

# 18 Can We Tell Stories Out of Our Memories? The Contributions of Derrida and Benjamin

MYRIAN SEPÚLVEDA SANTOS

The author draws from Jacques Derrida's and Walter Benjamin's writings on memory in order to argue that as these two thinkers deal with the simultaneity of the diachronic and synchronic dimension of time they open up the possibility of thinking about the relation between memory and narrative in a more complex way. These two theorists affirm the discontinuity and the non-recognition between past events and present discourses and show the danger of conflating memory and narrative without the awareness of its limits.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

"I have never known how to tell a story.

And since I love nothing better than memory and Memory itself, Mnemosyne, I have always felt this inability as a sad infirmity. Why am I denied narration? Why have I not received this gift (*doron*) from Mnemosyne?"

(Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires pour Paul de Man*, 1988:27)

Between January and February of 1984, three weeks after the death of his friend Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida gave some lectures on memory, which were published two years later. He opens his lectures with the following question: Why do those who love *Mnemosyne* lack the ability to tell stories? Is it possible to narrate a story out of our memories?

In one way or another, studies on memory have closely followed the definitions of *mnēmē* and *anamnēsis* outlined by Aristotle in *De memoria et reminiscentia*. To simplify somewhat, we might say that the former is related to a simple evocation of the past and the latter to an active reproduction of the past. Bergson defined two concepts of memory along these same lines: memory as *durée* and memory as imagination. The first was associated with those actions which resulted from a continuous learning process. In contrast, the second entailed the *souvenir* or representation of a certain fact that happened in the past (Bergson, 1913). The problems concerning the definitions of memory involve the perception of how different forms of time consciousness can be related. To what extent is the act of telling stories, which

involves *anamnēsis*, that is creative thinking and imagination, opposed to *mnēmē*? How to relate *durée*, continuity in habits and forms, to representation? How to relate memory with narration?

In what follows, I will draw from Jacques Derrida's and Walter Benjamin's writings on memory in order to better understand the interrelationship between memory and narrative. I will focus my analysis on two basic texts written by them on the issue of memory: *Mémoires pour Paul de Man* (Derrida 1988) and *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire* (Benjamin, 1968; 1939).

### **The Inability to Tell Stories Out of Our Memories**

If we accept that memory involves the new in every act of repetition, we must also accept that memory can neither retrieve past experiences as such, reconstruct the past anew altogether, nor be associated with on-going traditions capable of perpetuating themselves into the present.

In the first lecture about memory, Derrida argues against the Hegelian dialectical conception of history. To Derrida, recognition between past and present events is not possible. As Derrida reads Hölderlin's poem, *Mnemosyne*, he describes memory as an "impossible mourning" or "mourning in default" (Derrida, 1988, 27-57). There is no mourning or there is mourning in default because the object of mourning does not exist in itself, since it lives in "us." He says that memory does not have an object in itself to be remembered and, therefore, we can never hope to uncover this object. He is critical, therefore, of approaches that consider memory as the retrieval of a past that can be thought as an entity detached from the present. As he writes about mourning in default, he writes about mourning without any subject to be mourned.

As Derrida criticises the possibility of recognition between past and present he is also rejecting the idea that the retrieval of the past can bring knowledge and the promise of freedom. These ideas are based on the belief that there is a dialectics between rationality and reality. He argues that Hegel, in his *Encyclopedia*, committed a mistake when he opposed *Erinnerung* to *Gedächtnis* and thought that these experiences could be linked by dialectical thought. Hegel defined *Erinnerung* as reminiscence, that is, the memory capable of interiorising lived experiences. Memory was the poetic experience of death, the relation with the essence of being, which was thought within a non-temporalised past. By contrast, *Gedächtnis* was defined as simultaneously reflexive memory and the mechanical faculty of memorisation. Hegel thought of a dialectical relation between *Erinnerung* and *Gedächtnis*. For Derrida, there is no dialectical relation between them, because these terms do not exist separately from one another. Memory is a continuous movement, "in memory of" rather than "memory" in itself. There is no past independent of the present,

as there is no present independent of the past. Memory can never rescue the past through reflexivity since there is no past in itself to be rescued.

The second aspect that I would like to emphasise is that the philosopher refuses the idea that memory could be considered as a narrative of the past that results from the individual's psychological faculty. For him we are never *we-ourselves* (Derrida, 1988:49). It is believed that memory differs from narrative because it is capable of attaching emotions to facts and by this way it is capable of retrieving the past as lived experience. But to think of narratives of the past as a mere reinvention of the past would be a mistake, because these narratives are never circumscribed by the narcissistic fantasy of our subjectivities. What's more, even the attempt to analyse narrative as the result of interactive acts of remembering and forgetting that take place in the present would be mistaken. Derrida clearly rejects an experience that pretends that it is entirely present to itself in any particular time.

