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REMEMBRANCE AS INTERPRETATION OF THE PAST

1. We turn to memory when we forget something, the rest of the time relying on its silent work and trusting it implicitly. So it is natural to assume that the problem of memory that the humanities have shown interest in over the past few decades testifies to a mental quirk as a peculiar state of these disciplines. According to Pierre Nora's well known phrase, "memory is constantly on our lips because it no longer exists"¹. Since we are talking about the end of institutions and memory ideologies providing transmission and inheritance of the past, then, obviously, the issue is about memory representation, a certain right to clarification and enunciation of what takes place as a mysterious transformation of the past and the present. As if it were important for us to know that behind a reliable storage of the past, a silent drift down the flow of time, there is a place for special evidence, memory's unuttered speech. But does memory inform us about anything, except the past? Let's say it does, and in this case the question arises whether it is possible today to talk about the *meaning of the past* and, consequently, of memory as a form of differentiating and retaining this meaning. To find an answer, we will confine ourselves to the form of memory which is a phenomenon of the past, namely, *remiscences* and try to answer three questions concerning reminiscence as such: how the past *appears* in it as a modality of existence different from the present; whether it is possible to imagine reminiscence as *speech* with its characteristic modes of expression; what the subject of this speech is, the centre of its special significance.

¹ Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, English language edition, Revised and Abridged Translation, New York, Columbia University Press, 1996, Vol. 1, p. 1.

2. The forgetfulness of our time Nora writes about turns the past into an unsolvable problem, a chaos of the *other*, invading the cosmos of the present like a ghost of violence and lawlessness, be it the history of colonisation, persecution of national and sexual minorities, exploitation of women or child abuse. Nightmares of the past in some way reflect the loss of memory of historiography itself, which regards the past as a fundamentally different time, almost another form of life, breaking up our own time experience¹. Of course, speaking about forgetfulness, we do not mean the actual withering away of such institutions as the church, school, library, archive or museum. On the contrary, it seems that an *excess* of cultural memory makes the assimilation of the past or the transformation of the present into the past non-transparent and incomprehensible, overloading every new moment with an unbearable burden of an un-lived and haunting past. This is the way Borges' Funes is buried under the burden of memory, which takes away first his ability to move about and then his life itself.

In practical life memory functions in a much more transparent and understandable way. Here the past is the cause and condition of action, a commitment or a goal set; in the end, every moment of the present becomes the past, teaching us simple rules of reading signs and comparing the traces of the past. The situation is different with the remembrance of the past. Indeed, why, succeeding to the deceased, should we reintroduce him into the present, making room for one's own rival? Jan Assmann argues that *death* assumes the form of the past and induces memory as a debt to the dead². But next to the reverent remembrance of the dead, characteristic of "memory cultures", there is a different attitude to the dead, associated with fear and the desire to forget everything that can disturb the ghost of the past³. In other words, an experience of death and an ability to peer into the past through the partition of oblivion are equally important. Claude Levi-Strauss says that the Fox Indians hold ritual games during adoption ceremonies in which the winner is the team represented by the clan adopting the child and the loser is the one who *represents* the opposing team – a dead parent as the main rival of the living adopter⁴. This game implements a dual memory strategy: to recognise the dead in the guise of the living, to let him go, to separate the present from the past and thus release it for the living. Death separates

¹ Cf. "Given to us as radically other, the past is a world from which we are fundamentally cut off. We discover the truth about our memory when we discover how alienated from it we are... The whole dynamic of our relation to the past is shaped by the subtle interplay between the inaccessible and the nonexistent." Ibid, p. 12.

² Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 19.

³ Examples of such an attitude to the dead were collected in abundance by Sigmund Freud in *Totem and Taboo*, translator A.A. Brill, 2012, p. 36.

⁴ Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, George Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1966, pp. 31.

from the other, but the past is not only a form of death and separation; it is a game with death, allowing us to settle the boundary between the living and the dead and adapt it as a place of meeting and communicating with the Other. We can say that remembrance of the past offers an opportunity to look *through death* thanks to the oblivion of what makes death incompatible with life. That is why the commemoration of the dead cannot be called a model remembrance, but it is possible to speak about the objective of memory as opening up various opportunities to recognise the past in the living present.

