Introduction

"People talk so much about memory only because there's none left."[1] Pierre Nora's much quoted remark from his *Realms of Memory* confirms the well-known paradox that you need to lose something before you can become fully conscious of it. Consciousness generally develops in terms of what has passed, and this process fits in logically with the retrospective nature of memory, since the latter only begins when the experience to which it refers has run its complete course. Let us first look at the second part of Nora's dictum – the claim that there is no memory left. Is it true, and if it is, what sort of memory is not left?

Anyone who, for instance, equates real knowledge with learning by rote will have to accept that nowadays the latter is of little relevance. Learning a dozen verses or the five-times multiplication table by heart no longer figures in the way children are taught. It is true, of course, that the World Memory Championships still take place every year, with virtuosos competing for their place in the *Guinness Book of Records*,[2] but there can be no denying that the "golden age" of this particular

[1] Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*. Volume 1: Conflicts and Divisions, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, Columbia University Press: New York, Chichester, West Surrey 1996, 1.

[2] Ulrich Ernst has meticulously compiled a list of memory virtuosos from Antiquity through to the present, in fiction and in real life. "Die Bibliothek im Kopf: Gedächtniskünstler in der europäischen und amerikanischen Literatur," *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik 105* (1997), 86–123.

art has long since faded. In the days of Antiquity, the phenomenon of outstanding mnemonic capacity was attributed to generals, statesmen, and kings, whereas now it is associated with the entertainment industry or even the sphere of the pathological: the gap between the memory artist and the memory freak seems to have become very small.

After all, why should one learn things by heart when they are so easy to pick up from a book or a computer? Indeed, the decline of rote learning may be said to have coincided with the astonishingly swift advance of electronic data storage, although even before the computer relieved memory of its active function, the value of rote learning had already come into question. In early Greece, Plato had argued that it did not represent true knowledge. In his dialogue *Phaidros*, he not only criticized writing, but he also mocked the new technique of the Sophists, which was meant to help memorize the written word verbatim.

The history of the art of memory was, from the very beginning, accompanied in Western culture by radical criticism because deep-seated memories rarely conformed to accepted standards of reason and empiricism. "I'll knock those fairy tales out of your head," cries a character in a satire by Persius;[3] and in the middle of the 17th century the doctor and theologian Sir Thomas Browne dissolved the alliance between tradition, knowledge, and memory when he wrote: "Knowledge is made by oblivion, and to purchase a clear and warrantable body of Truth, we must forget and part with much we know."[4]

The Renaissance brought a revival of the art of memory, but again this was accompanied by criticism. Harald Weinrich has drawn attention to this tradition, which among others includes Montaigne and Cervantes. Cervantes' *Don Quixote* can even be read as a manifesto for "the basic dissociation of mind and memory," and Montaigne's essays amount to a fundamental "rejection of the pedagogics of high-performance memory."[5] With the rise of modernity, authors have

[3] "... ueteres auias tibi de pulmone reuello." A. Persi Flacci and D. Ivni Ivvenalis, *Satirae*. Eddidit Breviqve Adnotatione Critica Denvo Instrvxit W.V. Clausen, Oxford University Press 1992 Satvra V, 92/21.

[4] Sir Thomas Browne, *Selected Writings*, ed. Sir G. Keynes, London 1968, 227.

[5] a) Translated from Harald Weinrich, "Gedächtniskultur – Kulturgedächtnis," in Merkur, 45, Heft 508 (1991), 569–582. See also Harald Weinrich, *Lethe: The Art and*

constantly devalued all forms of memory in the name of reason, nature, life, originality, individuality, innovation, progress, and whatever other gods they may worship. Weinrich puts it this way:

> In any case, it is clear that the "hostility" first noted by Huarte between reason and memory, and evident throughout Europe ever since the Enlightenment, led to a general war against memory, with enlightened reason finally emerging as the victor. Since then, without being ashamed, we freely admit to having a poor memory, whereas one seldom hears anyone complaining that they have poor reason.[6]

By "memory," Nora probably does not mean the learning capacity of mnemotechnics so much as the general cultural tradition of educational memory, which binds the individual to a particular region or nation.[7] The feature sections of our newspapers often complain about the disappearance of cultural memory. Joachim Fest, for example, argued that "enthusiasm for destruction" is not a new phenomenon. In 19th- and 20th-century Germany, "again and again, out of aversion or confusion," political and cultural coherence has been ripped apart, and finally, in addition to "many traditions, authorities and taboos," the student revolts of the later 1960s willfully destroyed traditions together with lines of descent.[8] The Germanist and Goethe specialist Albrecht Schöne believes that even now a creeping cultural revolution is taking place, another "epochal shift" in which there is a whole "spiritual and intellectual continent" being set adrift:

> What is breaking away here from our cultural foundations, and is fading away from the collective basis and capacity for understanding that has encompassed the generations, is by no means confined to the great works of the Western canon. It applies just as much to the diaries of our grandfathers and to the letters of our grandmothers.[9]

Critique of Forgetting; trans. Steven Rendall. Ithaca, NY, London: Cornell University Press 2004.

