

MODERNISM, IRELAND AND THE EROTICS OF MEMORY

NICHOLAS ANDREW MILLER

Loyola College in Maryland



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CHAPTER I

Lethal histories: memory-work and the text of the past

A historical phenomenon, known clearly and completely and resolved into a phenomenon of knowledge, is, for him who has perceived it, dead.

Friedrich Nietzsche

“On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life”

In the dark, early morning hours of a spring night in 1990, a group of unlikely urban guerrillas entered the public square that fronts the Saarbrücker Schloss, a historic castle in the city of Saarbrücken, Germany. There they began digging up and removing a small number of the cobblestones with which the square is paved, concealing their work from the daytime gaze of palace guards and police by placing false, “dummy” stones in each of the resulting holes. Their work completed, the thieves deposited the stolen cobblestones at their base of operations in a nearby school and parted company, returning to their respective homes to sleep. The perpetrators of this odd theft, or exchange, of municipal property were art students, members of visiting professor Jochen Gerz’s seminar on memorial design at the local art academy, the Hochschule der Bildenden Künste; their nocturnal sojourn into the square was only the first of many in what was to become an extraordinary collective undertaking: the clandestine design and installation of a public memorial dedicated to the victims of Germany’s wartime past.

The stimulus for the unusual project had been provided by the history of the Saarbrücker Schloss itself. Originally built as a home for German royalty, the palace functioned during World War II as a Gestapo headquarters. Currently, the building houses the offices of the regional government, while the space once occupied by the Gestapo has been converted into a museum of local history, the Regionalgeschichtliches Museum Saarbrücken. Within this latter wing, in a space directly below the square itself, curators have preserved a tiny room, six meters square, which served during the war as a detention cell for prisoners

awaiting interrogation. The walls of this cell are covered with graffiti left by the occupants – men and women, Russians, Poles, Ukrainians, Italians, French; as many as sixteen held at once, and for months at a time – in which they recorded their names, places and dates of birth, and dates of incarceration.¹

Having visited the museum soon after his arrival in Saarbrücken, Gerz, a Berlin-born conceptual artist whose work has dealt repeatedly and brilliantly with the problematics of history and memory, initially conceived of the monument project as a kind of counterpoint to the cell's own space of inscription. In the artist's own words, the work would carry out "an act of recollection, comparable to the decision to preserve the names scribbled on the cell wall in the basement of the castle" (Gibson, "Clandestine Warning"). Taking their cue from the names listed on the room's walls, Gerz and his students spent more than a year in dialogue with the leaders of Germany's Jewish communities, enlisting their help in discovering the forgotten names of German Jewish cemeteries in use during the war.

The exhaustive list that resulted became the core of the memorial project, and the focus of its engagement with history. As the borrowed cobblestones arrived in the studio, each was to receive a name from the list, along with the date of transmission, carved into its surface. Once inscribed, the stones would be restored, once again under cover of night, to their respective positions in the square. Carved into the surface of the square's cobblestones, the names would serve to remind the citizens of Saarbrücken – and visitors in general – of the city's wartime past; eternally insistent, the memorial would impress upon a forgetful present the urgent necessity of memory.

Proceeding at a rate of twelve to sixteen stones per night, the sixteen artists continued their operation for well over a year, until more than a quarter of the square's eight thousand stones had been thus removed, inscribed, and reinterred. The project was unknown to local officials until the summer of 1991, when Gerz, running short of funds, was forced to contact Oskar Lafontaine, minister-president of the Saarland and vice president of the German Social Democratic Party, to request support. Fortified by Lafontaine's grant of 10,000 Deutschemarks (about \$6,300 in 1991), Gerz presented the project before the Stadtverband, a municipal voting body, at the end of August, ultimately winning a vote of official approval.² In May of 1993, the nearly completed installation was officially dedicated as a space of public remembrance under the title, *2,146 Stones – Monument against Racism*.³ In a final gesture of recognition, officials placed

a plaque nearby, identifying the monument for visitors and announcing its invitation to memory.

That Gerz received government sanction and funding for his clandestine and illegal use of public space is perhaps surprising. What is more shocking is that the square's official transformation into a space of public memory took place despite a singular and astonishing fact: the "monument against racism" itself is entirely invisible. The names, so painstakingly researched and carved, cannot be read; the square and its cobblestones appear today exactly as they did before work on the project began. Indeed, the mark of the work's official recognition, the plaque which proclaims its very existence, is itself the only visible trace of the monument-makers' guerrilla artistry. Through an extraordinary and paradoxical detail of the memorial's design, the artists effectively guaranteed their work's indefinite resistance to all recognition, official or otherwise: in restoring the inscribed stones to their places in the square, Gerz and his students deliberately replaced them name-side-down.

