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Sites, Sights, and Silences of Memory

Eugen Weber

Memory is what we make it. Memory is what we make of it. When I was asked to talk about “Sites of Memory,” I went back to two documents: Pierre Nora’s great monument to the subject, and Sellers & Yeatman’s *1066 and All That. Les Lieux de Mémoire*, in case you don’t know, consists of seven volumes, the first of which came out in 1984, the last in 1992, and it includes 4710 pages and 155 essays by 106 contributors. *1066* came out in 1931 and its subtitle reads “A Memorable History of England, comprising all the points you can remember, including 103 good things, 5 bad kings, and 2 genuine dates.” The dates are 55 BC when the Romans invaded England and 1066 when the Normans landed at Hastings. “The Norman Conquest was a Good Thing, as from that time on England stopped being conquered and thus was able to become top nation.” The book is 116 pages long, including five test papers with questions like:

“Which came first, AD or BC? (be careful)”

“What is a Plantagenet? Do you agree?”

“Deplore the failure of the Gunpowder Plot.” And so on.

We have here two conflicting approaches to memorable memory, and I shall not try to reconcile them. But if serious subjects deserve to be treated seriously (sometimes), Sellers & Yeatman also make a serious point that has often been made more pretentiously and at greater length: that memory is what you remember, but also misremember, invent, are told or taught. It becomes part of our mind’s furniture and that of the society or social groups in which we move, a symbolic capital of commonalities, commonplaces, clichés that acquire significance and force by being held in common, that mold a particular idiom of the mind, that act as passwords and as bonds (remember that this is what *religio* means). There are, of course, memories that function as personal and private affairs—*madeleines*, if you like. But these only become significant when they go public: when they are shared with a friend, a lover, an audience, after which they *also* operate as bonds and identifiers to initiates until, precisely as in the case of Proust’s *madeleine*, they enter the baggage, and the flow, of public memory.

To a historian, events, doings, lives matter as part of a public story. Most of the time, the personal and private counts when it ceases to be personal and private and becomes part of the public sphere. And all, or almost

all, of the documents we work with originate in whole or part in private contributions or initiatives: letters and diaries, literature and art, but also inscriptions, charters, monuments, contracts, wills, treaties, reports, accounts, reflect the activities, minds, hands, styles, or forgeries in which private and public mingle.

Memory does too. It tends to be recast, recreated, created even, by reading, transmission, reflection, retrospection. My own impression of participating in events like battles is very much like that of Fabrizio del Dongo at Waterloo; and a true account of experience recollected in tranquility would be confused, busy, incoherent, and difficult of access. But when, in the course of research, I have interviewed actors of historical situations, they had ordered their doings, reordered them in quest of clarity, accuracy or political correctness, read up on the background, sometimes even read their own published memoirs and accounts of events. So public memory, on which I want to focus, is less likely to be spontaneous and artless, more likely to be contrived, deliberately or not. But private memory is too. And I myself have read accounts of what is now called the Battle of the Bulge, the better to orient myself before going back to the Ardennes where I was wounded.

The French approach this finding that memory is less spontaneous than contrived by declaring it a non-issue. Yes, memory is an artefact and its purpose (though not always acknowledged) is to sketch out and confirm the image, entity, identity of a person or, historically speaking, of a society. Let's say the word: a Nation. A common history does not make a nation, but it helps to keep it united. That is a serious consideration for a nation as disunited and riven as the French, which has indeed been held together not just by force, but by imagined and inculcated identities, including a passion for building barricades.

You know what Ernest Renan said about this, but I shall quote him all the same: "Avoir des gloires communes dans le passé . . . avoir fait de grandes choses ensemble . . . voilà des conditions essentielles pour être un peuple." Common glories, common deeds—the memories detailed, retailed in Nora's *Realms* demonstrate that this is the case. But I have left out two clauses, so let me cite Renan's lines in full: "Avoir des gloires communes dans le passé, une volonté commune dans le présent; avoir fait de grandes choses ensemble, vouloir en faire encore." This is where the memory of past achievements can make up for present failures of commonality and will. When cohesion is weak or threatened, the symbols in the armory of national memory can restore or reaffirm it.

