nationalizing the Past*.

⁴⁸ Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective*, 97–142.

⁴⁹ The debates are too extensive to allow for any representative selection of works to be listed here; thus I shall name only a few more recent and influential surveys of the main contributions to the debate: Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering*, 18–20, 30–46; Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering*, 99–108; Candau, *Anthropologie de la mémoire*, 58–64; Corbin, 'History and Memory'; Cubitt, *History and Memory*, 26–65 *et passim*; A. Assmann, 'Transformations between History and Memory'; Erll, *Memory in Culture*, 38–66; Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Levy, 'Introduction', 43–5; Confino, 'History and Memory'.

⁵⁰ 'History and memory are sharply different, as manifested above all in the radically different histories that different people or groups remember', Megill, *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error*, 58. See also Wertsch and Roediger, 'Collective memory', 320–21.

⁵¹ 'The practice of history is, after all, a highly specialised form of commemoration', Jordanova, *History in Practice*, 138. See also Burke, 'History as Social Memory'.

⁵² See also Tamm, 'History as Cultural Memory'.

⁵³ The phrasing naturally evokes Johan Huizinga's classical definition: 'History is the spiritual form in which a culture is taking account of its past.' See Huizinga, 'A Definition of the Concept of History', 9.

⁵⁴ Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 9.

⁵⁵ Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 9.

⁵⁶ Cf. Assmann, 'Transformations between History and Memory', 62; Confino, 'History and Memory', 47.

⁵⁷ Cf. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 5.

⁵⁸ Duby, *Le dimanche de Bouvines*, 8. This classical study was recently reprinted with a new important introduction by Pierre Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 2005). Nora's text can be found also in his *Présent, nation, mémoire*, 205–20.

⁵⁹ Gowing, *Empire and Memory*, 7. See also another interesting application of the concept of mnemohistory: Oexle, 'Hahn, Heisenberg und die anderen Anmerkungen', as well as Oexle, 'Geschichte, Gedächtnis, Gedächtnisgeschichte'.

⁶⁰ With this aim in mind, I recently (November 2–3, 2012) organised an international symposium in Tallinn University entitled 'Afterlife of Events: Perspectives of Mnemohistory', with the participation, among others, of Aleida and Jan Assmann. An edited volume based on the symposium materials is planned for publication in Palgrave Macmillan's book series 'Memory Studies', in 2014.

⁶¹ Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften. Vol. 7*, 278.

⁶² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 299.

⁶³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 300.

⁶⁴ Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité*, 26–30 *et passim*; Delacroix, Dosse, and Garcia (eds.), *Historicités*, 133–49 *et passim*; Hartog, 'Historicité / régimes d'historicité'.

⁶⁵ Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité*, 111–62 *et passim*; Hartog, 'Time and Heritage'; Hartog, 'L'historien dans un monde présentiste?'; Hartog, 'Le présent de l'historien'. Similar diagnoses from a different perspective have also been made by Andreas Huyssen, see for instance, Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*; Huyssen, *Present Pasts*.

⁶⁶ Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History*, 119; Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 21–2.

⁶⁷ Schiffman, *The Birth of the Past*.

⁶⁸ Certeau, *Histoire et psychanalyse*, 86.

⁶⁹ The most important works being authored by Dutch philosophers of history, such as: Runia, 'Presence'; Runia, 'Spots of Time'; Runia, 'Burying the Dead, Creating the Past'; Lorenz, 'Unstuck in Time'; Bevernage, 'Time, Presence, and Historical Injustice'; Bevernage, *History, Memory, and State-Sponsored Violence*. Bevernage and Lorenz are currently preparing for publication the proceedings of a conference held in Freiburg, April 7–9, 2011, entitled 'Breaking Up Time: Negotiating the Borders between Present, Past and Future' (to be published in 2013).

⁷⁰ Runia, 'Presence', 8.

⁷¹ Bevernage, *History, Memory, and State-Sponsored Violence*, 5.

⁷² This fact has been best understood and made sense of by French scholars, see Loraux, 'Éloge de l'anachronisme en histoire'; Rancière, 'Le concept d'anachronisme et la vérité de l'historien'; Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps*, 9–55 *et passim*; Dosse, 'De l'usage raisonnée de l'anachronisme'.

⁷³ Olsen, *In Defense of Things*, 128.

⁷⁴ See Mosès, *L'ange de l'histoire*.

⁷⁵ Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', 263. See also Benjamin (ed.), *Walter Benjamin and History*; Gagnebin, "'Über den Begriff der Geschichte'".

⁷⁶ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 460.

⁷⁷ Thus, I can but agree with Confino's recent observation that the notion of memory has 'changed the way historians understand the presence of the past in the life of people in the past by making it into an essential empirical, analytical, and theoretical tool with which to understand social, political, cultural, even economic phenomena that regularly had been seen as determined by a very different set of factors.' See Confino, 'History and Memory', 44.

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