

**Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization. Funcions, Media, Archives.* Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 410 pp.**

**On the relationship between history and memory<sup>1</sup>**

What kind of relationship is established between history and memory? Historians – especially those devoted to the study of contemporary history – have few doubts that witnesses play a crucial role in the inquiry of the recent past. However, when they opt for detail in this issue, such writers normally highlight the differences between the aforementioned fields, with some reducing the latter to what some French specialists describe as the static category of “oral archives”.<sup>2</sup> Only a few suggest more complex possibilities.<sup>3</sup> The vast majority, focusing on the cognitive nature of both realms, are content to assert that history and memory are different phenomena and should by no means be confused. Behind this opinion there might even lurk a diagnosis of culture as is the case, for example, of the well-known *Les Lieux de mémoire* by Pierre Nora. But Nora’s cultural hypothesis has never been entirely convincing, as we can see, for instance, in the book that forms the subject of this review (pp. 5-7, 122). Nora saw the contemporary multiplication of “lieux de mémoire” (realms of memory) as a sign of the breaking with the past that is characteristic of the present culture.<sup>4</sup> However, when *Les Lieux* was published between 1984 and 1992, Nora was not yet in a position to have a deep understanding of the growing role of memory in all fields where human behaviour is reflected (politics, economics, identities, mass culture and intellectual culture), as was its competition with history, at least in topics concerning contemporary history. In the last two decades political and cultural changes have demonstrated that the explosion of memories is not a fleeting situation.

*Cultural Memory and Western Civilization* may surely contribute to a better understanding of this relation between history and memory. The author, Professor Aleida Assmann, is an expert in English literature, cultural anthropology and literary and cultural communication. This is the English edition of the edited *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (München, Verlag C. H. Beck, 1999) [literally: Spaces of remembrance: forms and transformations of cultural memory]. Written in an English that is very accessible, and which the author

---

<sup>1</sup> Gonzalo Pasamar is in charge of the Project “The memory of the Spanish Civil War during the transition to democracy”. Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (Spain). Reference HAR2011-25154 (2012-2014).

<sup>2</sup> See Henry Rousso, *La hantise du passé. Entretien avec Philippe Petit* (Paris: Textuel, 1998), 65.

<sup>3</sup> One author that does do this and speaks of the need for some “critical empathy” between both fields is, for example, the Italian historian Enzo Traverso, in *El pasado. Instrucciones de uso. Historia, memoria, política* (Madrid: Marcial Pons, Eds. Jurídicas y Sociales, 2007), 30-38. In Spain, there have been historians interested in reflecting on the relationship between history and memory in recent years. See for instance Juan José Carreras, “¿Por qué hablamos de memoria cuando queremos decir historia?”, in Alberto Sabio Alcutén y Carlos Forcadell Álvarez, *Las escalas de pasado*. (Barbastro: IV Congreso de Historia local de Aragón, 2005), 15-24, and Juan Sisinio Pérez Garzón and Eduardo Manzano Moreno, *Memoria histórica* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Nora, “General Introduction. Between Memory and History”, in Pierre Nora (ed.), *Realms of Memory. Rethinking of the French Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), Vol. I, 1-14.

herself has vetted with the aid of the English writer, David Henry Wilson, this work will surely contribute to stimulating reflection on the cultural role of memories.

Generally speaking it can be said that this erudite work, focusing on Western culture, has not aged since it was published for the first time. It might be ranked among the pioneering studies in memory since it has resisted more than a decade until the release of this edition. It is however true that during this period of time interest in cultural memories other than those of the Western world has developed. Moreover, studies relating to traumatic remembrances in the Hispanic world have also taken a great leap forward (for example, the traumatic memories of Latin American dictatorships and the memory of repression in the Franco era in Spain).<sup>5</sup> But this book, we must insist, has scarcely suffered any erosion because, along with the examples discussed (see below), it also offers some suggestive reflections. This resistance may be due to the basic hypothesis that has brought it into being, which would seem to confirm that the present development of memories stems in part from the traumatic events that have taken place in the twentieth century (p. 9).