The death of a loved one destroys the foundation on which our everyday world rests, threatening to subordinate life and draw the present into the vortex of the past. In fact, the question of the representation of the past in the present is decided depending on the manner in which the loss is compensated and replaced in the present, what time it can save in the game with death. It makes no sense to look for a single form of such a representation, it should be at least as diverse as the goals it serves in the present, and actions in which it is included; but it is worth asking whether the *diversity* of these representations is the only way to retain the past, an essential opportunity to unmake and remake the borders of the present into a network of images and signs, direct or delayed links with the past. Only such a network could serve both as a ritual and virtual, inner body of the past, ready to thicken into memories and disperse again, giving way to new experience, accompanying the awareness of the present with a shadow.

In our memories the past comes as an image, a death mask that draws a line dividing the past and the present. It is assumed that an image gives an exact replica of the original, and its possession is evidence of domination over the process of change, birth and loss, and therefore the right to the inheritance left by the departed. However, an image is not yet a remembrance because, as Kierkegaard's *Repetition* shows, *remembering* itself is also a *loss*, an escape from the present; we remember the present when it is not over yet, as a past for the future, but should it pass, we cannot remember without a repetition of the past, otherwise the image will remain only a ghost, a false claim to the past. Even if repetition of the lost is impossible, absurd as Job's demand, it alone gives us the right to bear witness to the past. So what does it mean to lose something and go back to *the same thing*, even if it is the *past*? How does one retain a *feeling* of "the same"? A random impression, taste or smell can bring back the lost time, a forgotten sensation of others and oneself. However, it is recognised as "*the same*" because originally it encompassed other sensations, actions and words that are now brought back together with the forgotten taste and smell. In fact, what comes back is not the same smell or taste, but the same possibility to *accommodate* one inside the other, be a *place* bringing a variety of things together upon meeting. Only this place is what comes through in remembrance, always preceding, conceding, the *past*, a partner in all the games played by *the present*.

3. The image of the past delineates the boundaries of the place given to the present. Usually it is a reflection and a trace of the other, a kind of paradigm, a model to follow; this, in fact, is the whole point of Plato's anamnesis as proto-remembrance, which returns the soul to Sameness, giving it a commensurate place in the movement of the sky and the order of other souls. Apparently, orientation in space is akin to memory, whether it is human or animal memory, but the question is not about memory in general, but of remembrance, namely how the past appears in this memory of place. Movement in space and mastering its borders and routes teaches one to see things from aside, to see oneself seeing things, that is, literally inheriting oneself in space, which is itself appropriated as an inalienable part of this inheritance. To a certain extent, any act of perception is such a movement along the borders of the place. What do we feel when moving a hand over the surface of a thing? First of all, the hand itself becomes the surface which the thing indicates by its impact, and this indication gives an insight into its shape and properties. Thus the body born in perception is perceived not only as a place to register actions, but also as a way to distinguish between *before* and *after*, the pre-established boundaries of the body and the changing outline of outer space, open to action and appropriation.

Jacques Lacan said that a gaze of the subject is only a spot located in the gaze of the Other, in its comprehensive light. It is a sign of the original lack, the desire to be, to have a body, which is appropriated only as an image in the gaze of other people, in a mirror reflection, in the indication of things. Therefore, *before* and *after* are first set apart by the difference between the other's and one's own gaze, place of the body, its boundaries, and its game, its action, in which the other's gaze moves away in space up to the boundary of the invisible and indistinguishable. We remember, not when we draw pictures of the past; a distinction between perception and the perceived is a step towards remembering, a reproduction of an effort endowing the perception of a thing with the story of its acquaintance and a presence under its anticipatory gaze. Thus, when looking at a fuzzy image one can notice a thickening shadow, a denser colour in one part of it, and this almost abstract interest suddenly turns into a visible space event, into a certain pattern, which enables one to discern in the thickening shadows the outlines of the eyes, and, finally, the expression of the gaze, looking at once from the present and the past, not a remembrance, but a memorable *place in the present*.

What we call the present does not coincide with the moment of direct experience, event, action of the body, its interaction with other bodies. The present is a paradoxical measure, because it is supposed to cover the infinity of everything existing in each moment. Things remind us of their hidden sides facing other things, invisible or completely unknown, which fill the space of the present on a par with the perceiving and acting body. If one walks down the street, a stream of cars and passers-by becomes a reality of the present and remains that even when the walk is a thing of the past

and street noise has faded away outside the house walls. Raising to the surface of the present a space of countless things and events, the past lurks in every crease of the surface as a possible manifestation of the invisible. The distance travelled is recognised, not in the external addition of the past, but in the guise of familiar things and places that we remember when we see or only just approach them. It is the same with our own body, which turns at the same time into the space of the present and the past, a feeling of oneself and the “memory of sides, knees and shoulders” guiding us on a journey to lost time.

