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0521411440 - Ancient and Medieval Memories: Studies in the Reconstruction of the Past - Janet Coleman

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This book is an analysis of thinking, remembering, and reminiscing according to ancient authors, and their medieval readers. The author argues that behind the various medieval methods of interpreting texts of the past lie two apparently incompatible theories of human knowledge and remembering, as well as two differing attitudes to matter and intellect.

This book comprises a series of studies taking as evidence of the past, ancient, scriptural and patristic texts, showing how these texts were understood by medieval readers and writers to be accounts of how people constructed narratives in order to give accounts of experience. These studies confirm that medieval and Renaissance understandings and uses of the past were not what is now generally understood by the past and its uses, but also that some modern understandings of the past and how it is remembered betray startling continuities with ancient and medieval theories.

Theories of remembering in the middle ages are shown to be in part about conceptual and linguistic signs, and in part about the reconstruction of narratives. Discussion extends to the nature of historical evidence, to the theories behind medieval historiography, and to various hypotheses relating physiological attributes of brain to intellectual processes of mind.

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ANCIENT AND
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MEMORIES

*Studies in the reconstruction
of the past*

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To Gary and Shem

CONTENTS

	<i>Preface</i>	page xiii
	<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xix
PART I THE CRITICAL TEXTS OF ANTIQUITY		
	Introduction	1
	Introduction	3
1	Plato	5
	<i>Plato on memory; his theory of mind, learning, recalling, knowing. 'Meno, Phaedrus, Republic.'</i>	
2	Aristotle	15
	<i>Aristotle on memory. The two-fold analysis of the soul; the relation between the lower, physical and the higher, intellectual 'parts'. 'De Anima' and 'De Memoria et Reminiscentia'; representative language and the distinction between history and rhetoric.</i>	
	RECAPITULATION	34
3	Cicero	39
	<i>The Roman tradition: rhetorical 'ars memoria' and Cicero, the anonymous 'Ad Herennium libri IV', Quintilian. The trivial mnemonic memory tradition; the rhetorical uses of memory and history.</i>	
4	Pliny and Roman naturalists on memory; Borges's <i>Funes the Memorious</i>	60
5	Plotinus and the early neo-Platonists on memory and mind	63
6	Augustine: the early works	80
7	Augustine's <i>De Trinitate</i> ; on memory, time and the presentness of the past	101

Contents

PART II THE PRACTICE OF MEMORY DURING THE PERIOD OF TRANSITION FROM CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY TO THE CHRISTIAN MONASTIC CENTURIES	113
Introduction	115
8 The early monastic practice of memory: Gregory the Great; Benedict and his Rule	117
9 Bede, monastic <i>grammatica</i> and reminiscence	137
10 Monastic memory in service of oblivion	155
INTRODUCTION	155
ANSELM	157
<i>The 'Monologion'. On meditation, memory and texts as memoranda</i>	
11 Cistercian 'blanched' memory and St Bernard: the associative, textual memory and the purified past	169
12 Twelfth-century Cistercians: the Boethian legacy and the physiological issues in Greco-Arabic medical writings	192
<i>William of St Thierry, Aelred of Rievaulx, Isaac of Stella, the 'De Spiritu et Anima'</i>	
PART III THE BEGINNINGS OF THE SCHOLASTIC UNDERSTANDING OF MEMORY	229
Introduction	231
13 Abelard	233
<i>Knowing, remembering, language, and interpreting past texts. The new linguistic logic of memory. Mind, language and external reality.</i>	
14 Memory and its uses: the relationship between a theory of memory and twelfth-century historiography	274
INTRODUCTION	275
'HISTORIA' AS PRIMARY SIGNIFICATION: BEDE, ISIDORE	276
THE 'NEW' HISTORY IN THE TWELFTH CENTURY: A RECOGNITION OF THE PASTNESS OF THE PAST? JOHN OF SALISBURY	285
CHANGES IN HISTORIOGRAPHIC TECHNIQUE DURING THE TWELFTH CENTURY	294
MONKS AND JOHN OF SALISBURY'S RHETORICAL HISTORY: HENRY OF HUNTINGDON, WILLIAM OF NEWBURGH, GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH	300