INELUCTABLE MODALITY OF THE MEMORIAL

Strolling on Sandymount Strand in the "Proteus" episode of *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus ruminates on the irreducibly textual nature of visual perception: "Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes. Signatures of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot. Snotgreen, bluesilver, rust: coloured signs."⁴ On the visual plane, the furniture of the world disposes itself as a series of not merely visible but *legible* objects, "signatures" to be deciphered and understood. The modality of the visible is ineluctably textual: to see is to read.

On the plane of historical perception, the faculty of memory effects a similar textualization of its object, the past. Like so much seaspawn and seawrack, the jetsam of history appears before the historical gaze as a collection of signatures – events, people, lives, stories – that are at once irreducibly contextual (that is, situated within and among cultures, societies, institutions, ideologies, and so on) and irreducibly textual (that is, susceptible of being read and understood in the present as history). Among the normative mechanisms of historical perception, one of the most effective instruments of this textualization of the past is the public memorial. While the term "memorial" encompasses myriad strategies for the formal encounter with the past as well as for political uses and abuses of it, and while in practice the memorial site can be a space for

either mourning or celebration, the function of indexing and textualizing history is coterminous with the very concept of memorialization. Regardless of differences in aesthetic or ideological vocabulary, all memorials are, at the most basic level, textual markers: sites for the reading of history. Indexical signifiers of the past, memorials bring past objects or events into their discursive presence as history, a presence in which they are resolved and identified in the form of legible texts.⁵

In the course of his extensive work on Holocaust memory, James Young has observed that the formal gesture toward the past embodied in the very concept of memorialization carries out a kind of fetishization of history, and with it, paradoxically, an atrophying of memory itself.⁶ Without denying the importance of the debate over how precisely to represent particular aspects of the past, Young points out repeatedly that every historiographical gesture – both the “scientific” and the “artistic”; both the “truthful” presentation of artifacts and the ideologically motivated “revisionist” interpretation of such artifacts – every such gesture threatens always to direct attention toward the objective status of the event and its proof, and away, therefore, from the ongoing (and indeed, historical) activity that Young calls “memory-work.” While human access to the past is necessarily dynamic (a reflection of the irreducibly fragmentary and shifting nature of memory), memorials of all kinds risk displacing the constantly mutating historical perception of individuals with a more or less static notion of “memory,” an objectified version of history for which the physicality of the memorial itself stands. The protean instability of the historical object fades before the memorial’s authoritative stance as textual marker, its confinement of historical perception to the modality of the en-graved.

Such a displacement is clearly at work, Young suggests, in museum-type memorials such as those at Auschwitz in Poland and the United States Holocaust Memorial and Museum in Washington. The illusion of witnessing the past is given a prominent role at such sites, where authentic artifacts such as the shoes, eyeglasses, or hair of victims are displayed as the surviving fragments of historical catastrophe. Without parting company with those who maintain the importance of preserving the past and our access to it – those who subscribe to a “never forget” imperative – Young pauses long enough to ask what, precisely, the sight of such objects awakens in viewers. His answer allows for both intellectual responses (enhanced historical knowledge, a sense of evidence) and emotional ones (revulsion, grief, pity, fear). At the same time, Young moves beyond assessing the relative appropriateness of such responses to

highlight their underlying passivity with respect to the historical Real, a past which produced the artifacts themselves (Young, *Texture*, 132).

At such sites, Young contends, the effort toward historical perception that is the sole and individual responsibility of viewers becomes unnecessary; it has been effectively completed in advance by the material presence of the memorial itself. Young's point is not that the Holocaust memorial literally and materially takes the place of the past event in the minds of viewers – that it replaces the past with a present text – but rather that it obviates viewers' own "memory-work," that active construction and destruction of the past that continuously produces the text of history. For Young, the Holocaust memorial tends to obscure the dynamic process of both memory and forgetting that is the Holocaust's only contemporary reality: what is lost in the act of memorialization is "not the event itself, but *memory* of the event" (Young, *Texture*, 344).

In granting this reprieve from the work of memory, memorials succeed, Young has suggested, in delivering a message in which viewers are perhaps far more heavily invested than they are in the acquisition of so-called "pure" historical knowledge: namely, that the history they reference is comfortably discontinuous with the viewers' own. The disposition of the past as legible object, carried out in the name of remembrance, is a particularly effective means of distancing present rememberers from the past in which such objects accrue their historical meaning. Knowledge of the Holocaust becomes the very mechanism by which its historical reality is kept comfortably distant: Auschwitz happened, certainly, but to someone somewhere else, in a time that is safely finished. The subject and object of historical knowledge have, in this context, entered a neat, relational economy of exchange that supports their communication only as an effect of their mutual separation.