Since being one’s past means changing and only becoming who you are, the memory of the past becomes a measure of becoming, the only one of its kind, a way of being-in-the-other and discerning the presence of the other in the contours of the present. In this sense, a remembrance is not only an image of the past but also an *inner language* capable of distinguishing signs of the other’s presence in forms of space; Hegel writes about it in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, believing that memory finds its true realisation in the language and becomes an “internal external” of the spirit, the last frontier on the way to thinking. This means that the trust in memory goes back to the origins of the language and the confidence in one’s *Other*, to the possibility of being in the other necessary for inner speech, in the past and the future, in recognition of one’s ancestors and descendants.

Hegel deems it possible to overcome the singularity of the sensual in the universality of the spirit, turn matter into a fine line of the signifier, and the history of the world, into a memory and self-awareness of Spirit. Thus, memory speech should link up with the logos of history. However, outside this completeness memory speech does not coincide with the fixed meaning system, remaining an arbitrary, idiosyncratic form of language and demonstrating a variety of possibilities to be the present, the past and the future. In his *Difference and Repetition* Gilles Deleuze singles out three types of repetition, three types of rhythms, with which the present communicates with the past and the future. In the first case, the past is reproduced in the present unconsciously, as a habit that has become automatic; repetition of the second type is the reverse of the first and is a reflection of the present in the past, being in fact a repetition of a memory in the sense of pure remembrance of Bergson’s *Matter and Memory*; the third type of repetition is built around birth and death as events of the future in the present. Deleuze’s three repetitions are ideal types of a relationship of the past and the present, in fact, always woven into the unity of remembrance as speech unity, marking the presence of the past and the future in the present.

The first repetition is recognised as a metonymical rhythm of value transfers, making it possible to reproduce in a new present the habits and skills of existence acquired in the past and play it backwards, discerning traces of the past in the contours of the present, inferring from the available effects to absent causes, from visible fragments to the invisible whole. Carlo Ginzburg described this type of thinking and memory as an “evidential paradigm”, linking it to, inter alia, the emergence of the art of storytelling,

and with it, history itself¹. The relationship of action and subject, a change in the arrangement of objects which turns into a memory of place are metonymical; this kind of relationship can be seen as a relationship of similarity of the past and the present, action and its reproduction in effect. Werner Herzog's film, *Ten Thousand Years Older* has an episode when the leader of the Uru Eus tribe recalls killing a family of white settlers, and to restore this event in his memory starts walking and swinging his bow. His gestures do not repeat exactly his previous actions, but represent a memory, which became a dance and a song: the body moves like a living scene of his memories, and the leader, fascinated by images and events of the past, is the embodiment of the second rhythmic model. In his dance the present and the past meet and become the same, which turns the memory scene into a *metaphor* of the murder. Pierre Bourdieu writes of ritual practices as a form of mnemonics, ensuring the effectiveness of remembering by mutual reflection of structures of various spaces and metaphorical transfer from one field to another of social skills of behaviour and orientation. The man's mode of action, his habitus, embodying a variety of such skills is nothing other than "a metaphor of the world of objects, which is itself an endless circle of metaphors that mirror each other ad infinitum"².

Mutual reflection of different worlds defines the essence of Plato's understanding of memory. The soul must see its reflection in the image and speech of another, a beloved or teacher, to rise in remembrance to God, with whom it has a relationship of an even more perfect likeness. Linking differences with likenesses, metaphor carries through the otherness of becoming, enabling a glimpse into the forgotten, the past, beyond one's ken, and Mnemosyne's gift, after all, is opened by way of a metaphor, so that a wax tablet and finger rings' imprints would help us get to the hidden trail of former lives and long gone times. An extreme opposite of Plato's view is Kant's forms of coexistence and contiguity, whose metonymy resembles a pure mind habit. However, recognising space and time in these forms, Kant turns them into a metaphor of line and number, which help him try to ascertain the reality of the external world and himself as a "world-being"³.

Roman Jakobson suggested that metaphor and metonymy form two lines along which a speech event, a message develops;⁴ we can add that a remembrance as a memory message cannot do without the same figures

¹ Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths and the Historical Method*, the Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989, p. 102.

² Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, translated by Richard Nice, 1990, p. 77.

³ Immanuel Kant, "Vom inneren Sinn".