Professor Assmann's reflection on memory is a successor to that of French authors Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora, and connects with experts on the Holocaust memory. It is also influenced by Reinhardt Koselleck's conception of historical time. In the book, however, there is no evidence of any influence of the well-known debate on the "limits of representation"<sup>6</sup> nor any other proposals on memory such as that of British historian Raphael Samuel, an expert on popular memory and identity, influenced by Pierre Nora and Postmodernism, and also a pioneering author as well.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the author draws from a very wide range of sources because of her conviction that "in literary texts and artistic works we can discover the most lucid theory of criticism in memory" (p. xii).<sup>8</sup> Thus the book includes ideas from Plato to novelists of the nineteenth century, together with the classics of the art of rhetoric (Cicero, Quintilian), Renaissance humanists, intellectuals from the Age of Enlightenment, Romantic poets, nineteenth-century philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche, and especially William Shakespeare's works (from which Professor Assmann is a well-known connoisseur), whose interest in English identity (and therefore certain kind of memory) is clearly highlighted (see below).

To address such a complex topic like that of memory, and avoid a simple morphologic overview or a mere description of recollections, the author has developed a solid theoretical basis and historical analysis which is mirrored in the threefold division

---

<sup>5</sup> See, for ejemplo, Gabriela Águila: "La *Historia Reciente* en la Argentina: un Balance", *Historiografías, revista de historia y teoría*, 3 (enero-junio 2012): 62-76; and Francisco Espinosa, *Contra el olvido. Historia y memoria de la Guerra Civil* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> See Saul Frieländer (ed.), *Probing the limits of representation. Nazism and the 'Final Solution'*. (Cambridge [Mass.], London: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of memory. Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London, New York: Verso, 1994). Although the book does not lack references either to the classics, which are indirectly related to the problems of memory, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (*The invention of tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) or Benedict Anderson (*Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> This idea is also repeated in the conclusion: "Today the most conscientious and inspiring self-reflection of cultural memory reside in their artistic creations" (p. 396).

of the work: a) the first part is devoted to functions that Western cultural memory have developed from classical writers to the twentieth century; b) the second – the longest – examines the ways in which memory has been expressed, from literary tropes to its various kinds of material support; and c) finally, the third – the shortest – is for the ways of storing memory.

Throughout the book there are several leitmotifs. The most important of these is, in our opinion, the problem of relationships between memory and history. That is, the relations between the abilities to conjure up the past in an active way, and the ability to store its traces and examine them from a distance. However, other themes are also present such as, for example, the importance and variety of “stabilizers of memory”, that is, the continuous need to invent external and internal mechanisms, which has been felt in different cultures and historical periods, to enable recollections to be maintained and conveyed to others. With the topic of stabilizers the author also discusses the two clichés which have served to explain how the brain operates with memory: the traditional static perspective that sees the brain as an organ which is limited to “storing” recollections, and its opposite, i.e. the “constructivist view” that regards the brain as a mechanism involved in a process of constantly reorganizing memory. To the author, there is a third way: memory can be seen as a process where stabilizing and destabilizing factors are continually combining with each other. As the reader will observe, this proposal has interesting implications in terms of the perception of historical time (see chapter 10, pp. 238-39 ff.).

One element that quickly stands out in this work is the idea that memory is a cultural phenomenon that is complex, changing and difficult to pin down and is closely related to its opposites: amnesia, oblivion, and forgetfulness (the last two are the expressions used by the author). “Memories are among the most fleeting and most unreliable phenomena of all”, the author says (p. 238). Cultural memory would thus be “a prosthetic device, an externalized and reinternalizable collective creation that is transmitted and transformed over time and reshaped by succeeding generations” (p. 395). Perhaps the best metaphor for understanding how cultural memory proceeds is that of the “spotlight”, which Professor Assmann uses a few lines earlier: “from a particular present, a section of the past is illuminated in such a way that it opens up a future horizon (...)” [and] “focused, concentrated memory inevitably includes active forgetfulness” (p. 396).