Conventionally, the form of the memorial is what ensures this displacement of memory-work by a distant, known, objective past: "history." The material durability of inscribed stone or metal is the indicator that the past has been permanently resolved for memory; that it has been, quite literally, en-graved. Gerz's installation, on the other hand, reverses this convention, adopting the en-grave-ing of the past itself as the most prominent feature of its own discursive and material form: the salient characteristic of *2,146 Stones* is not its invisibility, but rather the act of burial by which it achieves that invisibility. The artists' decision to "re-collect" (belatedly) the names of cemeteries rather than those of individual victims of racism places interment, the ritual laying to rest of the dead, at the center of their memorial's "act of recollection." It is not

the past that is the monument's principal concern, but our accustomed methods of engaging it: Gerz in fact draws a striking and unlooked-for equivalence between the recovery – literally a re-covering – of the past for knowledge and its burial, between historical knowing and historical elision, between memory and forgetting.

The need for a “faithful” remembrance of the past gives way in this instance to a more crucial acknowledgment of the denial that is at work within every act of knowing and remembering history, a function of burial that is indeed carried out by those very acts. In textualizing the past, Gerz's monument declares, historical knowledge brings the past to light only by producing a “lethal history,” a story of the past that is itself the discursive form of the past's burial. History's most basic task, the representation of a fundamentally un-present-able past, has in this sense an essentially funereal, or commemorative, function. Historical writing draws the past into its discursive significance as “truth” essentially by burying it in language. The measure of normative historiography's value, in this light, lies not in its successful maintenance of a scientifically objective point of view, but rather in its enactment of a discursive burial through which the past is “disposed” (that is, both “positioned” and “discarded”) as a dead body or corpus. The “accuracy” and “adequacy” of historical knowledge thus comes to be seen in direct proportion to its legibility; the writing or reading of history produces an ideal narrative to commemorate or memorialize a past that is in itself unrepresentable.

The idea that historical knowing bases its recovery of the past in an operation that also effects the past's burial returns us to the notion of memory as a sort of cultural pathology and, in particular, to the traditional resonance of that notion in the Irish context. As Stephen Dedalus well understood, Irish history gains its nightmare quality in its apparent tendency inevitably to recur. The motor driving that perceived pattern of repetition is not history itself, but a modality of memory that is deeply invested in the past's figurative burial. Yet such a modality is hardly exclusive or endemic to Irish culture. The objective status of the past within an economy of knowledge is the residual effect of ambivalent human desires both to know that past and to be done with it for good and all – to “lay it to rest.” Neither of these desires is primary with respect to the other: to remember is to find the past in its disposition as dead body, and thus to bury it; to incorporate this dead, objective past is to specify its integrity and truth as an object of knowledge. The creation of “lethal histories” (textual or discursive interments of the past),

is in that sense a structural necessity of historical discourse itself: the “recovery” of the past for knowledge will always gravitate toward an ambivalent process of re-presentation and re-burial because knowing the past is always a matter of specifying a thing that is inaccessible in itself.

It is to the lethal effects of this mode of historical knowing that Irish history bears particular and profound witness. Yeats’s discovery, at the end of his life, of his own poetic images of the past in the guise of “circus animals” confirms, in a specific instance, memorialization’s curious capacity to distance Ireland’s present from its past. In his early work, Yeats had sought poetic subjects that expressed “character isolated by a deed,” images that could revitalize Ireland’s mythic past and make it available to the present. In “The Circus Animals’ Desertion,” Yeats acknowledges that what animated the figures of Oisín, Cúchulainn, the Countess Cathleen, and others for him was their purity as symbols and emblems. In his poetic idealization of them, he confesses, “Players and painted stage took all my love, / And not those things that they were emblems of.”⁷⁷ The tone of regret that suffuses this poem suggests the poet’s belated awareness that a too-selective gaze made of these images memorial figures in James Young’s sense:

Those masterful images because complete
 Grew in pure mind but out of what began?
 A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
 Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
 Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
 Who keeps the till.

(Yeats, “The Circus Animals’ Desertion,” 33–38)

Selected “in pure mind” as representative figures, Yeats’s images of the Irish past become in the poet’s canonical corpus instruments for the sentimental fetishization and elevation of history. They come to “stand for” a preferred Irishness that is ideally beautiful and therefore irreducibly distant from the complexity and perpetual changeability (David Lloyd’s “undeveloped possibilities”) of anything that might be called Irishness in the present. What is striking is Yeats’s explicit and bitter acknowledgment that this inevitable historical separation is what in some sense motivated his celebration of such figures in the first place. Chosen for their beauty, passion, and nobility, they leave unacknowledged their own rootedness in the less presentable material and emotional realities of Irish history, what Yeats called “the foul rag and bone shop of the heart” (Yeats, “The Circus Animals’ Desertion,” 40).