Contents

PART IV ARISTOTLE NEO-PLATONISED: THE REVIVAL OF ARISTOTLE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SCHOLASTIC THEORIES OF MEMORY	325
Introduction	327
15 Arabic and Jewish translations of sources from antiquity: their use by Latin Christians <i>The 'Prose Salernitan Questions', Isaac Israeli, Avicenna (Nemesius of Emesa, John of Damascus)</i>	328
16 John Blund, David of Dinant, the <i>De potentiis animae et obiectis</i>	363
17 John of La Rochelle	389
18 Averroes <i>The 'Epitome' of the 'Parva Naturalia'; the 'De Memoria'</i>	401
19 Albert the Great	416
20 Thomas Aquinas	422
PART V LATER MEDIEVAL THEORIES OF MEMORY: THE <i>VIA ANTIQUA</i> AND THE <i>VIA MODERNA</i>	461
Introduction	463
21 John Duns Scotus	465
22 William of Ockham	500
23 The legacy of the <i>via antiqua</i> and the <i>via moderna</i> in the Renaissance and beyond	538
THE LEGACY OF THE 'VIA ANTIQUA' AND THE 'VIA MODERNA'	541
PETRARCH'S HUMANISM AND THE 'VIA ANTIQUA'	547
THE MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE SENSE OF THE PAST	558
CURRENT HISTORIANS' VIEWS ON A RENAISSANCE SENSE OF THE PAST	562
CAUSATION, EVIDENCE, ANACHRONISM	567
SHIFTING GENRES, STYLES AND AUDIENCES	573
WHAT MACHIAVELLI AND HOBBS INHERITED FROM THE 'VIA MODERNA'	584
MODERN DISCOURSE CONCERNING SENSES OF THE PAST	593
Conclusion: an all too brief account of modern theories of mind and remembering	600
<i>Bibliography</i>	615
<i>Index</i>	638

PREFACE

Now that these studies have been written, I must, following Pascal, decide what should be put first. I must say something about what has been done here and why. Originally trained as a physical chemist, I was equally interested in the study of history and historical explanation. I turned out to be inadequate in both domains. Dissatisfied with theories of explanation in disciplines that were held to employ opposing methods of analysis of facts, I have not come up with some universally applicable method that is more satisfying. But in devoting myself to an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the middle ages, I have, over twenty years, reaffirmed my conviction that alien patterns of thought can be investigated to some degree of satisfaction, without my ever believing that the way medieval authors described their world was the way I described mine. It has never been clear to me that there is a single truth about living, that the world is indubitably one way for all of us or throughout history, except in trivial ways. With language one crosses and intersects other ways of describing how it is in the world for human experiencers without ever quite hitting on an expression which encapsulates how it really is for this one. Some expressions come close but only just: language is limited. I think it has always been thus. The otherness of thinking and living in the middle ages, as it is expressed in texts, is for me, in the first instance, simply a shift in discourse.

Perhaps more to the point, in having transplanted myself to a culture other than the one in which I was born and educated, I gradually became aware that my memories of dear ones, loves and acquaintances, seemed to recede and alter when I was out of the original setting in which I came to know them. More startlingly, I found they simply were not with me. I had not deliberately forgotten them; they simply were somehow edited out of my present, unsuited to present settings. And descriptions of my past were translated into another code which present friends used to describe their lives. My explanatory narratives became justifications of who I thought I

Preface

had become, in a language that was mine but also theirs and in its sharing, somehow less mine. Instead of inducing a feeling of alienation, this reinterpretation of my experiences provided comfort and a shy kind of gratitude regarding the ease with which one learns conventional codes of self-expression. If I had reconstructed my personal past, not to lie about it in any conscious way but to communicate it coherently to others, could it be said that this is what various thinkers during the middle ages, concerned with issues of how the past is known and what the past means for someone who confronts it, were also doing? Here began my journey from the ancient Greek world through the Latin middle ages, to examine theories of memory and the consequent issue of how these memories were thought to be used by rememberers.