Again, the success of Nora's enterprise demonstrates the demand for this sort of reassurance. And remember that in the years when *Realms* was in gestation France was on the wobble. The *trente glorieuses* had petered out, the economy was limping, unemployment was beginning its perilous ascent, immigration was becoming an issue (again!), politics looked increasingly precarious. No wonder that the 1980s were a great time for commemorations: 1980, centennial of making July 14 a national holiday; 1981, centennial of free elementary education; tricentennial of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1985, fiftieth anniversary of the Popular Front in 1986, Millenary of the Capetian Monarchy in 1987, twentieth anniversary of May 1968 in 1988, bicentennial of the French Revolution in 1989, centennial of General de Gaulle's birth in 1990. The one anniversary that did not evoke celebration was the bicentennial of Louis XVI's execution in 1991. Evidently, having done or undone great things together was supposed to cement solidarities that were getting very skittish.

Now look at the subjects that Pierre Nora's first volume sets out to evoke. They are symbols like the *tricolore* and the *Marseillaise*, monuments like war memorials and the Pantheon, commemorations like the *Quatorze Juillet*, and the pedagogy that rubs them in—especially as found in textbooks. Being the work of historians, the volume acknowledges that where there's myth there's also counter-myth; so counter-memories receive their due attention, like the Vendée and the *Mur des Fédérés* at the Père Lachaise. But these account for only ten per cent of the collection. A subsequent volume entitled "Les France" features other conflictual inheritances: Catholicism and secularism, Red and White, Right and Left, not to mention Vichy and xenophobia. But all emphasize the very *French* aspects of these divisive conflicts, all thereby fortify the image of national personality and identifiable national peculiarity. Whereas the Dreyfus Affair gets no mention.

You probably know that, under Mitterrand, Jack Lang ordered a very large bronze statue of Captain Dreyfus to be placed in the courtyard of the Ecole Militaire, where the unfortunate captain had been stripped and humiliated in December 1894 (another commemoration!). The military rebelled; and the statue, created by cartoonist-sculptor TIM, was banished to a distant, discreet corner of the Tuileries, where it languished until, a year or two ago, it was shifted to an equally unsung square on the Rive Gauche.

So certain memories are better swept under the carpet. You can't do that with Vichy, or with the Camisards; but you can at least try with Dreyfus; and sometimes, with some memories, you may even succeed. You can see this in the little town of Dreux, not far from Chartres, where four memorials honor: (1) those who died in the Great War, in the subsequent less-great

Second War, and in Indochina and Algeria; (2) those who died after being deported by the Germans in the 1940s; (3) young local Communists shot for resisting the Germans. And these are all the object of annual ceremonies on Armistice Day, November 11.

The fourth memorial, which receives little notice, is an obelisk inscribed “to the French soldiers killed outside its walls, the town of Dreux”; it marks the occasion, in October 1870, when the municipality decided *not* to resist the Prussians. They disarmed the National Guard, they demanded an evacuation of what troops there were, and they declared Dreux an open city. Certain patriots nevertheless wanted to try to stop the enemy, and their untoward enthusiasm led to an unfortunate incident in which anti-Prussians and anti-anti-Prussians fired on each other, with both parties suffering casualties. So the French killed outside the walls of Dreux in 1870 were killed by other French. These are the dead commemorated by the obelisk, and these are the memories—not exactly forgotten, because provincial memories go back a long way—but tacitly occulted when others are celebrated.

Renan had something to say about that too: “L’oubli, je dirai même l’erreur historique, sont un facteur essentiel de la création d’une nation, et c’est ainsi que le progrès des études historiques est souvent pour la nationalité un danger.” Renan cites as typical sources of friction differences in language, religion, and race—meaning ethnic origin; and he is pleased to note (his lecture was delivered in 1882) that all these count for less and less.

