
Fragments of/on Memory

Gary Peters

Fragments of/on Memory

Gary Peters

Abstract

Cultures of memory cultivate our memory by encouraging the displacement of exterior historical events by the interiority of singular memory, rendered collective through an ethics and politics of empathic communicability. The assumption being that, while we are the *products of* history, we are the *producers of* memory, and thus can be held responsible for what we produce. The assumption is that historically we are within time while, memorially, time is *within us*. As such, cultures of memory cultivate to the extent that they establish a collective and systematic exchange of interiorities in the name of a shared responsibility for the past, present and future: a caring community of retention/recollection, intention/attention and protention/expectation.

But, outside of the exigency to cultivate our memories and memorialise our cultures, is it possible to emancipate memory from the cultural *concept of* memory? Would this be irresponsible?

Keywords: memory, forgetting, empathy, responsibility, obligation, habit, sensation.

*The man with a good memory does not remember anything, because he does not forget anything.*¹

In a culture of memory we are in danger of forgetting how to forget. And as the narrator of Borges's *Funes, the Memorious* reminds us, forgetting how to forget is tantamount to forgetting how to think: "to think is to *forget* a difference, to generalize, to abstract. In the overly replete world of Funes, there were only details, almost contiguous details".² And remember, Funes was paralyzed just as Nietzsche's 'historical man' is crushed by the past:

*Man...braces himself against the great and ever greater pressure of what is past: it pushes him down or bends him sideways, it encumbers his steps as a dark, invisible burden.*³

For Nietzsche, it is not so much thinking, but creating that requires 'active forgetfulness:' the most powerful creative act being the creation of a future, one that is worthy of becoming our past, and, thus, worthy of returning eternally. Something of a challenge!

*

In a culture of memory 'Lest we forget' reverberates and resonates as an incessant cultural cliché, one that threatens to rob us of memory in the name of memory. And, lest we forget, this is indeed a threat:

*Lest is a very rare word and quite old fashioned. Most people in Britain know it because we see it written very often in the same place—on war memorials...It's a warning. It's introducing a danger to be avoided.*⁴

Dangers, threats, warnings! The forgotten underside of a culture of memory: fear, coercion, control. Lest we forget.

*

In a culture of memory 'We will remember them' reverberates and resonates as an incessant cultural cliché, one that threatens to rob us of hope in the name of memory.

*But where our desires are and our hopes profound,
Felt as a well-spring that is hidden from sight,
To the innermost heart of their own land they are known
As the stars are known to the Night.*⁵

How are the stars known to the night? As light in the darkness? The darkness of forgetting illuminated by remembrance? But it is from out of the dark well-spring of our innermost hearts that our hopes and desires emerge in ignorance of their forgotten origin. Yes, 'we will remember them' but only in their own forgetfulness of their own innermost hopes and desires that, now extinguished, make them worthy of our remembering. The remembrance of a past future that never came to be: a remembered forgetfulness.

*

All the people of all the nations which had fought in the First World War were silent during the eleventh minute of the eleventh hour of Armistice Day, which was the eleventh day of the eleventh month. It was during that minute in nineteen hundred and eighteen, that millions upon millions of human beings stopped butchering one another. I have talked to old men who were on battlefields during that minute. They have told me in one way or another that the sudden silence was the Voice of God. So we still have among us some men who can remember when God spoke clearly to mankind.⁶

In a culture of memory ‘the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month’ eternally returns, at the 11th hour, as an incessant, cultural cliché, one that threatens to rob us of the difference that only such repetition can and should bring, but only if emancipated from a hegemonic concept of memory that wills the return of the same sameness, ‘lest we forget:’ memory as ritualised mnemonics, mnemonic rituals, where the noise of the world momentarily ceases and the voice of God is heard. Give thanks to the Almighty!!

But seriously, after the ‘death of God’ the Nietzschean eternal return insists upon the recurrence of a moment of forgetfulness, a moment of hope and desire, where possibility returns as the willing of a future worthy of becoming a past. The eternal recurrence of the same should be understood as the eternal recurrence of the same difference: this is what repetitive memorialization forgets.