As memorial figures, Yeats's "circus animals" render the Irish past both legible and comfortably distant, prompting for Yeats, as for Gerz, the arduous search for a new practice of memory-work: "Now that my ladder's gone / I must lie down where all the ladders start . . ." (Yeats, "The Circus Animals' Desertion," 38–39). Yeats's poem concludes without any promise of success in this endeavor to reconfigure his engagement with the Irish past; on the contrary, the idealization of history clearly remains as a persistent threat to any act of memory, poetic or otherwise, undertaken in the present.

SHUT YOUR EYES AND SEE

In contrast to Yeats's desire to forge a new, less idealized textualization of history in the "foul rag and bone shop of the heart," Gerz's approach to a reconfigured practice of memory-work seems, at first glance, to reject the necessity of textualizing history altogether. Against every cultural and aesthetic expectation, Gerz deliberately disables the textual mechanism by which historical perception engages its object. And yet *2,146 Stones* itself consists of nothing but text: names – signifiers whose connection with history is never in question – are after all at the core of the project from the beginning. The realization of the monument depended on a process of historical research – a process in which the students' training and skill as artists counted for little.⁸ The artists' primary object of production, in fact, was not a work of art, but a document that was in every sense a historical text, a list of previously forgotten names that underscored precisely the past's unknowability, its inestimable yet real absence. What is striking about Gerz's installation, then, is the manner in which it accepts the function of textuality in constructing historical memory. It renders its own text invisible as a way of openly welcoming illegibility as a vital aspect of the historical text itself. The past in this case remains a text that presents itself in a non-fetishized, illegible (although not entirely unrecoverable) form. Paradoxically, *2,146 Stones* offers a memorial text that cannot be seen, only read.

Strolling on Sandymount Strand, Stephen Dedalus distills the paradox of the invisible yet legible text in an imperative that might also serve the viewer of *2,146 Stones*: "Shut your eyes and see" (Joyce, *Ulysses*, 3.9). What Stephen is able to "see" as he shuts his eyes and continues to walk is, in fact, the same physical landscape of the strand, now no longer visible but textualized through a vocabulary of sound: "Stephen closed his eyes to hear his boots crush crackling wrack and shells . . .

Exactly: and that is the ineluctable modality of the audible . . . Crush, crack, crick, crick . . . Rhythm begins, you see. I hear” (Joyce, *Ulysses*, 3.10–23). Absent visibility, the objects of perception dispose themselves for Stephen as an auditory text, a rhythmic poem: “acatalectic tetrameter of iambs marching” (Joyce, *Ulysses*, 3.23–24).

This replacement of a visual text by an auditory one is a cue to the reader of *Ulysses* itself. Like all of Joyce’s works from *Chamber Music* to *Finnegans Wake*, *Ulysses* asks its reader not only to see, but to hear the language on the page. Gerz’s monument does not replace the visual text of history with an auditory one in the same sense.⁹ It does, however, issue a similar directive to the visitor who would take the accessibility of memorial texts – not to mention of historiography in general – for granted. By negative demonstration, Gerz’s monument underscores the fact that, normally, memorials reduce history to its most legible, decipherable form, that of an objective past. By refusing to fulfill this function, Gerz’s memorial suggests the possibility of reading history otherwise.

For Gerz, the construction of *2,146 Stones* was a logical, even necessary, step in a career that has been largely dominated by the use of absence as a mode of expression. Virtually all of the artist’s work engages the realms of the historical and the political through a vocabulary of silence, invisibility, erasure, or illegibility. Such a palette invariably requires the active engagement of the viewer. It is the viewer, and not the artist, who must produce the work of art. It is the viewer’s capacity to know and not to know, to remember and to forget, that textualizes the viewing experience and brings into being, there in the plane of the viewer’s own gaze, a legible object: the work of art – or the work of memory – itself.¹⁰

A singular case in point, and one that illustrates the crucial function of the viewer perhaps more clearly than does *2,146 Stones*, is Gerz’s best-known work, the disappearing *Monument against Fascism* (1986) installed in a suburban business center near Hamburg. Designed in collaboration with his wife, Esther Gerz, the installation consisted of a twelve meter high by one meter square hollow pillar, covered by a veneer of soft lead. Hard metal styluses attached by cables at each corner of the base enabled visitors to inscribe their names directly on the surface of the monument. As its lower surface became saturated with the recorded markings of viewers, the monument was lowered, by degrees, into a space that had been opened in the ground beneath it. Over the course of five years, the pillar was so lowered six times, finally disappearing completely on September 27, 1991.¹¹ At present there is nothing but a plaque in

the ground where the pillar once stood, a marker commemorating the memorial itself – its birth, life and death – in the manner of a gravestone.