In fact from the ancients onwards what is understood by memory has included two very different components: the fact of storing or keeping what is given, on the one hand, and that of creating something new, on the other. Although this topic is more or less explicit right from the beginning of the book, it is only at the end of the first part when we can observe its real implications in terms of the debate on history and memory (Chapter 6, pp. 123-32): according to the author, “the apparently clear opposition between memory and history is becoming less and less tenable” (p. 123). The aforementioned two-faced nature of cultural memory – creation and storage – turned out to be the best proof. In this way it would be possible to talk of two kinds of closely related cultural memory: the “functional memory” and the “storage memory”. The former is a living memory and “consists of vital recollections that emerge from a process of selection, connection and meaningful configuration” (p. 127). The latter contains instead “what is unusable, obsolete, or dated; it has no vital ties to the present

and no bearing of identity formation” (Ibid.). The first kind of memory has a normative character and draws attention to what is supposed to be remembered. It is thus related to identity and processes of legitimization and loss of legitimacy (and in this way it drives the attempts to conjure up the existence of a presumed “era” or “foundational event”). As this normative component of memory loses strength, cultural memories also lose their quality of living memories and evolve into storage memories.

This theory may serve to explain the emergence of historical discipline during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, it will only be useful as long as it can be admitted in a specific way that functional and storage memories are not realms that were completely independent at that time. The raising of studies on Antiquity over the nineteenth century can be examined, for instance, in the light of this hypothesis. Once Antiquity fully loses its normative character or “mythical” image between the mid-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth century, then historiography on Antiquity is in a condition to blossom from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. In this way, Antiquity becomes storage memory and develops into a field of research proper.<sup>9</sup> However, as far as medieval and Modern studies in history are concerned, the aforementioned difference between functional and storage memory proves more complex. The Modern State still kept vivid bonds with the Middle-Ages in the opinion of politicians and intellectuals during the first half of the nineteenth century (especially for the French “doctrinaires”, British Whigs, and Spanish moderate liberals). According to them, one part of the Modern state’s identity would stem from the “medieval state”. Yet this recognition was never an obstacle preventing those people from firmly believing in the need for storing a large number of documents from modern states in historical archives (particularly those concerning the period from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, that is, the Ancien Regime).

As we said, the difference between functional and storage memories is crucial in this book. In the first part, it can already be seen within the interesting distinction also rooted in classical authors, between the memory as a “mnemotechnical art” and what the author calls “vis memory” (pp. 17-22). The first is the tradition which sees memory as the art of storing and retrieving, as was the technique improved by the ancient authors, Cicero and Quintilian (in this case a technique understood as a tool for rhetorical art). The second is the memory understood as a mental faculty, a concept the earliest allusions of which date back to Aristotle and Galen. This is the basic idea that gives rise to literature which regards memory “as a driving force that follows its own rules” (p. 20).

From the humanists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries onwards the problem of fame (the author uses the Latin expression “fama”) and identity is associated with the latter class of memory, the memory understood as a “force”. *Fama* thus refers to the importance that is conferred on the rights of the dead. In the author’s opinion, the rites and practices of the living and the cult that links them with the dead are “the earliest and most widespread of social memory” (p. 23). However, from the Renaissance on, this interest in the dead was to go through a process of secularization,

---

<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, there is a need to observe that as Italian fascism decided to retrieve it for its political legitimacy, Antiquity was somehow resurrected as a functional memory again, at least until the collapse of the Mussolini regime.

which adopts the form of the idea *fama*, that is, “a secular form of immortalization” (Ibid.). As for identity, this is a component of cultural memory that makes its presence felt in a clearer way when the notion of national history and memory emerges from the sixteenth century onwards. Hence the importance the author gives to Shakespeare’s histories, which dealt basically with fame and English nationhood: “It should not be forgotten that Shakespeare’s Histories were not seen initially as a contribution to world literature so much as to the historical formation of a nation”, the author says (p. 69).

The Romantic view of memory is a central topic in the first part (See chapter 4). It shows how the erstwhile conception of memory espoused by the classical authors and understood as a mnemotechnical phenomenon would have become an active phenomenon with Romantic writers. The pages where the author comments on this process of transition are very suggestive: it includes humanists such as Erasmus, who proposed restoring the teaching of mnemotechnics (p. 80), to Romantics such as the poet William Wordsworth, in addition to Enlightenment intellectuals like John Locke and David Hume (pp. 86-88). Wordsworth has a special importance here since, according to the author, he represents “the transition from memory art to memory as power” (p. 79). To Wordsworth, instead recording, preserving and retrieving, the main function of memory would be creating something new, that is, acting as a supplement for understanding (pp. 92-94).