The great historian Maitland once reflected on the materials needed to reconstruct medieval history. For him they were records of the law and the courts, and he said one had to master an 'extremely formal system of pleading and procedure', 'a whole system of actions with repulsive names'. This is especially true of medieval philosophy and theology. Over the years I have attempted to master these 'repulsive names' and alien methods. In this book I have tried to give an account of some of the most prominent medieval theories and practices of remembering and reconstructing the past by examining the various ways in which texts (which were written in antiquity and which spoke to the future about the authors' present), were interpreted and understood during the middle ages. This book examines attitudes to and uses of the past through a study of texts written over a period of nearly 2,000 years. It is an attempt to construct a plausible account of earlier theories of remembering at a time when, for the most part, we hold that the past as past is irrecoverable and 'other' but that it can be known to some extent in its otherness if only through analogies that seem coherent to us.

As Collingwood put it, 'the past simply as past is wholly unknowable; it is the past as residually preserved in the present that is alone knowable'. In a certain sense, Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century knew this as well, and he and many of his contemporaries and successors were philosophically concerned to try to explain why the past as past was not only unknowable but in an important sense, trivial. Even those like William of Ockham, who argued that the past as past was knowable as such, and then developed complex psychological mechanisms to try to explain this 'fact', none the less believed that the past's importance, its significance, was only in and with respect to the present. Whether or not they could prove that men remembered exactly what was, they all argued that men make the past intelligible in the light of present circumstances. I use the term 'men' in its

Preface

generic sense but meaning ‘male’ insofar as the medieval texts considered below do not explicitly include or exclude women from their discussions, taking mind’s capacity for intellection to be sexually undifferentiated. There is no doubt, however, that for both Plato and Aristotle, on whose writings later medieval accounts depend, the characteristics of rational mind are explicitly male.

The bickering of philosophical sects are an amusement for the foolish; above these jarrings and creakings of the machine of thought there is a melody sung in unison by the spirits of the spheres, which are the great philosophers. This melody, *philosophia quaedam perennis*, is not a body of truth revealed once for all, but a living thought whose content, never discovered for the first time, is progressively determined and clarified by every genuine thinker.¹

Furthermore, this book argues that behind the various medieval methods of interpreting texts of the past through an analysis of texts’ language and the ways in which language signifies real experiences, lie not only two apparently incompatible theories of human knowledge, but also two differing attitudes to matter and intellect. It is a book that takes as evidence of the past, past texts, past accounts of how men constructed narratives about how it was for them to be in the world. And in locating what look like progressive and regressive lines of development in medieval arguments about the past, a past known through past texts confronted by medieval readers and writers, this book attempts to confirm two things. On the one hand, it argues that the medieval understanding of the past was in some outstandingly important ways not what we understand by the past. On the other, it also attempts to show that the modern sense of the past is, in fact, a very recent and even limited attitude and that it is not one subscribed to by all modern historians, nor by all of us all of the time.

The book is also an *indirect* attempt to reexamine ancient and medieval theories of remembering in order to evaluate whether modern psychological and neurophysiological theories of remembering have superseded past accounts as they affirm they have when they characterise earlier theories as belonging to a period of archaic mind and the childhood of civilisation now come to maturity. To my own astonishment, I have found that modern scientific accounts of the earlier theories of thinking and remembering are not only oversimplified and inaccurate.² The modern theories

¹ R. G. Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis or the Map of Knowledge* (Oxford, 1924), p. 13.