The monument's disappearance in this case implicitly acknowledges that the memories worked by present viewers are impermanent, which is to say historical. The installation's radical relation to history lies in its willingness to submit memory itself to a process of decay, a process in which not only history but historiography is destined for the grave. Paradoxically, what distinguishes such a work as a memorial is the fact that it is conceived as having a life of its own, a limited span of time in which to exist, to work its textualization of history for and with the populace of the present as knowers of history. Its "life-span" complete, it will – like the events of a more distant past toward which it gestures without representation – cease to be present.¹²

Installations such as these, the disappearing pillar outside Hamburg and the illegible cobblestones in Saarbrücken, function as "counter-memorials." They gesture toward the past without revealing history so much as the volatility of history's perception, its constant tendency to decay and disappear even as it is revealed through acts of textualization in the present. In this perspective, the important factor is not the objective truth of the past, but the dynamic process of memory-work engaged in by knowing and unknowing subjects in the present. The counter-memorial's central purpose is not to represent the past; neither is it to index it through a particular stable, material, and legible gesture. What the counter-memorial makes known is its own dependence on a vital and dynamic present and on the work done in that present by living rememberers. At the counter-memorial site, then, it is the writers and readers of the present who shoulder the burden of responsibility for "adequate" and "accurate" historical representation; it is their memory-work that produces the counter-memorial's varied and ambivalent "texts" of commemoration.

In the case of the disappearing pillar, for instance, many of the visitors and tourists and accidental passers-by responded to the monument's invitation in the intended fashion by inscribing their names. But others reacted very differently, "defacing" it – ironically but perhaps not surprisingly – with scrawled swastikas or, less congruously, with declarations of adolescent love ("Hans leibe Christiane"). A few passionate observers actually shot bullets at the pillar, while a significant portion of the local population, exercising a more common form of "memory-work," ignored it altogether. The counter-memorial thus reconfigures the function of monuments in general so as to emphasize the variable

and inclusive processes of text-making which they enable in the present; it is the text produced, the legible, permanent text as well as the disappearing or “invisible” one, that records the reality of the historical event. The counter-memorial bears witness to the fact that history’s crucial truth lies not in a lost, objective past that must be captured and accurately rendered by the historical gaze, but in memory itself, a text which in all its protean volatility must be continually read and unread, remembered and forgotten.

If as a counter-memorial *2,146 Stones* affirms the necessity of memory-work, its particular handling of history raises some persistent and difficult questions. In view of recent efforts to revise Germany’s wartime history – efforts contextualized by the resurgence of xenophobic and nationalist passions in Germany and elsewhere – the problematic political implications of a monument designed to render particular elements of Holocaust memory permanently invisible are obvious. To have so painstakingly recaptured something of this lost history, only to render it invisible rather than legible and public, seems a cynical sort of betrayal at best. What, it seems worth asking, is the point of Gerz’s taking such a radical step, especially when the risk of perceived collusion with the forces of outright falsification is so great? Indeed, the monument’s apparent complicity with an amnesiac historicism seems heightened by Gerz’s claim that he originally conceived of the work as, literally, “an act of *recollection*, comparable to the decision to *preserve* the names scribbled on the cell wall in the basement of the castle” (Gibson, “Clandestine Warning”; emphasis added).

So far from generating a more consummately “historical” work, Gerz would appear to have borrowed the conventional public form of the memorial in order to produce through it a fundamental derailment of that form’s presumed value as mediating historical text. From the perspective of normative historical discourse, such a derailment raises strong suspicions that the artist might be guilty of an elaborately quixotic – not to say pretentious – denial of history. At the very least, Gerz would seem to have appropriated the vocabulary of commemoration in order simply to proclaim the impossibility of forging any real connection with the historical past whatsoever. Indeed, the painstaking care invested by the monument builders only intensifies the irony of their work’s apparently self-negating gesture. Even if the work can be said to be thoroughly “historical” in its execution and its subject matter, in what sense can it reasonably be said to “remember” the particular history of Germany’s Jews – which, after all, it seems not to have memorialized, but only to have buried once again?