1882 was the year in which Jules Ferry’s schools kicked in, which meant that within a generation or so most of the French would be speaking French; and *that* meant that memories would be couched and relayed in French, and would be learnt both orally and visually in the national language. It also meant that one of the great Franco-French conflicts, the religious war that goes back well beyond the French Revolution to the massacres of the sixteenth century, would rise to heights unprecedented for a hundred years and culminate in the separation of Church and State in December 1905.

Memories of religious conflict go back past the Vendée and the mini-Vendées that raged over other parts of France in the 1790s, to the times of the Catholic League in the sixteenth century and the Camisard rebellion in the seventeenth century, both of which left their mark on family and local remembrance, grudges that resurged into national awareness when they expressed themselves through universal suffrage, but also in the bloody disorders and broken careers that marked religio-political struggles from the 1880s to the early 1900s. It would take the hecatombs of the First World War and sometimes the massacres of the Second to paper that canyon over, to prove that pedagogy and commemorations had done their edulcorating job, that

memory had largely shifted from village and region to city and nation, to persuade most normal folk that they shared not only the same memories but also the same bygones.

It would be a long haul. The Belgians and the Italians who had been trickling into this large underpopulated country before the First World War were not much more foreign than Bretons and Auvergnats and Provençaux, who also spoke dialect, not the national language, and who had to learn it, along with the rituals of urban living and the rites of national belonging that school and military service taught. Recurrent festivities were also designed to expose all the citizenry to the allegedly common and commonly shared memory of a national past that led to the national present of democratic politics and of elections (another festive ritual), and of shared conflict—between Reds and Whites, Catholics and Anticlericals, French and French. Franco-French wars overrode even class war, even xenophobia; and they too reaffirmed a national identity first learned, then inscribed in personal memory and personal pride.

All these motifs and that of private memory bound and jointed with more public memories come out in the Resistance, and in the memorial treatment of Resistance, which are not mentioned in Nora's work. That is a pity, because here is an object lesson of how realms of memory are created, accreted, managed, manipulated, assimilated even as they are commemorated and studied; but also how they feed on each other.

We know a great deal about the competition between the Gaullist model of Resistance, unitary and patriotic; and the Communist model, class-consciously dominated by workers and peasants. We know less about the memorial tug-of-war between the uniformed Resistance in the African and Italian campaigns of the war and the clandestine *résistance de l'intérieur*. We hardly ever hear about the conflict between Resistance and Counter-Resistance that you can read about in Marcel Aymé, or view in films like *Lacombe Lucien*. All of which should remind us that memory is not a *bloc*, but a mosaic or a jigsaw whose parts often assert themselves over the would-be whole. Like family memory, which differs from clan to clan, political-family memories differ too. So do the memories and memorial claims of subsidiary groups that have in the past ten or twenty years claimed attention for their resistance activities: women; foreigners, especially Spaniards; and Jews who, in turn, tend to divide between Communist *franc-tireurs et partisans* and those who identify themselves as Jewish rejects of an anti-semitic society.

Then there is the fact that the Resistance itself was the heir of memories and of traditions that it sometimes ignored, but often drew upon for identification and legitimation. It called upon Joan of Arc, it referred to the na-

tional revolutionary tradition: *les soldats de l'an II*, Valmy, the *levée en masse*. The communists invoked the Bolsheviks of the great revolutionary war and the Republicans of the Spanish War. But most references went beyond, or around, Right and Left; and many bypassed general criteria inspired by national or international history for more specifically local memories.