The second part of the book is devoted to what is called “the media”, namely all ways in which the memory expresses itself. It includes very detailed pages where Professor Assmann leads us once again to different periods and authors. Yet, to stop readers from seeing this part as a simple repertoire, there is a need to observe the second of the aforementioned leitmotifs: the importance that the so-called stabilizers of memory have for the author. In fact, the chapter can be regarded as an all-embracing analysis of “external”, “internal” mechanisms to retain memory, their changes, and the metaphors used to express its importance.

This section begins with the examination of the use of metaphors to represent memory, from spatial expressions (the storehouse, the library, the excavation in Freud’s case, etc.) to images intended to indicate the passing of time (the stomach, freezing, thawing, sleeping and the awakening, the hourglass, etc.) (pp. 146-63). The author soon moves to the analysis of “external” stabilizers, especially writing and images. There is also a reference to language, which is considered “the most powerful stabilizer of memory” (p. 239), and also a final chapter devoted to “places of memory”, pp. 281-324).

Of particular interest is the analysis of the importance of writing in relation to image. For humanists writing was a “transparent” medium. They considered it to be the surest way of transmitting memory because of the belief that writing was not subject to the passing of time (pp. 179-80 ff., 398). Nevertheless, from the eighteenth century this boundless confidence was fading away in favor of traces, relics and images (pp. 193 ff.). Traces became something more valued than texts, since they were beyond the reaches of conscious and intentional articulation. Yet, the prevalence conceded to traces also had effects in terms of the perception of historical time: as traces involved an “inbuilt forgetting” that was beyond intentions, then the traditional line that linked the past and

the present was going to break, and the past was going to turn into “a foreign country” (p. 197)<sup>10</sup>.

As for the “internal” stabilizers, the pages devoted to the “body” contain interesting reflections and examples on the way these stabilizers operate (pp. 230-80). The body can be regarded as a “medium of memory”, the author says, which includes mechanisms to stabilize memory such as affect, symbol and trauma. The role of affect when living through a particular event is particularly highlighted in this part: when affect can be represented in the form of a narrative, then it serves to strengthen personality or identity. But, when this affect is too intense, then it can surpass the limits of representation and bring about serious consequences for the narratives. It can shatter memory and overshadow identity, and prevent the event from being narrated or forgotten: the result would be a “traumatic memory” (pp. 247-53).

The third part of the book deals with the ways of storing memory and the influence that current changes in the perception of time have exerted on the traditional idea of the archive. What is discussed and exemplified in these final chapters are the capacities of memory and oblivion being developed in current culture nowadays (Chapters 12-16). What kind of problems revolve around the conservation and decay of cultural objects today? Is our idea of conservation changing because of the current capacity to see the past as a foreign country, the multiplication of cultural objects, and the development of audiovisual media systems (tape recording, cassettes, records, videos, etc.) that are characterized by their great capacity of erosion? What happens with the idea of “authenticity of the original” that had always dominated the concept of conservation? Throughout these pages (pp. 325-94), the author makes proposals to adapt these factors to current systems of conservation and examines the work of some contemporary artists who are attempting to visualize this kind of problem in their work (for example, the interest in what is lost or in what was once considered rubbish or junk but today becomes art).

With these comments we hope that the reader will not be in any doubt that *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization* deserves to be read because it is one of the most important and solid reflections on memory ever published. We are sure that the English version will help with the dissemination of this outstanding book.

Gonzalo Pasamar  
University of Zaragoza (Spain)

Fecha de recepción: 19 de noviembre de 2013

Fecha de aceptación: 28 de noviembre de 2013

---

<sup>10</sup> At this point, in addition to the well-known expression coined by David Lowenthal (*The Past is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), we can see Reinhardt Koselleck's indirect influence, to whom there is a “Sattelzeit” [literally, “saddle period”] between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, where a change in perception of time took place. This change not only meant new social and political terms had to be invented or traditional ones re-interpreted, it also implied that the past would begin to evolve “a foreign country”, to use Lowenthal's expression again.

Publicado: 31 de diciembre de 2013

Para citar: “On the relationship between history and memory. Review of Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization. Functions, Media, Archives*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 410 pp.”, *Historiografías*, 6 (julio-diciembre, 2013): pp. 150-156.

<http://www.unizar.es/historiografias/historiografias/numeros/6/pasamar.pdf>