6 Translated from Harald Weinreich, "Gedächtniskultur – Kulturgedächtnis," in Merkur 508 (1991), 569–582.

7 Both learning and educational memory have been combined by memory psychologists under the category of "semantic memory."

8 Joachim Fest, "Das Zerreissen der Kette. Goethe und die Tradition," *FAZ*, June 21, 1997, No. 141. The phrase "enthusiasm for destruction" stems from Goethe.

9 Albrecht Schöne's acceptance speech on being awarded the Reuchlin Prize on 17 January 1995 in Pforzheim, in *Die Zeit* August 18, 1995, No. 34, p. 36.

Communication between eras and generations is broken when a particular store of common knowledge disappears. Just as the great works, like Goethe's *Faust*, can only be read against the indispensable background of greater, older works like the Bible – which William Blake called "the great Code of Art"[10] – the records of our great-grandparents can only be read against the background of orally transmitted family histories. Schöne sees a parallel between the *cultural* memory that transcends eras and is supported by normative texts, and the *communicative* memory, which generally links three generations through memories passed on by word of mouth. On both levels, cultural and communicative, Schöne discerns a decline in memory.

Along similar lines, Nora describes the current memory crisis as the present being uncoupled from the past. He speaks of an "increasingly rapid slippage of the present into a historical past that is gone for good," a process in which experiences "still lived in the warmth of tradition, in the silence of custom, in the repetition of the ancestral" are being ripped out. He also identifies the destructive power that is at work here: the "conquest and eradication of memory by history." Whatever we now regard as memory is in "its final consumption in the flames of history."[11] With this diagnosis, Nora echoes Nietzsche's assessment of historical scholarship as a catastrophic force that erodes the sources of living memory and collective identity. His comments might also be related to the current crisis of testimony based on the *experiential memory* of a rapidly dwindling number of witnesses who survived the greatest of all 20th-century catastrophes, the Holocaust. On this subject, the historian Reinhart Koselleck writes:

> With the shift of generations the object of historical research will undergo a decisive change. The embodied experience of the survivor's *present past* gives way to a *pure past* which is disconnected from sensuous experience. [. . .] With fading memory the temporal distance to the historical event not only becomes greater but also takes on a different quality. Soon the only remaining source of information will come from the written records, augmented by pictures, films, memoirs.[12]

[10] See Northrop Frye, *The Great Code. The Bible and Literature*, London 1982.
[11] Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations 26*, Spring 1989, 7–24; here, 7 f and 13.
[12] Reinhart Koselleck, Epilogue to Charlotte Beradt, *Das Dritte Reich des Traums*, Frankfurt a.M. 1994, st 2321, 117–132; here 117.

Koselleck describes the change from the still present to the pure past as the irreversible replacement of living historical experience by scholarly historical research. What exactly does that mean?

> The criteria for research become more factual, but they are also perhaps less *colourful*, less experiential, even if they give promise of greater insight and greater objectivity. The moral involvement, the hidden protective mechanisms, the accusations and the attributions of guilt – all these techniques of mastering the past *lose* their political and existential relevance, they fade out and cede to detailed historical scholarship and to theoretically orientated analysis.[13]

Less colorful, loss, fading out – these are terms describing an unstoppable process of forgetting, which Koselleck sees as leading directly from the living, personal reality of memory to the scholarly abstraction of historical research. History according to this model must first "die" in the heads, hearts, and bodies of those who have lived through it before it can rise phoenix-like from the ashes of experience to take on new life as scholarship. So long as there are survivors, bringing with them their emotions, claims, and objections, academic perspective runs the risk of distortion. And, therefore, objectivity is not simply a matter of method and scholarly criteria but is also based on *mortification*, as the involvement and the suffering must first fade and die.