In Lozère for example, the Catholic north of the department was imperious to Resistance and so, largely, was neighboring Aveyron. In the more difficult country of southern Lozère, Hérault, Ardèche, the Cévenols likened themselves to Camisards, as Audois referred to Cathares, as the Varois referred to the republicans of 1851 who rebelled against Louis-Napoleon's *coup d'état* of December 2, 1851. In Brittany, the *Chouans* of 1793-96, their sons and their nephews, had risen against Napoleon during the Hundred Days under the command of a La Rochejaquelein (brother of the leaders of 1793), then rose again in support of the Duchess de Berri in 1832, this time under a La Rochejaquelein and a Charette, then flowed into the Zouaves Pontificaux in the 1860s and volunteered against the Prussians in 1870. Yet *Chouan* regions showed little interest in Resistance in the 1940s. On the other hand, the central part of Brittany which in 1675 revolted against Colbert's new taxes, provided recruits for another kind of insurgency against foreign oppression. And everywhere the traditional guardians and interpreters of tradition—pastors, priests, *instituteurs*—mediated these interpretations too.

But, where it functioned, popular imagination established other parallels between resistance to authorities *then* and *now*: *maquisards* were assimilated to Mandrin and other social bandits, to smugglers who always played a social role in the countryside, to *réfractaires* who had fled conscription for a century and a half, above all to the *Jeunesse*—traditionally transgressive, violent, festive, and defending *their* community, their territory, against *horsains* from the outside.

So once again, memory, its transmission, its utilization, turn out to be matters of selection, of choice out of a stock of references that are there to be revived at need, that suggest themselves when the moment is right.

Then, when the moment of action was past, it was time for the memorable action to be institutionalized, to be declared an official part of patriotic patrimony, to be homogenized so that internal rivalries and dissensions were edulcorated, and unwanted participants like the *Armée Secrète* or General Giraud could be evaporated and, as the French say, *occultés*. It was time for memory to be eviscerated and stuffed for public exhibition and edification, ritualized by the State, defended by associations, played out in ceremonies and commemorations. That was when we got the cult of those who died in

battle, the victims transfigured as heroes and martyrs, the emblems like the Cross of Lorraine and the V for Victory, the memorials and monuments like that at Glières: the constitution of contemporary mythology.

That was also when the authorities, but not the authorities only, set out to conscript the cinema (*films d'intérêt national*, as the Ministry of Information put it in 1945) to produce a national and international memory of the Resistance as an inspiring national heritage. They did what they could to suppress embarrassing presentations like Marcel Carné's *Les Portes de la nuit*; they supported and subsidized and publicized René Clément's very fine *La Bataille du rail*, with its epic account of the resistance of railway workers that culminates in the sabotage of a German armored train, but that never hints (why should it?) that railwaymen never tried to sabotage a single train deporting Jews either to Drancy or to Germany.

We all know that Max Ophüls's *Le Chagrin et la Pitié*, made in 1970, was only shown on French television in 1981. It is not so well known that in 1945 a director called Jeff Musso made a film about the Resistance called *Vive la Liberté*, which sank without trace in 1946, the year *La Bataille du rail* triumphed, because it suggested *en passant* that French people who respected the authority of Pétain and of the Vichy regime might think themselves to be as good French as those who opposed them. In other words, again, deep divisions had to be papered over, which they were for some decades; and *that* had to be done because the past, as always, represents the present's idea of the future; and manipulating the past is one way of affecting the future, and the future of the future.

Now let me go back to generalities. Just ten years ago, in 1988, Isaiah Berlin remarked on the explosion of what he called "religious bigotry" which, he said, not one of the most perceptive thinkers of the nineteenth century had predicted. I suggest that if they did not, that was because, in the spirit of their time, they marginalized "bigotry" or swept it under the carpet; they privileged inventive imagination, utopian, millenarian, over that other imagination of the resurrectionist kind that we call memory. But even inventive imagination works by rearranging recollections.