Therefore, Derrida denies to an individual or to individuals in interaction the ability to recreate the past because he emptied the concept of memory from any allusion to subjectivity as a self-enclosed entity. To him, the past would never allow itself to be reanimated within consciousness. As individuals remember, they do not have the ability to see anything with new eyes, since they are inscribed in a chain with different and unpredictable meanings. There is a law beyond any kind of interiorisation or subjectivity (Derrida, 1988:53-57). Therefore, the denial of creativity is crucial for Derrida. Thoughts, bodies, voices, looks and the soul of the dead other, although in the form of signs, symbols, images and mnemonic representations - that is, separate fragments - will never be completely dead and will live in us. The presence of the dead body in us means that we are not given the gift of creativity.

Third Derrida argues against the Heideggerian notion of being in time, since it still works within the limits of the binary constitution of metaphysics. He doubted the ability of consciousness to grasp what might be understood as the text within the temporal horizon. According to him, the "chain" to which we belong is very far from the image of the continuous flux within imagination. He writes about the "law" of the text, which applies not only to the attempts to deal with tradition, but also to those directed towards the uncertainties of the unconscious. To Derrida, Heidegger failed to perceive that the trace is not only prisoner of itself, but also a prisoner of the text, because he did not have the perception of the trace itself.

Like Foucault, and Nietzsche before them both, Derrida does not believe that social and political thinkers can bring the past into the present, either by recognition, or by the interpretation of its form or content without carrying all the constraints that are within the present. History, oral history, cultural history, tradition, memory, reflexive memory, mnemonic memory, psychoanalysis, none of them hold the possibility of going beyond the order of name. The same goes for the proposals of the relatively-opened future within

reflexive imagination. Such attempts to deal with memory can only lead to the creation of a concept that entails a teleological version of either the past or the future.

The concept of time in Derrida's writings yields the understanding that there are neither fixed things nor absolute subjectivities about which we can think. As he writes that we can only refer to "in memory of", he writes about *différance*, with the letter "a", as a way of explaining that there is a movement of continuous production of differences without ever achieving identity. To him, if there is the archivolithic drive, this is never present in persons, neither in itself nor in its effects (Derrida, 1995:25). He emphasises, therefore, the movement of rupture, disjunction and heterogeneity. There is no meaning to be grasped from the past outside the order established in the present, although the present order cannot be freed from the past either. Concerning memory, it is possible to say that we have the illusion that memory carries duration, but memory is not detached from the act of the narrative itself. In short, we do not tell stories out of our memories, because memories are within our narratives.

### **The Modern Inability to Tell Stories Out of Our Memories**

In the above-mentioned essay on Baudelaire, Benjamin analysed Marcel Proust's definition of two different kinds of memory: involuntary and voluntary. These definitions hold strong parallels with those already described in the previous section, from the Greek's notions of *mnēmē* and *anamnēsis* to Bergson's definitions of *durée* and imagination. To Benjamin, while involuntary memory was associated with simple evocation, voluntary memory meant the remembering that was in the service of the intellect, that is, the voluntary recollection of past events as the intentional conservation of the past.

Benjamin related involuntary memory to *Erfahrung*, and associated it with the experience that enters tradition. The experience of time that is possible through involuntary memory is not the one that will find identification with a past event, but the one that will be perpetuated as transmitted meaning within tradition. Benjamin's understanding of *Erfahrung* was very close to the concept of tradition described by hermeneutic approaches. In contrast, he associated voluntary memory with *Erlebnis*, a concept described by Wilhelm Dilthey as the human experience of life, in which the permanent content of what was experienced was merged with the immediacy with which this content was grasped.

Benjamin criticised both the concept of *Erfahrung*, which according to him was based on the assumption of continuous time, and the concept of *Erlebnis* since this latter emphasised the sphere of a certain temporality within human's life (Benjamin, 1968; 1939:155-200). He, therefore, distanced himself from the hermeneutic and phenomenological notions of tradition. He contented that Heidegger sought in vain to rescue history for phenomenology, since he did it

abstractly, that is, through the concept of historicity. History could not be considered as one more category of knowledge, because any kind of knowledge was distorted by history. In addition, he wrote that: “the historical index of the images does not simply say that they belong to a specific time, it says above all that they only enter into legibility at a specific time” (Benjamin, 1989:50).