⁴ "The development of a discourse may take place along two different semantic lines: one topic may lead to another either through their similarity or through their contiguity. The metaphoric way would be the most appropriate term for the first case and the metonymic way for the second, since they find their most condensed expression in metaphor and metonymy respectively." Roman Jakobson, *Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances*, p. 129. http://theory.theasintexas.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/jakobson_Aphasia.pdf

(of speech). However, there is an important difference between the two messages, since language gives us sign material, while remembrance for the first time turns various moments into signs of the past. In this case, the meaning of metaphor and metonymy is determined not so much by the construction of the message chain, but the formation of a certain vision making it possible to distinguish in the figures of the present a possibility of a game or performance played out in the presence of, or under the gaze of the past. Neither metonymy nor metaphor subordinate the present to the past or the past to the present; bringing closer together the different, they do not remove it in the form of contiguity or similarity, but hold it as a fold on the surface, paving the way to remembering. Thus, on the way home you can wonder where you turned off the road last, but then you remember how you examined this house or let your glance follow the bend of the road, and the place itself directs your memory, determines eye movement and how you see yourself on the way from the past to the present. This memory gaze has a peculiar transparency, a sort of pure value of memory language, because the past is remembered from the present as if from its future and is seen pervaded by the future, as if burdened with an internal event in which every moment of the present is preparing for the coming of its future. According to legend, Simonides of Ceos recognises this event in the space of the refectory, where the merry feast turns into the chaos of wreckage and mutilated bodies¹, and it is necessary to pass through the external and alien space of death to give back to those alive the names of the dead stolen by death and gather in memory the separated forms *was*, *is* and *will be*.

4. In contrast to Hegel's memory language, memory speech remains an unremoved border of the single and the universal, represented by images, seals and emblems of the past, whose meaning is only recognised as a riddle, puzzle, mystery of the initiated who have the key to reading the cipher. This is the only way to appropriate a place in the gaze of the Other, in the totality of Being or in the despotic order of the Symbolic. This is, to a certain degree, summed up by Lacan's analytics of gaze, which links the possibility of a subjective position with the use of a mask, the art of simultaneously hiding and presenting oneself, being a blind spot in the spectacle of the world and turning blindness into a desire to recall the presence of the Other forgotten in this spectacle. The use of a mask is just a gesture in which a delay was originally inscribed, a suspension of real action², and in this sense Lacan's appropriation of gaze reproduces Bergson's

¹ Cicero, *De Oratore*, Cicero in 28 Volumes, Vol. III, with an English translation by E.W. Sutton, London, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1942, p. 465, 467.

² "What is a gesture? A threatening gesture, for example? It is not a blow that is interrupted. It is certainly something done to be arrested and suspended. ...As a threatening gesture it is inscribed behind." Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Translated from the French by Alan Sheridan, London, 1977, p. 116

understanding of memory and vision as a reaction delay, the shading of natural light and turning the shadows into the background and the outlines of the visible image in equal measure of the present and the past¹.

Thus, a gesture appears as a kind of remembrance and a sign of the forgotten, a mystery of the past and the key to understanding it, but it should be added that gaze as the first gesture finds a special form of presence, a place which defines all of the games of masks, demonstrations and concealment, direct action and infinite delay. To clarify its meaning, it is worth turning to Roland Barthes' reasoning in which the past of photography is opposed to memory². In contrast to the disparate images of the past, photography is perceived as a punctum and punctum wound, a completed "*this-has-been*" event, crossing the stream of memories by the direct gaze of the departed, Death³. And yet this discouraging gaze of the past has a certain kinship with memory. The forgotten is revealed not in the feeling, not in the experience of a delayed return, but as a direct loss, which is the necessary condition for memories. Barthes' entire book is memories of his mother, and what completes it and turns the photograph into a genuine memory is the face of the mother, lost and found as the past itself.

The face is what cannot be seen directly, it is given only in reflections as the form and condition of presence in the sensual world, always open, unoccupied place of perception. The face is not seen, but is *reproduced* by everything visible and, above all, the face of the other, which becomes the most important form of memory, recognition of one's presence in the world. In the face of the other the world restores what was lost at the moment of birth, as if recognising that the present in its final existence is commensurate with the entirety of the past and the consummate. Therefore, it can be called the actuality of memory, a kind of *consciousness of the memory's subject*. The identity of the person, based on memory, implies the uniqueness of a face lost and restored by the other. In the end, to become real does not mean to move from one time to another, because in the past we do not remain who we were in the present. We have become real only because the past was a loss at every moment, a becoming, and therefore the memory of the past is no more and no less than a measure of *the other*, an excess of the visible, piercing the present as the gaze of the Other.

¹ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, translated by Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1911, p. 12.

² Roland Barthes, *Camera lucida. Reflections on Photography*, Translated by Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, 1982, p. 91.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 79