*

If something is to stay in the memory it must be burned in: only that which never ceases to hurt stays in the memory...Man could never do without blood, torture, and sacrifices when he felt the need to create a memory for himself...all this has its origin in the instinct that realised that pain is the most powerful aid to mnemonics.⁷

The cultivation of memory takes many forms, all and every one hopelessly resisting the inevitable dissolution of time into an amorphous oblivion of forgetfulness. All and every one branding-irons burning into the forgetful flesh. The memorialization of memory quickly and too easily blurs into the moralization of memory, the stigmatization of forgetting as evil. ‘Beyond good and evil’, Nietzsche, as always, sees the cruelty at the heart of the moral-moralising-memorialising majority. ‘Forgive me, for I have sinned:’ thus spoke the forgetful one.

*

A culture cultivates by ‘inviting’ us to become responsible; responsible for ourselves and our own actions and inactions; responsible for others, and, indeed, for the irreducible and inviolable otherness of the other. Responsibility is an empathic concept, demanding that we learn how to become responsive to the

claims of a singular and collective alterity. It is also a communicative concept, where empathic intersubjectivity grounds a communicative community of mutual understanding able to inform responsive and responsible acts. Irresponsibility is not an active category: it is the failure or refusal to respond to the stimuli offered by the many and various cultural majorities (moral or otherwise).

Cultures of memory cultivate our memory by encouraging the displacement of exterior historical events by the interiority of singular memory, rendered collective through an ethics and politics of empathic communicability. The assumption being that, while we are the *products of history*, we are the *producers of memory*, and thus can be held responsible for what we produce. The assumption is that historically we are within time while, memorially, time is within us. As such, cultures of memory cultivate to the extent that they establish a collective and systematic exchange of interiorities in the name of a shared responsibility for the past, present and future: a caring community of retention/recollection, intention/attention and protention/expectation.

But, outside of the exigency to cultivate our memories and memorialise our cultures, is it possible to emancipate memory from the cultural *concept of memory*? Would this be irresponsible?

*

‘Sensation’ (a central concept for Gilles Deleuze) is a form of memory, albeit of a peculiar type: let us call it sensorial memory. Rather than being the *active* re-collection of past experiences (individual and/or collective) or the *passive* acceptance of a past-ness that is doubly imposed as culture and nature (or, worse, the ideology of culture *as nature*), sensation is here understood as a form of ‘passive creativity’ where the transition from activity to passivity—memory to habit—is remembered, reversed and re-activated *within* the given of habit. The question no longer being: what *should* we remember but what can we *do* with our memories, how can we transform the passive reception of ‘it was’ into (to use Nietzsche’s words) ‘thus I willed it’. Nietzsche’s *amor fati* is Deleuze’s ‘passive creativity’.

*

As Henri Bergson observes, habits are memories that have become acts and thereby forgotten, a transition from the mind to the body, from thinking to living, from imagining to repeating, and from the personal to the impersonal:

*Spontaneous recollection is perfect from the outset; time can add nothing to its image without disfiguring it; it retains in memory its place and date. On the contrary, a learnt recollection [habit] passes out of time in the measure that the lesson is better known; it becomes more and more impersonal, more and more foreign to our past life...Indeed, this habit could not be called remembrance, were it not that I remember that I have acquired it; and I remember its acquisition only because I appeal to that memory which is spontaneous, which dates events and records them but once.*⁸

Denying the title of remembrance to habit, unless aided by the ‘perfection’ of spontaneous memory, threatens to deny us the very sensation of passing ‘out of time’ into the anonymity and impersonality of a ‘foreign’ life. The cinematography of spontaneous memory, the freeze-framing of moments, lost and found, recovered and shared as the building blocks of a memorial culture are in danger of creating a space for remembrance that obscures the originary act of channeling the aleatoric swarming of the event of time and fate into the active forgetfulness of habitual gestures.

*

In a culture of memory we are, all of us, expected, indeed *obliged* to get into the habit of remembering, thanks to the indefatigable labor of the ever-swelling ranks of memorialisers, whose responsibility it is to generate the heat necessary for the memorial brand to leave its mark on the flesh of the forgetful. But could we also try and recall how the habitual forges links between the singular and the universal, the owned and the unowned, and between memory and forgetting rather than (or as well as) memory and history? Would it be possible to spontaneously remember that which makes such spontaneity possible: habit? Not, as with Bergson, in order to draw the anonymity of habit back into the “perfect” moments of acquisition and ipseity—“*I* remember that *I* have acquired it; and *I* remember its acquisition only because *I* appeal to that memory which is spontaneous”—but as a way of acknowledging the fact that it acquires *us*, and that, to repeat, we have habits to the extent habits have us. We remember acquiring and having, but forget having *been had*: inevitably, as that is precisely where the possessive ipseity of the *I* is dispossessed. Here, where repetition no longer serves the mnemonic but, rather, drills ever more deeply into the obliviousness of the acting body or the bodily act, here we can no longer speak of here or there, of mine or yours, of self/other, subject/object, singular/universal that have us all. Nor are we talking of the in-between that exercises so many in their faddish desire for the liminal; the between is not a vestigial space that can be described and explained, but a transition that must be sensed, enacted and re-enacted repetitively and eternally.