I would like to argue that in the present day what is happening is the exact opposite of the process described by Koselleck. We are very far from an automatic process in which the experiential reality of the Holocaust is silently passing into the custody of professional historians. The temporal distance from the historic event has not made this memory less colorful, but if anything it is now closer and more immediate than ever. Statements like the following are not uncommon: "The more distant Auschwitz becomes, the closer this event and the memory of this crime comes to us."[14] Instead of being delegated to professional historians into whose sole competence Koselleck expects and wishes to see it placed, it has been reclaimed by society. We have witnessed that far from automatically fading and ceding to historical scholarship, memory has been sharpened and reshaped in

[13] Ibid. (my italics, A.A.).
[14] Linda Reisch, Preface to Hanno Loewy (ed.), *Holocaust: Die Grenzen des Verstehens. Eine Debatte über die Besetzung der Geschichte*, Reinbek 1992, 7.

historically new ways. We are currently facing, reconstructing, and discussing new forms of memory that open up an access to the past that is distinct from and complementary to that which is provided by historical scholarship. Living memory thus gives way to a cultural memory that is underpinned by media – by material carriers such as memorials, monuments, museums, and archives. While individual recollections spontaneously fade and die with their former owners, new forms of memory are reconstructed within a transgenerational framework, and on an institutional level, within a deliberate policy of remembering or forgetting. There is no self-organization and self-regulation of cultural memory – it always depends on personal decisions and selections, on institutions and media. The transposition of individual living to artificial cultural memory and thus from short-term to long-term memory is a highly complex process fraught with problems: it brings together temporal extension with the threat of distortion, reduction, and manipulation that can only be averted through continuous public criticism, reflection, and discussion.

Nora's comment on the disappearance of memory in our present is contradicted by essays written by a group of American doctors, psychologists, and cultural historians. They refer to the growing role of memory in public life and stress its new and, indeed, unprecedented importance for our culture:

> We live in a time when memory has entered public discourse to an unprecedented degree. Memory is invoked to heal, to blame, to legitimate. It has become a major idiom in the construction of identity, both individual and collective, and a site of struggle as well as identification.[15]

While certain types of memory – such as rote learning, classical education, and personal experience of the *Shoah* (Holocaust) – have declined or are fading, other forms like those of politics and the media are evidently gaining in importance. The past, which becomes farther and farther removed from us, obviously does not pass automatically and exclusively into the hands of the professional historian; it continues to make its impact on the present in the form of competing claims and obligations. The general discourse of historiography

[15] Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, eds., *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, New York and London 1997, VII.

now finds itself in collocation with a great variety of often contradictory memories, which demand the right to social recognition. No one today would deny that these memories, based on individual experiences and transformed into collective claims, have become a vital and controversial element of modern culture.

The first part of Nora's dictum – that people talk so much about memory – is therefore much easier to confirm. Over the last twenty years there has been a continual surge in the quantity of literature on the subject. Interest in memory evidently goes far beyond being just one more academic fashion of the moment. This enduring fascination suggests that a wide variety of questions and interests – cultural, scientific, social, and informational – are stimulated and consolidated at this particular point of intersection. The computer as a simulated mode of recollection offers an important background for cultural study, as does modern neurology with its new insights into the buildup and breakdown of neuronal networks. The range of approaches alone makes it clear that memory is a phenomenon that no single discipline can call its own.

The subject not only transcends the borders of individual disciplines, in the sense that there is no one profession that can provide an all-embracing concept of it; it also shows itself to be highly controversial within the individual disciplines themselves. Virginia Woolf has warned us: "Memory is inexplicable."[16] Literature, indeed, has always taught us that there are different and even contradictory approaches toward memory. "I would enshrine the spirit of the past / For future restoration," wrote William Wordsworth. T. S. Eliot, by contrast, bemoaned the fact that "there's no memory you can wrap in camphor / But the moths will get in."[17] And we might introduce another pair of authors who took contrary positions with regard to the workings of memory. Italo Svevo, at the beginning of the 20th century, adopted what we today would call a *constructivist view*:

> The past is always new; as life proceeds it changes, because parts of it that may have once seemed to have sunk into oblivion rise to the surface and others vanish without a trace because they have come to have such slight importance.

[16] Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), Harmondsworth 1975, 56.
[17] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* 1805, XI, v. 342–343; T. S. Eliot, *The Cocktail Party*, London 1969, 49.

The present conducts the past in the way a conductor conducts an orchestra. It wants these particular sounds, or those – and no others. That explains why the past may at times seem very long and at times very short. It thunders forth or murmurs *pianissimo*. The only part of it that is highlighted is the part that has been summoned up to illumine, and to distract us from, the present; and it is then that one recalls pleasant memories and regrets more vividly than recent happenings.[18]

At roughly the same time, Marcel Proust emphasized the authenticity of memory and highlighted its involuntary character: "This book, the most difficult of all to decipher, is also the only one dictated to us by reality, the only one 'impressed' into us by reality itself."[19] Svevo's comments anticipate the approach of the systems theory of memory, according to which the past is a construction freely built according to the demands of the respective present. Proust's concept, on the other hand, is of a present that is influenced by a particular past that eludes the scope of intentional construction. Proust compares the presence of the past in human consciousness to a photographic negative, of which it is not possible to say in advance whether it will or will not one day be developed.