² For instance, they only provide Aristotle’s imprint theory and not the nonphysiological side of his argument in the *De Anima*. Or they say things like: ‘For Plato [sic] the formation and preservation of memory was likened to the imprint of a solid object in soft wax; when the wax hardened a trace was left behind. Using this example as an analogy, Plato held that experiences may similarly leave traces upon an impressionable mind. Memory traces are

Preface

which have replaced frequently misdescribed earlier theories, despite their experimental, scientific jargon, often are rather more unsophisticated than *some* medieval theories. This does not mean that any of the medieval theories more adequately ‘saves the phenomena’ than any of the modern ones. But I had not realised before embarking on this project that some of the most dominant current psychological theories of mind, learning, language and remembering, especially materialist theories of mind, have apparently unknowingly so narrowed the discussion of these perennial issues. They are working only with another set of analogies which often appear to me to be less fruitful than those of some earlier models, when they do not simply reproduce what some earlier thinkers themselves concluded, albeit in another language and narrative genre. In the final chapter I have attempted to give an overview of some modern theories of mind and remembering in order to take the account of ancient and medieval theories into the present. I leave it to the reader to determine how far we have come in these matters.

Theories of remembering in the middle ages turn out to be, in part, theories of signs, of language and the various ways in which language relates to thinking. Medieval theories of memory are, in part, theories of reconstruction. This is because learning to read and write depended for many centuries on late classical grammar and logic texts which effectively argued that things in the world, to which language referred and thinking referred, could not be ‘touched’ except through the mediation of linguistic or mental signs. Hence, the examination of a text which was a surviving fragment of the past in the present, could only be an examination of coherent ways of grammatically and logically speaking about experiences, rather than an examination of the events themselves. The nature of reliable evidence is at issue in medieval historiography and epistemology, intimately bound up with the nature of language and men’s confidence in its conventionally established means to refer to and report nontextual evidence accurately. Physics and mathematics were taken to have their own ways of dealing with the world. Historical knowledge and understanding is of the world but only through language. Hence, they accepted the gospel testimony as the unembellished accounts of the eye-witness experiences of the evangelists, and sought no further verification of such accounts. But this, of course, is precisely what I am doing as an historian of ideas expressed in past texts: I cannot, through this examination, make any assertion about the extralinguistic reality or existence of what the

the records of past experience which occur as a result of learning.’ John G. Seamon, *Memory and Cognition, An Introduction* (Oxford, 1980), p. 4. I discuss below how this is precisely not Plato’s view but the view he rejects.

Preface

words and sentences refer to. Who knows whether what they said about their experiences accurately matched those experiences as experienced? But I am afraid I am in the same situation regarding any of my friends: we are using a conventional series of signs and constructions to turn private, sensual experiences into common counters.

But medieval theories of memory are not only theories of signs. They provide elaborate descriptions and hypotheses about the 'place' of thinking and remembering, and then relate physiological attributes to intellectual processes. We are still asking 'where in the brain are memories stored' and we still do not know.

In concluding this study with summaries of various competing contemporary neurophysiological and psychological theories of memory, I have meant only to indicate that the modern world is, in some important ways, reformulating issues and some answers, that were already at the heart of medieval discussions. Most of us remain unaware that modern science, some modern history and modern philosophy have inherited from the Renaissance a trivialisation of over 1,000 years of previous history. We have accepted that aspects of modernity began during the Renaissance and that preceding centuries were populated by men and women without historical perspective, without philosophical and logical insight, weighed down by an orthodoxy we have not, for the most part, even had the curiosity to examine before we reject it. Where thinkers in the Renaissance are believed to be like us, medieval thinkers, even when some concede they may be interesting, are not like us. But *neither* medieval nor Renaissance thinkers are like us. There is no argument in the following pages that we are simply repeating the middle ages. But there are important reasons why certain issues keep cropping up over the centuries in philosophical, theological and scientific circles, and one of these is that as a literate civilisation, we have constructed our pasts from inherited texts, taken what we see as relevant to our own situations while discarding the rest until the next generation picks up the threads dropped by its fathers. Certain kinds of questions, especially about thinking and remembering, do not seem to receive definitive answers at any time, and we repeat the analyses, moving backwards and forwards, in every generation.

This book was originally intended as a joint venture with Dr Burcht Pranger of the Theologische Faculteit of the University of Amsterdam. I have little doubt that had we collaborated it would have been very different. It would have been a more subtle, more beautifully and sensitively reconstructed memory of medieval rememberers. But events and

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[More information](#)*Preface*

experience led us in different directions. The resulting book is meant as a *semper memor* to our continuing friendship and common interests.