At this stage, it should be obvious that Benjamin and Derrida’s notions of temporality have many common aspects. The concepts of temporality underlying their writings hold some strikingly affinities. They both rejected the premise of a continuous and homogeneous temporality as well as subjectivist notions about the reconstruction of the past. For them, neither does the past cast its light on what is present, nor does the present cast its light on what is past. Benjamin, like Derrida, did not believe that it would be possible to tell stories out of our memories. Also to Benjamin, narrative retained its primacy over memory. However, unlike Derrida, who has dedicated his life-work to developing the concept of *différance* in a direct dialogue with the philosophical tradition, Benjamin never proposed his approach as a philosophy of life. The inability to tell stories out of memories was the result of the ongoing movement of history, that is, of modernity. While Derrida emphasised the order of name, Benjamin focused on the investigation of dream-images.

To Benjamin Proust’s attempt to merge memory and narrative could not be generalised. He stressed that this attempt was in vain because there has been different sorts of experience throughout time. To him, the shock experience was the experience of modernity. Benjamin, therefore, pointed out to what he called phantasmagorias or *dream-images*, which can be understood as fragmented narratives, and as such, as a source of knowledge. The project to which he dedicated most of his research, the Arcades, entailed the disclosure of the imprints of the nineteenth century’s changes on intimate areas of life and work in Paris. He focused on a catalogue of themes and a gallery of types, which varied from warehouses to the *flâneur*.

Benjamin was deeply convinced that the meaning within modernity could be revealed by dream-images. He attributed the task of this revelation to historical materialism, which could blast the mystical monads in which past and present were merged in a fight against the constraints of structures that reproduced themselves throughout time. Neither was the historian’s instrument made up of interpretative or explanative theories nor was its object made up of social constructions created in the present. Whether talking about monads, constellations, dream-images, phantasmagorias or Ur-phenomena, Benjamin was referring to the merging of the Now and Then. In his words, “an image is that in which the Then and the Now come together into a constellation like a flash of lightening” (Benjamin, 1989:50). Memory as collective representation, that is, as narrative was to be demolished as just another mythology of modernity. This mystical conception was based on the understanding that

although every past and present could be synchronic with certain moments in history, history itself was the diachronic dimension that could allow the legibility of the moment.

In Derrida's thinking, to the infinite collection of significations within memory there is only the infinite collection of significations of our thoughts. We could say that "in memory of", like a traumatic experience, holds no separation between past and present and bears no witness either. Benjamin also wrote about the increase of traumatic experience in modern times. Whereas Derrida denounces a prison of meaning as ephemeral and transitory, Benjamin pointed out that past injustices must be redeemed in the present. Both authors wrote about a situation in which the past never achieves full recognition whatever the historical context within which it is considered. The concern with knowledge about the past is replaced by a concern with the political consequences inherent to the awareness of time. There is no past to be retrieved, there is no present facing death, only justice to be faced or done.

The beauty of Benjamin's writings is that at the same time they pointed out the limits in understanding, they affirmed the mediated character of knowledge. Benjamin held a strong sensibility towards silent wars among different ways of being, of experiencing time. We not only experience the past in different ways, but according to our possibilities. Also in remembering it is necessary to consider who are those who struggle for life. I would say that, according to Benjamin, the merging between narrative and memory has not completely vanished, otherwise it could not be perceived in modern times. The contribution of Benjamin to social theories of modernity is that he dealt throughout his work with the historical condition of human experience and its limits. We not only have disjointed expressions of life, but are disjointed ourselves.

## **Conclusion**

Many authors have argued that the recent emphasis on memory by a myriad of studies has had the predictable effect of neutralising the awareness of what happened in the past. The attempts to narrate, for instance, traumatic situations, such as the holocaust, the bombing of Hiroshima, the Vietnam war, and the fratricide massacres in Yugoslavia, have created the disturbing effect of emptying the tragedy that these catastrophic events meant in the past. In Georges Bataille's words, the revelation of the bombing of the city of Hiroshima is in a sense the opposite of a revelation, since the human representation of this catastrophe is not capable of giving the dimension of the event. According to him, horror has no words to describe itself and feeling cannot be the point of departure for action. As one takes refuge in the world of activity, one does not solve the problems of the profound violence and the

impossible horror which are basic component of human life (Bataille, 1995; 1947:228-9).

As both Derrida and Benjamin wrote about memory and narrative, they showed the impossibility of telling stories out of our memories. For them collective memory should be distinct from any self-sustained act of reconstruction of the past *as well as* distinct from living and unmediated traditions. Although for these authors the past is always created anew, and becomes virtually whatever societies decide, the past is not just an object negotiated by contemporary individuals. They yield the understanding that the lived past also marks out spatial and cultural boundaries, which are responsible for important and crucial aspects of social life that have been forgotten.

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<sup>1</sup> This text is a short version of the article "Memory and Narrative in Social Theory: The Contributions of Jacques Derrida and Walter Benjamin", *Time and Narrative*, 2001, forthcoming, in which there is a more in-depth analysis about Derrida and Benjamin's conceptions of historical time as well as the relation of their thoughts with contemporary social theory.