*

Sensorial memory while actualized in the habituated and forgetful body, cannot be in-habited. Sensorial memory possesses without being possessed, providing a *habitus* that is not a home but rather a dwelling that offers not a place of rest but, more essentially, a place to *wait* (to dwell): and there is nothing more restless than waiting. Sensorial memory (a form of Kantian *sensus communis*?) is shared but incommunicable, enacted but not as individual or collective action, a remembering without re-collection where the eternal return of the same always repeats the same restless moment of waiting: what happens now? What happens next?

*

Perhaps, as Nietzsche proclaimed, we need to remember how to forget in order to create new habits of remembering, whereby the crushing weight of the “it was” —the “spirit of gravity” — is transformed into a bearable lightness of being, and where a sense of the past or the affect of the past engulfs us as a fate to be loved (*amor fati*). Something like this:

*...it is a whole temporal ‘panorama’, an unstable set of floating memories, images of a past in general which move past at dizzying speed, as if time were achieving a profound freedom. It is as if total and anarchic mobilizing of the past now responds to the character’s motor powerlessness.*⁹

This is to remember memory as an outside, not a Levinasian absolute alterity grounding a communicative ethics, but a lived exteriority capable of witnessing and sensing the *event* of memory in the incommunicable and irresponsible an-archy of the given.

*

To will the past as if it would eternally return — pure Nietzsche — is not to take possession of the past as interiorised memory, but is, on the contrary, to liberate the past from the proprietorial imperative of a memorialising culture quite capable of naming and even shaming its forgetful citizens. It is to recognise, to repeat, that we are within memory rather than memory being within us. Deleuze again:

*The only subjectivity is time, non-chronological time grasped in its foundation, and it is we who are internal to time, not the other way round. ...Time is not the interior in us, but just the opposite, the interior in which we are, in which we move, live and change.*¹⁰

Such a view, an apparently simple reversal, has profound implications for any conceptualisation of a culture of memory rooted in a posited communicative community of rememberers, all co-responsible for sustaining an empathic sharing of diverse interiorities in the face of an ever-encroaching forgetfulness and barbarism. Such a reversal takes us to Heidegger. His notion of Being-with (*Mitsein*) assumes a remembering-with, not as an empathic intermingling of singular interiorities, but as a radical ‘unsociability’ that neither faces the inside nor an exteriority mediated by the ‘face’ of the other, for whom we are responsible (Levinas). For Heidegger, being unsociable or (better) Being’s unsociability, are not positions within the social (coldness, distance, diffidence, solitariness, etc.) but ontologically *prior* to socialisation, acculturation and cultivation. Being-with is no more the intermingling of subjectivities than remembering-with is the sharing of unique and personal strands of duration. Being interior to time, subjectivity is not, ontologically, in a position to subject time to its own measure, on the contrary, subjectivity is here conceived as subjection, as being subject-to time present and time past. All we share is this subjection, and it is the extent to which we forget this prior subjection that we, as a culture, strive to achieve (through empathy) what has always already been achieved as our original and originary foundation. This is precisely the gist of Heidegger’s rejection of empathy:

‘Empathy’ does not first constitute Being-with; only on the basis of Being-with does ‘empathy’ become possible: it gets its motivation from the unsociability of the dominant modes of Being-with.¹¹

*

Ironically, cultures of memory are dependent upon the very forgetfulness of habit, producing and promoting, as they do, the habitualised rituals of collective remorse and shame that are constitutive, controlling and often coercive. But such forgetfulness forgets (in the name of memory) the originary moment of habit as a transformative event. So, it is not a question of escaping the habitual but, following Nietzsche, of creating “a new habit” which, as habit, is inseparable from the re-origination of and re-subjection to the past.