The fuel that imagination runs on is the information and misinformation that we accumulate by experience and vicarious experience. Ideas and images do not arise by immaculate conception: they are born of ideas and images. Personification of memory, Mnemosyne was the mother of the nine Muses, and her realm, much vaster than that of lived experience, offers memories for all times; and you never know what a time or a situation will call for. The first *lieu de mémoire* in Western history, which is Christian history, is Jewish history: the genealogies, genocides, and other shenani-

gans of the Old Testament. Israel is a land of fathers and forebears. They and their deeds are remembered in words and in celebrations that commemorate historical—or allegedly historical—events.

Religio-historical sites, Jerusalem and the Temple, Megiddo and Babylon, a whole sacred geography, concretize remembrance and screw it firmly into sanctified space. A liturgy of feasts—Passover and so on—recalls moments in a national history that is not just redemptive but inspiring and energizing; that marks a people with an indelible mark, that ties them together with a powerful bond, that willy-nilly gives them a sense of election, identity, solidarity, loyalty—not necessarily with and to each other, but in terms of a common destiny and a common piety about the higher entity that comprehends and transcends them.

The storehouse of memory is not monopolized by Jewish and Christian material. It is easy to discover other references in it, for example Greek and Latin ones. And it is not surprising, in retrospect, that some of the most thoughtful agnostic intellectuals of the *fin de siècle* should have been epicureans and stoics; just as it should not surprise us that some of the most strident voices of *our fin de siècle* should be evangelical and fundamentalist. Nor that so many founders and innovators of contemporary societies (notably in France) should have sought to create and recreate sacred histories of their own, complete with prophecy, liturgy, mythology, and theology. It should not surprise us that tribes and sects in this country attempt to do it; and that nationalists and other French tribes and sects have worked at it for two hundred years.

It is the function of a functional memory first to stir the imagination, then to pervade it, permeate it, and settle in it, so that it can pop up as a matter of course. The French have succeeded in establishing their *lieux de mémoire*, not necessarily all of Nora's 150 but enough for them to count, and in fixing them as firmly as the Hebrews did: mythology, liturgy, not least the jealous, demanding God of the *patria*. And they have done it, as the Hebrews did it, largely by teaching, and by the accumulated teaching of their monuments.

A father's first duty to his son, says Jules Michelet, is to teach him about the fatherland. He takes him to Notre Dame, to the Louvre, to the Tuileries, to the Arc de Triomphe. From a balcony or a rooftop he shows him the people, the army marching past, the shimmering bayonets, the *drapeau tricolore*. "There, my child, look, there is France, there is the fatherland." A hundred years after Michelet, a lad who described himself as *un petit Lillois de Paris* had a similar experience: "nothing struck me more than the symbols of our glories: night falling over Notre Dame, the majesty

of evening at Versailles, the Arc de Triomphe in the sun, the flags we conquered floating under the vaulted roof of the Invalides." Charles de Gaulle had certainly imbibed the lesson from his father, but his vision is much the same as that of Michelet.

Now, as Mona Ozouf has suggested, let us move on to May 1981, when the newly-elected President of the French Republic walks up the steps of the Panthéon, flanked by a guard of honor, and on into the grim, gray nave of the building. On the face of it, he is engaging in a piece of public ritual much like what you find in other modern states: the new President inaugurates his term of office by paying homage at a shrine which is supposed to represent the unity and continuity of his country. The frieze over the portico under which Mitterrand passes proclaims the official intention: *Aux Grands Hommes, la Patrie Reconnaissante*. This was the didactic agenda which Mitterrand had in mind with his inaugural innovation: a ceremony of integrative memory, a gathering of the national community around its great men, a reaffirmation of French unity around their national greatness.

Except that the Panthéon does not stand for national consensus the way the Washington Monument does, or even the Lincoln Memorial. First of all, it is a disaffected church and hence a permanent reminder of one major Franco-French conflict. Second, it is a monument to men. And whilst anachronism is a menace, it is still hard to avoid the fact that the first and so far only woman, Marie Curie, entered it only as part of a couple in 1985. It is also a monument not just to any men, but specifically to Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary men, with earlier times represented only by Rousseau and Voltaire. Which reflects its third aspect: the sectarian significance of the great men enshrined in what appears to be a monument less to inclusion than to exclusion.