Gerz's penchant for the expressive dynamics of absence is rooted neither in a post-modern aesthetic sensibility nor in a professionally opportunistic fondness for aesthetic games and ruses. Rather, as Gerz himself has insisted, the source of his artistic proclivities must be located in history, and particularly in the timing of his birth in Berlin in 1940: "The power of absence, which some people still encounter as a religious, literary, or artistic experience, was in my case a concrete biographical fact which might be translated as a case of being 'too late.' This may seem absurd, but I don't think I am the only German of my generation to be concerned with such a feeling."¹³

What Gerz was personally "too late" for was, of course, the rise of German fascism in the 1930s, the course of Berlin's history during the war and the effects of that history on Germany's Jewish population. It is precisely this lateness that defines both historical experience and historical consciousness at the level of the individual subject. Gerz's having missed a particular historical moment at which a certain kind of political action may have been both possible and necessary highlights the fact that, with respect to the past, all knowing is necessarily a retrospective and therefore belated reconstruction. To the extent that any object is designated within a discourse of "history," it is so designated only from this perspective of lateness, from the point of view of a subject that has come into being at precisely that moment at which the object of remembrance cannot be seen or experienced in fact.

This "lateness" informs Gerz's subjectivity as an artist at the deepest level. It is not that his art articulates some compensatory expression of guilt for not having "been there" when his action would have counted; on the contrary, it directly expresses the extent to which, as a historical subject, he (like every rememberer) is continuously "not there," and is instead continuously "late." It is from this point of view – subjectivity predicated on history's unrecoupable loss – that Gerz approached the building of *2,146 Stones*. To look at this monument is to see the absence not only of the past to which it refers, but also of any convenient means (such as a narrative or figural representation) by which one might comfortably situate oneself as knower of that history; to experience the work's invisibility, in other words, is to discover one's own inexorable alienation from its most crucial function as a memorial, that of putting the past in play discursively and rationally for knowledge. It is this deeply historical experience of coming upon the past "too late," then, that the invisibility of Gerz's *2,146 Stones* makes concretely available and indeed, in a metaphorical sense, "visible" to its viewer.

Gerz's installation offers itself, then, as a sort of catalyst to memory, a reminder of racism's historical reality in Saarbrücken. At the same time, the work itself refuses absolutely the role to which historical indexes of this type are typically reduced, that of embodying an adequate textual compensation for, and implicit resolution of, the past itself. This paradoxical structure is what allows the memorial to subvert the neat constitution and separation of historical identities that produces a "lethal history." As a "counter-memorial," Gerz's work registers the simple fact that remembering is a kind of work, a continuous and active engagement, and that as such it is distinct from the particular memories that may be licensed by the textualizing gesture toward history performed by a given memorial. So far from denying or relativizing historical knowledge, it is this approach that enables Gerz to engage Saarbrücken's wartime past so forcefully and so concretely.

BELATED RECOVERIES: THE RETURN TO "HISTORY"
AND THE SUBJECT OF MEMORY

Gerz's counter-memorials also serve to distill and amplify a number of issues regarding the relationship between textual representation and historical knowledge that gained prominence in critical and theoretical debate during the very years in which those memorials were constructed. Within the field of literary studies in particular, concern with "the question of history" in the late 1980s and early 1990s fueled a pronounced shift in focus from textual to contextual concerns. Disaffection with the perceived failings of structuralism, deconstruction, and so-called "text-centered" methods of criticism compelled scholars to turn with increasing confidence and frequency to history as a means of grounding what has often been judged to be a more politically aware and socially responsible critical practice. As the study of literature became increasingly engaged with issues of ethics, politics, and social justice, historicism emerged as something of a panacea for what many continue to identify as literature's traditional ills: the ivory-tower isolationism and hermeticism which result from purely textual or theoretical approaches to reading. While theoretical interrogations of historicism, the status of memory, and the values and methods of historical discourse continue to be brought forward, it is clear that, practically speaking, history has also gained a discrete and positive – though enigmatic – value of its own within the debate.

In the context of this methodological shift, it might seem logical once again to dismiss Gerz's construction of an invisible memorial as an

irresponsible and anachronistic act of artistic self-indulgence. From the perspective of a criticism generally convinced of modernism's fundamental complicity with theoretical "denials" of history, Gerz's project must seem a nostalgic, and ultimately pointless, cliché. Placed in a modernist aesthetic trajectory that might include works such as Kasimir Malevich's "White on White" paintings or John Cage's *Silence* recordings, Gerz's work might seem to mark the logical extreme at which the elevation of form over real experience becomes both absurd and self-defeating: precisely at the moment of art's engagement with the plane of the real (here, the history of German Jews), it promptly erases itself. In this context, *2,146 Stones* appears to justify by its own negative example the gradual but wholesale condemnation of structuralism and formalism that has accompanied the recent ascendancy of history in critical discourse. More importantly, the monument seems to lend credence to the idea that aesthetic formalism, specifically that of modernism, is necessarily compromised by an unwillingness to acknowledge art's effects in the political and social spheres.