The best we can do is to confront our inherited...nature with our knowledge of it, and...inplant in ourselves a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature, so that our first nature withers away. It is an attempt to give oneself, as it were a posteriori, a past in which one would like to originate in opposition to that in which one did originate.¹²

Obviously, such a statement, such a desire, for all of its radicalism, can itself only come from within a culture of memory, a culture that Nietzsche and his self-proclaimed “untimeliness” is committed to escaping. He, like us, can only confront his/our inherited nature with a “*knowledge* of it”. He, like us, is inescapably a product of the very knowledge economy that he both despises and wishes to forget. Culture-nature; memory-forgetting; knowledge-ignorance; having and being-had; the will to power – the power not to will, these are not dialectical binaries but the chiasmus of co-existence, our co-existence with ourselves, our co-existence with the other, the endless crisscrossing of being-with and remembering-with. The restlessness of memory work is chiasmal not dialectical, there is no memorial absolute transcending the conflicting and conflicted narratives of culture and its ever-proliferating cultural histories, only the endless unconcealment and concealment of an origin that has never ceased originating the memorial site that is both within and without us.

To “inplant in ourselves a new habit” requires, then, the double recognition of the habitus as both the dwelling that we own, and the habits which own us; the place from where we know ourselves and our past, and the place from where we give ourselves a past. Both knowing and giving are collective, indeed universal acts, but where knowledge is a shared exchange economy, giving has nothing to do with exchange and, indeed, is the most infinitely unsociable gesture imaginable. Here the past is given as a gift; not the gift as social gesture but as the ontological grounding offered up for us to inhabit and become habitualised to.

*

While time, as Kant recognised, is an “inner sense, that is, of the intuition of ourselves and of inner states”,¹³ this should not be confused with self-

consciousness in any simple or naïve sense, not least because it is precisely such a sensation of time that *constitutes* the self as an intuited *object* rather than conscious subject: “time is therefore to be regarded...as the mode of representation of myself as object”.¹⁴ This explains why Deleuze is able to say of Kant that he “defined time as the form of interiority, in the sense that we are internal to time:”¹⁵ the ‘form’ and the ‘we’ are constituted simultaneously.

So what?

Such thinking takes us away from a conception of cultural memory that valorises the interiority of a *given* subjectivity as an increasingly privileged moment within a stable memorial exchange economy, structured around a *given* empathic mutuality. Instead, subjectivity and objectivity, interiority and exteriority are displaced by the endless chiasmal reversal of actuality and virtuality; where, as with Heidegger’s notion of truth as unconcealment-concealment, memory-work is an event that far exceeds the “allure” of consciousness. Deleuze:

*The virtual image (pure recollection) is not a psychological state or consciousness: it exists outside of consciousness, in time...What causes our mistake is that recollection-images...haunt a consciousness which necessarily accords them a capricious or intermittent allure, since they are actualised according to the momentary needs of this consciousness. But, if you ask where consciousness is going to look for these recollection-images...we are led back to pure virtual images of which the latter are only modes or degrees of actualisation.*¹⁶

In a culture of memory we are in danger of succumbing to the allure of the moment and the needs of the singular consciousness confronted with a collective historical guilt. Yes, no doubt, ‘we will remember them’, but again, the ‘we’, the ‘them’ and the ‘remembering’ are all constituted together *within* a temporality of “pure recollection” that is forgotten in the very name of a cultural memory that it founds or originates. This “pure recollection”—the event of memory rather than the memory of events—is forgotten because it is “outside of consciousness”, as is the affectivity of sensation and the sensorial memory that we are grasping for here.

*

Returning to our epigraph, where forgetting is understood to be essential to memory, could we try and imagine not a memory consequent to a forgetting but, rather, a forgetful memory or, put another way, an unconscious memory: such, perhaps, is sensorial memory. Even when, to paraphrase Samuel Beckett’s famous words: there is nothing from which to remember, nothing with which to remember, no power to remember, no desire to remember;¹⁷ the event of memory remains, and the sense of this event—the evental sense—remains as the felt or intuited obligation to remember.

*It remains questionable when we are in such a way that our being is song, and indeed a song whose singing does not just resound anywhere but is truly a singing, a song whose sound does not cling to something that is eventually attained, but which has already shattered itself even in the sounding.*¹⁸

“Put me in your box and I’ll tell you what I know”¹⁹

A young woman is singing of terrible things. Things that have happened, happened to her, happened to others, happened to so many others who can be heard, yet not heard, singing (*sotto voce*), not within, but alongside or on the outside of this singular but universal song, this shattering sound.

“I solemnly, sincerely, truly declare”

According to Heidegger, all being is being-with (Mitsein): the other is always proximal, the voice is always double-tracked, the song is always overdubbed, the lyrics are always co-written, the composition is always a com-position, a collaboration.

