

*Memory, History,  
Forgetting*



PAUL RICOEUR

TRANSLATED BY KATHLEEN BLAMEY & DAVID PELLAUER

# MEMORY, HISTORY, FORGETTING



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Forgetting*

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*Dans la mémoire de Simone Ricoeur*



*He who has been, from then on cannot not have been:  
henceforth this mysterious and profoundly obscure fact of  
having been is his viaticum for all eternity.*

§ Vladimir Jankélévitch

*In a special place in the library of the monastery there stands a superb baroque sculpture. It is the dual figure of history. In the foreground, Kronos, the winged god. An old man with wreathed brow: his left hand grips a large book, his right hand attempts to tear out a page. Behind and above, stands history itself. The gaze is grave and searching; one foot topples a horn of plenty from which spills a cascade of gold and silver, sign of instability; the left hand checks the act of the god, while the right displays history's instruments: the book, the inkpot, and the stylus.*

§ Wiblingen Monastery, Ulm



Entre la DÉCHIRURE par le temps et le  
et l'ÉCRITURE de l'Artiste. et son stylet

Jean Pilon



# CONTENTS

*Preface* xv

## PART I ON MEMORY AND RECOLLECTION 1

### *Chapter 1 Memory and Imagination* 5

- Reading Guidelines 5
- The Greek Heritage 7
  - ~ *Plato: The Present Representation of an Absent Thing* 7
  - ~ *Aristotle: "Memory Is of the Past"* 15
- A Phenomenological Sketch of Memory 21
- Memories and Images 44

### *Chapter 2 The Exercise of Memory: Uses and Abuses* 56

- Reading Guidelines 56
- The Abuses of Artificial Memory: The Feats of Memorization 58
- The Abuses of Natural Memory: Blocked Memory, Manipulated Memory, Abusively Controlled Memory 68
  - ~ *The Pathological-Therapeutic Level: Blocked Memory* 69
  - ~ *The Practical Level: Manipulated Memory* 80
  - ~ *The Ethico-Political Level: Obligated Memory* 86

### *Chapter 3 Personal Memory, Collective Memory* 93

- Reading Guidelines 93
- The Tradition of Inwardness 96
  - ~ *Augustine* 96

- ~ *Locke* 102
- ~ *Husserl* 109
- The External Gaze: Maurice Halbwachs 120
- Three Subjects of the Attribution of Memories: Ego, Collectives, Close Relations 124

## PART II HISTORY, EPISTEMOLOGY 133

*Prelude History: Remedy or Poison?* 141

*Chapter 1 The Documentary Phase: Archived Memory* 146

- Reading Guidelines 146
- Inhabited Space 147
- Historical Time 153
- Testimony 161
- The Archive 166
- Documentary Proof 176

*Chapter 2 Explanation/Understanding* 182

- Reading Guidelines 182
- Promoting the History of Mentalities 188
- Some Advocates of Rigor: Michel Foucault, Michel de Certeau, Norbert Elias 200
- Variations in Scale 209
- From the Idea of Mentality to That of Representation 216
  - ~ *The Scale of Efficacy or of Coerciveness* 218
  - ~ *The Scale of Degrees of Legitimation* 221
  - ~ *The Scale of Nonquantitative Aspects of Social Times* 223
- The Dialectic of Representation 227

*Chapter 3 The Historian's Representation* 234

- Reading Guidelines 234
- Representation and Narration 238
- Representation and Rhetoric 248
- The Historian's Representation and the Prestige of the Image 261
- Standing For 274

PART III THE HISTORICAL CONDITION 281

*Prelude The Burden of History and the Nonhistorical* 287

*Chapter 1 The Critical Philosophy of History* 293

- Reading Guidelines 293
- “*Die Geschichte Selber*,” “History Itself” 296
- “Our” Modernity 305
- The Historian and the Judge 314
- Interpretation in History 333

*Chapter 2 History and Time* 343

- Reading Guidelines 343
- Temporality 352
  - ~ *Being-toward-Death* 352
  - ~ *Death in History* 361
- Historicity 369
  - ~ *The Trajectory of the Term Geschichtlichkeit* 370
  - ~ *Historicity and Historiography* 376
- Within-Timeness: Being-“in”-Time 382
  - ~ *Along the Path of the Inauthentic* 382
  - ~ *Within-Timeness and the Dialectic of Memory and History* 384
    - Memory, Just a Province of History? 385
    - Memory, in Charge of History? 389
- The Uncanniness of History 393
  - ~ *Maurice Halbwachs: Memory Fractured by History* 393
  - ~ *Yerushalmi: “Historiography and Its Discontents”* 397
  - ~ *Pierre Nora: Strange Places of Memory* 401

*Chapter 3 Forgetting* 412

- Reading Guidelines 412
- Forgetting and the Effacing of Traces 418
- Forgetting and the Persistence of Traces 427
- The Forgetting of Recollection: Uses and Abuses 443
  - ~ *Forgetting and Blocked Memory* 444

- ~ *Forgetting and Manipulated Memory* 448
- ~ *Commanded Forgetting: Amnesty* 452

*Epilogue Difficult Forgiveness* 457

- The Forgiveness Equation 459
  - ~ *Depth: The Fault* 459
  - ~ *Height: Forgiveness* 466
- The Odyssey of the Spirit of Forgiveness: The Passage through Institutions 470
  - ~ *Criminal Guilt and the Imprescriptible* 471
  - ~ *Political Guilt* 474
  - ~ *Moral Guilt* 476
- The Odyssey of the Spirit of Forgiveness: The Stage of Exchange 478
  - ~ *The Economy of the Gift* 479
  - ~ *Gift and Forgiveness* 481
- The Return to the Self 486
  - ~ *Forgiving and Promising* 486
  - ~ *Unbinding the Agent from the Act* 489
- Looking Back over an Itinerary: Recapitulation 493
  - ~ *Happy Memory* 494
  - ~ *Unhappy History?* 497
  - ~ *Forgiveness and Forgetting* 500

*Notes* 507

*Works Cited* 607

*Index* 627

## PREFACE

The present investigation has grown out of several preoccupations, some private, some professional, and others, finally, that I would call public.