Yet the apparent disingenuousness of Gerz's *2,146 Stones* only persists as long as it is presumed that because the past is stable and unchanging, it is also, in an ideal sense, purely and adequately legible; that the authoritative coherence and narrative stability of the memorial form merely reflects the natural stability of historical objects and events themselves. In fact memorials are, in the most generic sense, never indicators of the past as such, but always of its absence and loss. What is "textualized" in the memorial form, and in historical discourse in general, is not the positive, ontological reality of past events, but the radical unrepresentability – indeed, the illegibility – of the historical. Borrowing Lyotard's diction in his concluding essay to *The Post-Modern Condition*, we might say that the memorial, generically speaking, is that which puts forward the persistence of the illegible within signification itself.¹⁴

Gerz's willingness to take the extraordinary and deliberate step of forfeiting entirely his work's power to signify denotes a remarkable refusal to compromise or reduce in any way the real paradox of historical perception: namely, that the effort to know the past is at once both necessary and impossible. Regarded from this angle, what *2,146 Stones* "denies" is not history, but precisely the ease with which the past tends to become fetishized within the debate over historical representation. Gerz's monument reminds its viewers that what, in fact, historical representation is typically expected to produce is concrete evidence – a textual marker – of history's restoration, atonement, and conclusion for the present.

Against a fetishizing practice within which the legibility of historical events is construed as ideally equal and adequate to their ontological reality, *2,146 Stones* insists that the incomprehensibility of history's loss be acknowledged to cohere alongside – indeed, flush with – history's textual re-presentation.

This matter of historical knowledge's fetishizing function is one that literary criticism, in its return to an overtly contextual methodology of reading, has managed largely to bypass. Like the sign erected to identify Gerz's otherwise invisible monument, the term "history" has itself come to operate within critical debate as a kind of cipher, a strangely transparent signifier that seems to designate a concrete, definable act of critical engagement with the past. Under the sign of "history," that act somehow seems familiar to all – and yet, also remains maddeningly elusive in practical terms. For most readers, the adoption of a "historical perspective" means simply that the value of history as a viable ground for reading practices in general has been presumed. Meanwhile, the radical and unrecoupable absence of the past, the persistence of history's illegibility within historical texts, is conveniently ignored.

In this context, the existence of *2,146 Stones* exposes a core assumption driving academic and theoretical discussions of memory in general, namely that history is a discourse exclusively of knowledge. "History," as it is traded about in the intellectual marketplace, coheres and has value as an object of rationality, a thing either known or unknown, a series of events either remembered or forgotten: the "question" of history inexorably concerns the attempt to know the past. It is because of this allegiance to rationality as history's ruling frame of reference that recent debates, while they have opened themselves to a vast array of concerns including not only textual, but political and social uses and abuses of the past, have also tended to confirm the authority of the rational subject at the center of historical discourse. Emphasizing the objective status of historical truth and the relative adequacy of its textual or linguistic representation, historically oriented scholars have tended to presume the discrete coherence of the subject itself as knower. The return to history has, in this sense, masked a return to a peculiarly humanistic notion of the subject as a being constituted exclusively in its capacity to know.

In a powerful way, Gerz's approach to memory as a "belated" activity reveals what has actually been at stake in criticism's pursuit of "the question of history" from the beginning. What the "late" visitor to the Saarbrücken site directly confronts is neither the past nor a representation of it, but precisely his or her own subjective status as a knower of

history. At a stroke, Gerz displaces the customary vocabulary of historical discourse – the endless march of variously “adequate” or “complete” representations, the insistence either on historiography’s scientific or aesthetic function, and so on – with the question of a subject, one for whom, at this and every instant, history functions as a discourse of knowing. By erasing the textual field of history’s representation for the knowing subject, Gerz not only reminds us that the past’s principal defining feature is its absence, but also demonstrates that it is the institutional status and authority of the rational subject that is history’s more fundamental mechanism of mediation.¹⁵

In more precise terms, what I am suggesting is that the discursive burial of the past displaces onto an objective hermeneutic system, “history,” an interment that in fact takes place at the level of the knowing subject him- or herself. Conventional historical discourse always posits knowledge (a figural or narrative presentation of the past) as compensation not only for history’s crucial absence, but also for the subject’s crucial lateness. While knowing buries the past as the victim of a lethal history, it also buries the knower’s own radically unrepresentable subjectivity, a subjectivity incommensurate with knowledge, erecting in its place a commemorative, idealized construction: the rational, authoritative subject of historical knowledge. The term “lethal history,” then, carries the literal connotation that it is also the knower of history who is “en-graved” within historical discourse, or constituted there in a posture of terminal stability as a “dead” certainty. In the act of reading monuments and other historical texts, rememberers become, in an imaginative sense, monuments in their turn.