“I’ll stand and declare my most shame-filled memories”

According to Heidegger, being-with is not the same as being-alongside, just as, ontologically, proximity has nothing to do with the existential sociality of an empathic space. I do not ‘feel-for’ her as she sings of such terrible things, I feel-with her. Being-with and feeling-with create no social bond, on the contrary, they reveal — eventually — what Heidegger describes as the essential “unsociability of being”.

“Take possession of what I have lived through”

Care (I do care, why?) is not an empathic interpersonal relation but an ontological compartment, one that caring communities don’t care about, one that our culture of memory is in danger of forgetting.

“My memories are malleable in timing and chronology”

Does she sing to remember or forget? Both? Her use of repetition, of looping and delay are a reminder of what Kant calls the “apperceptive” nature of the self, where the self only becomes a self to the extent that it “*accompanies*” itself. But this self-accompaniment also creates a song — a harrowing yet beautiful song — that fills the space with a re-sonance, a re-sounding that, while existentially both singular and collective (she sings, we listen), is ontologically unowned: no more she, we, I, me, mine, just the remembrance that there is nothing from which to remember, nothing with which to remember, no power to remember, no desire to remember, together with the obligation to remember. She is obliged to sing, we are obliged to listen, but sometimes it is necessary to stop caring why in order to remember why we care.

“...but of some things I am sure”

Endnotes

1. Beckett, Samuel. *Proust and Three Dialogues with Duthuit* (London: John Calder, 1999), 29.
2. Borges, Jorge Luis. 'Funes the Memorious', in *Ficciones*, trans. Anthony Kerrigan (New York: Grove Press, 1962), 115.
3. Nietzsche, Friedrich. 'The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 61.
4. Parrott, Martin. 'Ask About English:' http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/radio/specials/1535_questionanswer/page68.shtml
5. Binyon, Laurence. *For the Fallen* (1914).
6. Vonnegut, Kurt. *Breakfast of Champions* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973), 6.
7. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On The Genealogy of Morals, in Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1968), 497.
8. Bergson, Henri. *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1911), 95.
9. Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema II: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Continuum, 2005), 55.
10. *Ibid.*, 82.
11. Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 162.
12. Nietzsche. 'The Uses and Disadvantages of History', 76.
13. Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1933), 77.
14. *Ibid.*, 79.
15. Deleuze. *Cinema II*, 82.
16. *Ibid.*, 81.
17. Beckett. *Proust*, 103.
18. Heidegger, Martin. 'What Are Poets For?' trans. Alfred Hofstadter in, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 138-139.
19. The lyrics in bold here are taken from the song performed by Emily Rowan at the 'Cultures of Memory' conference, York St John University, October 2014. A video of her performing the piece forms part of the current edition of this journal.

Bibliography

- Beckett, Samuel. *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*. London: John Calder, 1999.
- Bergson, Henri. *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1911.
- Binyon, Laurence. *For The Fallen*, 1914.

Borges, Jorge Luis. 'Funes the Memorious', trans. Anthony Kerrigan. New York: Grove Press, 1962.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema II: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. London: Continuum, 2005.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Oxford: Blackwell, 1962.

Heidegger, Martin. "What Are Poets For?" trans. Alfred Hofstadter in, *Poetry, Language, Thought*. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith. London: Macmillan, 1933.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. New York: Random House, 1968.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 'The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Parrott, Martin. "Ask About English": http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/radio/specials/1535_questionanswer/page68.shtml

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Breakfast of Champions* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973).

Biographical Note

Gary Peters is currently Professor of Critical and Cultural Theory at York St John University, UK. He has published widely in the area of continental philosophy, critical theory and aesthetics from Kant to the present. This work often overlaps with certain areas of pedagogical research as well as a range of art practices (from music and the performing arts to visual art and literature). He is also a musician and composer, working across a wide range of genres. His first book was published in 2005 by Ashgate and is entitled: *Irony and Singularity: Aesthetic Education from Kant to Levinas*. His second book published in 2009 by the University of Chicago Press is entitled: 'The Philosophy of Improvisation'. A third book, edited with his wife Fiona Peters, is entitled *Thoughts of Love*, and was published in 2013.

His current work in progress is a second book on improvisation for the University of Chicago Press entitled *Improvising Improvisation: From out of Philosophy, Music, Dance and Literature*. This is due to be published in late 2016.

G.Peters@yorks.ac.uk