Many explanations have been offered for the new predominance and enduring fascination of the memory paradigm. They include the decline of modernization theory, with its emphasis on progress and grand expectations for the future; the end of a philosophy of the subject, which focuses on the rational, self-contained individual; the end of one-track disciplines in the humanities, with their ever narrowing range of specialization. Against this background, the subject of memory emerges both as a new field of interdisciplinary approaches and as a problem that impinges directly on many different areas of society in a rapidly changing world.

None of these factors, however, quite suffice to explain why there is now such an obsessive preoccupation with the study of memory – this book being just one example. Unlike the ceaselessly effective continuity of tradition, the workings of memory are sporadic, fractured, and

[18] Italo Svevo, "Death," in *Short Sentimental Journey and Other Stories*, trans. Beryl de Zoete, L. Collinson Morely, and Ben Johnson (Berkeley 1967), 302.

[19] "Le livre aux caractères figurés, non tracés par nous, est notre seul livre": Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu vol. III, Le temps retrouvé*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, Paris 1954, 880.

enervated under the impact of trauma. Memory always needs a stimulus, and, according to Heiner Müller, begins with a shock. Nothing could have provided a greater shock than the catastrophic destruction and oblivion that marked the middle of the 20th century. It is therefore only logical that, from a European and especially a German perspective, in the aftermath of this unprecedented violence and destruction advocates of memory stepped forward – as did Simonides in the Roman legend – to view the settings of such catastrophes. When we accept this connection between excessive violence in the past and the memory boom of the present, Nora's statement loses much of its paradoxical quality and can testify to the ways in which later generations process the traumatic heritage of the mid-20th century.

In this book I address the complex phenomenon of memory from many angles and trace lines of development as well as problems and their contexts. For this reason I switch among *traditions* (mnemotechnics and forms of identity), *perspectives* (individual, collective, and cultural memory), *media* (texts, images, places), and *discourses* (literature, history, art, psychology, and so on). The text is divided into three parts: the first deals with functions, the second with media, and the third with means of storing cultural memory. The presentation of the different functions and discourses of memory will be shaped by a number of conceptual distinctions. That between "storing" and "remembering," for instance, goes together with the distinction between memory as art and memory as power; and this entails two largely independent traditions of discourse: the familiar one of rhetorical mnemotechnics and the less known psychological one that identifies memory as one of three mental faculties also known as internal senses. The former tradition aims to give an orderly Gestalt to knowledge, while the latter is concerned with interaction between memory, imagination, and common sense. The distinction between memory as *ars* and memory as *vis* is also more generally related, respectively, to the storage and the identity functions of memory.

Remembrance of the dead, posthumous fame, and historical memory are three forms of reference to the past that are differentiated in early modernity and develop into independent and possibly competing functions of cultural memory. The third chapter of this book illustrates by way of a literary example cases of "memory politics" in the broadest sense. Both deal with the importance of memory for the

formation of identity. Shakespeare's *Histories* construct a national identity by way of historical memories, whereas Wordsworth's *The Prelude* fashions an individual identity through biographical memories. This chapter focuses on a creative reconstruction of memory – a process that inevitably also deploys the power of forgetting. The following chapter on memory boxes discusses the selection and vital importance of memory contents in terms of literary examples from different historical periods. What is important or unimportant, and how can the important be preserved? The first example is a medieval ark constructed in spiritual space to contain and safeguard important Christian knowledge; a second example is a chest described and constructed by the German poet Heinrich Heine that enshrines reading matter essential to his life (and death); and the last example is a heavy chest of books whose plunge into an abyss shatters the burden of a life-threatening cultural memory. The last chapter addresses more generally the seminal question of selection, forgetting, and storage capacity. It introduces the distinction between "storage" and "functional" memory, which connects back to memory *ars* and *vis*.

If one studies memory from a medical or psychological standpoint, it is fair enough to concentrate solely on the organic field of neurological structures and processes. However, as soon as one shifts the focus to social life as embedded in culture, one is forced to consider the technical *media* by which memory is formed and communicated. When the Russian Tartu-School semioticians and culturologists Yuri Lotman and Boris Uspenski defined culture as the "non-hereditary memory of a collective," they were emphasizing the dependence of cultural memory on particular practices and media.[20] This type of memory does not come into existence or persist of its own accord; it has to be created, established, communicated, continued, reconstructed, and appropriated. Individuals and cultures construct their memories interactively through communication by speech, images, and rituals. Without such representations, it is impossible to build a memory that can transcend generations and historical epochs, but this also means that with the changing nature and development of the various media, the constitution

[20] Yuri M. Lotman and Boris A. Uspenski, *The Semiotics of Russian Culture*, Ann Arbor 1984, 3.