Just what this means you can see if (in Ozouf's wake) we contrast Mitterrand's ceremony at the Pantheon with the ceremony that followed it when Mitterrand crossed from the left bank of the Seine to the right bank (and remember not just the connotations of Left and Right, but the Eiffel Tower on the Left facing the Sacré Coeur on the Right), crossed from the Panthéon to the *Hôtel de Ville*, to be honored by the mayor of Paris, Jacques Chirac.

At the Panthéon, Mitterrand had evoked the spirit of the place by calling up great key presences: Lazare Carnot, who organized the citizen armies of the Revolution, Victor Hugo, who celebrated the suffering poor, Jean Jaurès, the socialist tribune and advocate of justice, Jean Moulin, the Republican martyr of the Resistance—a kind of Popular Front of radical, populist figures. Across the river, in the town hall that the Commune burnt and the

Third Republic rebuilt, the memories that Chirac summoned were of Ste Geneviève, Ste Jeanne d'Arc, Henri IV, General de Gaulle, none of whom is represented in the Pantheon. And when elected to the presidency himself in 1992, Chirac's first official act was a flying visit to de Gaulle's grave at Colombey, followed by a ceremony at the Arc de Triomphe.

The rift of French history, the conflict of rival memories, comes out in the resonances of such contrasts. *Hôtel de Ville* and *Panthéon* are both intended to represent commonality, civic and national patriotism, shared emotions of pride and gratitude. Yet both retain a partisan significance, and the Panthéon especially so. Insofar as it represents a monument to memory, it is to the memory of continuing cleavage and continuing feuds—precisely what the French have in common, which is their history, or at least their memorable histrionics.

That brings me back to Sellers & Yeatman's *Memorable History* of England, which is not multiple but singular, not complicated but simple; and that features only two dates, of which only one matters. How different this caricature looks from a comparable caricature of French memorability, which would be surfeited with bad kings, and with more bad things than good, and with far more dates than just 1066. As Michelet said somewhere (who insisted that history is not about narrative or analysis, but about resurrection), in France nothing is finished; everything always begins again: 1789 and 1815 and 1830 and 1832 and 1848 and 1851 and 1871 and 1968 and Old Uncle Tom Cobby and all. Which is another thing that the French have in common with the Hebrews: the soil of France, like that of Palestine, has an uncommon propensity to resurrections.

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Sites of Memory

Tracing France's Cultural Self-Consciousness



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Special Issue

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*Selected Proceedings from
UCLA French Graduate Students'
Third Annual Interdisciplinary Conference*

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The UCLA French Department Graduate Students'
Third Annual Interdisciplinary Conference
April 17-18, 1998

*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

PAROLES GELÉES

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CONTENTS

Introduction	5
<i>Stacey Meeker</i>	
Sites, Sights, and Silences of Memory	9
<i>Eugen Weber</i>	
Oublier l'avant-garde?	19
<i>Jean-François Fourny</i>	
Details and Reproducing Domination: The Birth of the Ballet School, the Prison, and Other Correctional Facilities	33
<i>Regina Fletcher Sadono</i>	
Memory as Construction in Viollet-le-Duc's Architectural Imagination	43
<i>Aron Vinegar</i>	
Clichés of Unity: History and Memory in Postwar French Film	57
<i>Marc Siegel</i>	
Naming <i>la Guerre sans nom</i> : Memory, Nation and Identity in French Representations of the Algerian War, 1963-1992	65
<i>Naomi Davidson</i>	
Swann, Vinteuil et Marcel, et la mémoire involontaire	91
<i>Joseph Jenkins</i>	
French Folie: Memory and Madness in Buñuel's <i>Belle de Jour</i>	101
<i>Mary M. Wiles</i>	
Conference Program	119
Ordering Information	122