Private preoccupation: to say nothing of my gaze directed back now over a long life—*Réflexion faite* (looking back)—it is a question here of returning to a lacuna in the problematic of *Time and Narrative* and in *Oneself as Another*, where temporal experience and the narrative operation are directly placed in contact, at the price of an impasse with respect to memory and, worse yet, of an impasse with respect to forgetting, the median levels between time and narrative.

Professional consideration: this investigation reflects the frequenting of works, seminars, and symposia in the company of professional historians who have been confronting the same problems regarding the ties between memory and history. This book is a prolongation of this uninterrupted conversation.

Public preoccupation: I continue to be troubled by the unsettling spectacle offered by an excess of memory here, and an excess of forgetting elsewhere, to say nothing of the influence of commemorations and abuses of memory—and of forgetting. The idea of a policy of the just allotment of memory is in this respect one of my avowed civic themes.

### §

The work contains three clearly defined parts, distinguished by their theme and their method. The first part, devoted to memory and to mnemonic phenomena, is placed under the aegis of phenomenology in the Husserlian sense of the term. The second part, dedicated to history, comes under the scope

of an epistemology of the historical sciences. The third part, culminating in a meditation on forgetting, is framed within a hermeneutics of the historical condition of the human beings that we are.

Each of these three parts unfolds along a planned course marked in each case by a threefold rhythm. In this way, the phenomenology of memory begins deliberately with an analysis turned toward the object of memory, the memory (*souvenir*) that one has before the mind; it then passes through the stage of the search for a given memory, the stage of anamnesis, of recollection; we then finally move from memory as it is given and exercised to reflective memory, to memory of oneself.

The epistemological course embraces the three phases of the historiographical operation; from the stage of witnessing and of the archives, it passes through the usages of “because” in the figures of explanation and understanding; it ends on the scriptural level of the historian’s representation of the past.

The hermeneutics of the historical condition also embodies three stages; the first is that of a critical philosophy of history, of a critical hermeneutics, attentive to the limits of historical knowledge that a certain hubris of historical science transgresses again and again; the second stage is that of an ontological hermeneutics intent on exploring the modalities of temporalization that together constitute the existential condition of historical knowledge; buried under the footprints of memory and history then opens the empire of forgetting, an empire divided against itself, torn between the threat of the definitive effacement of traces and the assurance that the resources of anamnesis are placed in reserve.

These three parts, however, do not constitute three books. Although the three masts carry interlocking but distinct sails, they belong to the same ship setting off for a single itinerary. A common problematic, in fact, flows through the phenomenology of memory, the epistemology of history, and the hermeneutics of the historical condition: the problematic of the representation of the past. The question is posed in its radicality as early as the investigation of the object-side of memory: what is there to say of the enigma of an image, of an *eikōn*—to speak Greek with Plato and Aristotle—that offers itself as the presence of an absent thing stamped with the seal of the anterior? The same question crosses through the epistemology of testimony, then through that of social representations taken as the privileged object of explanation/understanding, to unfold on the plane of the scriptural representation of events, conjunctures, and structures that punctuate the historical past. The initial enigma of the *eikōn* will continue to grow from chapter to

chapter. Transferred from the sphere of memory to that of history, it reaches its height in the hermeneutics of the historical condition, where the representation of the past is found to be exposed to the dangers of forgetting, but is also entrusted to its protection.

## §

A few remarks addressed to the reader.

In this book I am trying out a form of presentation I have never used before: in an effort to rid the text of the most burdensome didactic considerations—introducing each theme, recalling the links with the preceding line of arguments, anticipating subsequent developments—I have placed guidelines to the reader at the main strategic points of the work that will tell the reader at what point I am in the investigation. I hope that this manner of negotiating with the reader's patience will be well received.

Another remark: I frequently mention and quote authors belonging to different epochs, but I do not present a history of the problem. I summon this or that author according to the requirements of the argument, without concerning myself with the epoch. This seems to me to be the right of every reader, before whom all the books are open simultaneously.

Shall I confess, finally, that I have no fixed rule in the use of "I" and "we," excluding the "we" of authority and majesty? I prefer to say "I" when I assume an argument as my own and "we" when I hope to draw my reader along with me.

So let our three-masted ship set sail!

## §

Allow me, now that the work is over, to express my gratitude to those among my close relations who have accompanied and, if I may venture to say, have approved of my undertaking. I will not name them here.

I set apart the names of those who, in addition to their friendship, have shared their competence with me: François Dosse who advised me in my exploration of the historian's workshop; Thérèse Dufлот who, thanks to her typing skills, became my first reader, always vigilant and at times merciless; and, finally, Emmanuel Macron to whom I am indebted for a pertinent critique of the writing and the elaboration of the critical apparatus of this work. A final word of thanks to the president and director of the Éditions du Seuil and to the directors of the collection "L'ordre philosophique," who have, once again, accorded me their trust and their patience.



PART I

*On Memory and Recollection*