Among the qualities that make Yeats’s late poetry so compelling is his manifest willingness to fight – despite advancing age and creative exhaustion – against this interment of the subject for rationality. The opening line of “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” acknowledges the poet’s blocked state – “I sought a theme and sought for it in vain / I sought it daily for six weeks or so” (Yeats, “The Circus Animals’ Desertion,” 1–2) – but turns, finally, as we have seen, to what amounts to an act of appalling courage and faith. In Yeats’s poetry, such moments are not without precedent. Ten years earlier, in the extraordinarily difficult and beautiful poem, “Among School Children,” Yeats revealed a stroll through a schoolroom as on occasion for memory-work in the present, a “questioning” of his own past in the eyes and faces of the children before him.

Dreaming of Maud Gonne in an idealized form as “a Ledaean body” (Yeats, “Among School Children,” 9), the poet looks upon the children

and wonders “if she stood so at that age – / For even daughters of the swan can share / Something of every paddler’s heritage –” (19–21). This memory-work has the unexpected effect of collapsing, for the poet, the conventional separation of present and past: “And thereupon my heart is driven wild: / She stands before me as a living child” (23–24). Yeats presents this eruption, the past’s sudden and material presence in the schoolroom, as a disruption of the normative historical order in which the rememberer’s rational stability is constituted as a compensation for historical loss. The poem openly questions this compensatory structure –

What youthful mother, a shape upon her lap
Honey of generation had betrayed,

...

Would think her son, did she but see that shape
With sixty or more winters on its head,
A compensation for the pang of his birth,
Or the uncertainty of his setting forth?

(Yeats, “Among School Children,” 33–40)

– and casts a baleful eye on Yeats’s own status as a monumentally authoritative subject-of-knowledge.

At a time when the poet had reached pinnacles of both local and international stature (he was an Irish Senator and a Nobel laureate), his bitter descriptions of himself as “a sixty-year-old smiling public man” (8) and as “a comfortable kind of old scarecrow” (32) expose the lethal consequences of historical knowing at the level of the individual subject. While Yeats’s “circus animals” depict the costs of idealizing the past, “Among School Children” finally resonates as a sort of plea for the apprehension of the *self* through a different sort of memory-work, a “labour” that would be less like knowing than it is like “blossoming or dancing,” and in which “body is not bruised to pleasure soul, / Nor beauty born out of its own despair, / Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil” (Yeats, “Among School Children,” 57–60). The poem’s final question, “How can we know the dancer from the dance” (64) seeks, but does not define, a mode of knowing that would not produce a dead thing, the commemorative, monumental self – “a sixty-year-old smiling public man” – as its necessary compensation.

Yeats presents the knower of history in his poem, just as Gerz does in *2,146 Stones*, as a being who is not figuratively but literally “late.” In placing the commemorative status of the subject who knows at the center of their “acts of recollection,” Yeats and Gerz both reveal the myopic

and fearful character of our customary engagements with the past. In accepting knowledge of the past in place of an awareness of history's more radical unrecoupability, we inscribe our identities as historical subjects within a fundamentally compensatory economy. To the extent that we negotiate history exclusively from the position of knowing subjects, the past becomes for us, in the most literal sense, a mere pre-text for the identities in which we are invested.

The critique of modernism's alleged "denial" of history has always presumed historical discourse's viability and truth when grounded in the authority of the knowing subject. Yet modernism emerges historically as the antithesis of critical investment in this model. Indeed, modernism as such might be fairly characterized as the site of the individual's inscription and configuration beneath the sign of history as something other than a subject of knowledge. This Other subject of history, the theoretical coordinates of which were first sketched by psychoanalysis, is one for whom the absent past insists on being written and re-written, not in the form of coherent, finished narratives, but in the very life and vital being of the individual him- or herself. Psychoanalysis apprehends a different sort of memorial subject in whom the past persists symptomatically, in forms that are by definition inaccessible to knowledge: vocal tics, physical behaviors, psychological patterns and so on. Recognizing that such symptoms are memorial texts – products of the individual's self-fashioning within a continuing process of memory-work – psychoanalysis specifies historical discourse's proper ineluctable modality, that of desire.

Before turning to a fuller exploration of a psychoanalytic "erotics of memory" – and to criticism's historical resistance to it – it is worth noting that what *2,146 Stones* makes visible is precisely the remembering subject's constitution in this paradoxical and ambivalent dynamic of desire. Radically disappointing every expectation of compensatory knowledge, the monument instead invites a spectacular range of apparently incongruous and ambivalent reactions: fascination, boredom, anger, disappointment – even (perhaps) a newly configured sense of "evidence." Put succinctly, what Gerz's monument puts in play is the quotidian and unwieldy reality of the subject's actual relation to history. The rememberer, in this case, coheres no longer within the world of ideally legible facts, the world of adequate historical knowing, but instead within an erotics of memory, the ineluctable modality of desire in which the activity of memory-work takes place.