These pages have also, sadly, turned into a memorial to the most inspiring of my teachers, Professor Paul Vignaux (d. 1988), whose seminars at L'Ecole des Hautes Etudes, Paris, provided the setting and structure for my deepening acquaintance with fourteenth-century theology and philosophy. It was especially in cafés after class that M. Vignaux sat with this foreign student, and invited Duns Scotus and Ockham to join us, speaking through photocopied incunabula of the probable ordering of people's lives and thoughts. Because I have forgotten more than I can remember what I owe to M. Vignaux's inspiration, I have tried by writing these pages, to recapture that past through reminiscence. Vignaux's brilliance echoes only faintly, the traces have unwittingly been effaced, but they are the source of my continuing interest in the various medieval theories of remembering and knowing. I am all too aware that my past is only residually preserved in my present. And I also know that one learns only what one has it in one to learn, not what one's teachers have it in them to teach.

I should like to record my special thanks to Professor J. H. Burns, Dr Michael Clanchy, Professor Christopher Holdsworth, Mr Iain Hampsher-Monk, Professor David Luscombe, Professor Robert Markus, Dr Constant Mews, Professor Heiko Oberman, Dr Burcht Pranger, Professor Michael Wilks and to many others including my students at Exeter University and at the London School of Economics. I am grateful to these colleagues who read parts or all of this work in manuscript and offered their intellectual wit and inspiration so that this book might possess some virtue.

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AFH</i>	<i>Archivum Franciscanum Historicum</i>
<i>AHDLMA</i>	<i>Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge</i>
<i>Archiv Gesch. Philos.</i>	<i>Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie</i>
<i>BGPTMA</i>	Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters
<i>CCEL</i>	Corpus Christianorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
<i>Conf.</i>	<i>Confessions</i>
<i>CSEL</i>	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
<i>DA</i>	<i>De Anima</i>
<i>De Div. Qu.</i>	<i>De Diversis Quaestionibus LXXXIII</i>
<i>De Lib. Arb.</i>	<i>De Libero Arbitrio</i>
<i>De Ord.</i>	<i>De Ordine</i>
<i>DM</i>	<i>De Memoria et Reminiscentia</i>
<i>Ep.</i>	<i>Epistolae</i>
<i>Fin.</i>	<i>De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum</i>
<i>LI</i>	<i>Logica Ingredientibus</i> , ed. B. Geyer, in <i>Peter Abelards philosophische Schriften</i> , <i>BGPTMA</i> , 21, vol. 1, 2, 3 (Münster in Westphalia, 1919–27)
<i>LPNS</i>	<i>Logica 'Nostrorum petitioni sociorum'</i> , ed. Geyer, <i>BGPTMA</i> , 21, vol. 4 (1933)
<i>MGH</i>	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica</i>
<i>Nic. Ethics</i>	<i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>
<i>PG</i>	J. P. Migne, ed., <i>Patrologia Graeca</i>
<i>Phlb.</i>	<i>Philebus</i>
<i>Phil. Consolatio</i>	<i>De Consolatione Philosophiae</i>
<i>PL</i>	J. P. Migne, ed., <i>Patrologiae Cursus Completus</i> , series Latina
<i>Post. Anal.</i>	<i>Posterior Analytics</i>
<i>Prior Anal.</i>	<i>Prior Analytics</i>

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[More information](#)

List of abbreviations

<i>REA</i>	<i>Revue des Études Augustiniennes</i>
<i>Rhet.</i>	<i>Rhetoric</i>
<i>RTAM</i>	<i>Recherches de Théologie Ancienne et Médiévale</i>
<i>ST</i>	<i>Summa Theologiae</i>
<i>Sup. Periermenias</i>	<i>Glossae super Periermenias</i>
<i>Th.</i>	<i>Theaetetus</i>
<i>TRHS</i>	<i>Transactions of the Royal Historical Society</i>