



“ Memory ”

Vincent Ferré

► To cite this version:

Vincent Ferré. “ Memory ”. Elizabeth Emery, Richard Utz. Medievalism: Key Critical Terms, Boydell & Brewer, pp.133-140, 2014. halshs-03119342

HAL Id: halshs-03119342

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03119342>

Submitted on 23 Jan 2021

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Memory

Vincent Ferré,
Université Paris Est Créteil (UPEC)

According to Paul Zumthor, the Middle Ages occupies a specific position in our collective memory since this period provides the most obvious term of comparison for readers from the end of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century.¹ Modern medievalism grew in Europe and the United States precisely at this time, when western societies began to feel the uncertainty of the future and the distance of the medieval past. According to Pierre Nora, since the seventies and eighties “our present time [has been] promoted and doomed to memory, that is fetishism of traces, of historian obsession, of patrimonial capitalization [. . .] Everything [has] become historical, deserves to be remembered, and to be kept in memory.”² Are these two phenomena – memory and medievalism – connected?

Memory (Latin *memoria*, Greek *mnēmē*) may be defined as the faculty to preserve and evoke representations of past and absent things – facts or states of mind – and bring them to the present: to *presentify* and actualize them; or, to put it briefly, to keep information in mind and recall it. Still, *memory*, as conceptual “crossroads,”³ belongs to multiple fields and possesses multiple applications: in biology (heredity, neurophysiology), history and psychology, social sciences and humanities, modern technology (computers). Throughout the twentieth and the twenty-first century, the concept has expanded by analogy and metaphor.

As Pierre Nora has remarked, it is not possible to reduce memory to a mere opposition to oblivion or to a shared experience.⁴ *Memory* is best understood in conceptual pairings: present and past, present and future, faculty and result, spontaneity and will, private and public, remembering and forgetting, praise and criticism, oral and written. Memory is both a faculty and a result; it is a synonym of *remembrance*, like vestige, remnant, trace, or *remanence*. More precisely, it is usually conceived, after Aristotle, either as *mnēmē* – a spontaneous remembrance, close to an *affection* (Ricoeur) – or *anamnesis*, that is the result of a voluntary effort to recall.⁵

Nevertheless, these related concepts are not antonyms; they are to be understood in a dialectics with forgetting. Memory is also made of oblivion because it is sometimes discontinuous, as the fortune of texts, writers, or motives reveals: their history is made of disappearances.⁶ Besides, memory is torn between preservation of the past and creation of an image, always risking that the latter will become a delusion. Since memory, both individual and collective, is not inherited, but is the result of a construction, one may try and define the nature of the relation between memory and medievalism: is memory a staple of history and medievalism, or is it a construction? Can we indeed “remember” the Middle Ages, and if so, *what* Middle Ages do we “remember” since we cannot rely on a personal and direct experience of the Middle Ages? The issue is particularly acute in literature and the arts, which offer a form

¹ Paul Zumthor, *Speaking of the Middle Ages* [1980] (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

² Pierre Nora, *Présent, Nation, Mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), 25.

³ Jacques Le Goff, *Histoire et mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 11.

⁴ Nora, *Présent, Nation, Mémoire*, 27.

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* [*La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 2000], trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 4. See also Michèle Gally, *La Trace médiévale et les écrivains d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: P.U.F., 2000), 1.

⁶ For a general reflection, see Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*.

to express memory: since medievalism is forced to rely on *images*, which are the mode of appearance of the “representation of the past,”⁷ what is it but a form that is another (further) mediation? What is the limit between *image* and *imagination*, and where does invention, or *fiction*, begin?

Given its importance in education and learning, or as a literary *topos*, the Middle Ages is associated with memory.⁸ In keeping with techniques inherited from Antiquity, memory was indeed at the core of medieval teaching, as Frances Yates argues;⁹ and the celebration of a glamorous past, of the Arthurian court or of ancient Greece, is a commonplace in fictional and “historical” works by Wace, Monmouth, Layamon, and Chrétien de Troyes, to name a few.

Even though the term seldom appears as a separate entry in literary companions, lexicons, or encyclopedias, memory is of great importance not only for the Middle Ages, but also for medievalism defined as a study and a *recreation* of the past, learned and creative activities – hence a sort of *mise en abyme*, since medievalism deals with the “memory” of an era itself engaged with memory. This dual approach is sometimes viewed as corresponding to rival kinds of memories, a learned memory (aiming at authenticity) being challenged by a creative memory so to speak, associated with representation, image, and freedom from accuracy. The latter considers the medieval past as an aesthetic category, a pool of images that the mind may use.¹⁰ Nevertheless, it is possible to argue that these two aspects belong to the same impulse, as Jeff Rider suggests:

The Middle Ages are, today, a body of artifacts [. . .] and, more importantly, the worlds we imagine on the basis of these artifacts. Imagining these past worlds, whether from a historicist, academic point of view or from an anachronistic, popular point of view is useful to us because it helps us discover new modes of being-in-the-world, new capacities for knowing ourselves, and improve our abilities to understand and to configure the experiential world and our lives.¹¹ Is memory a staple of learned and creative medievalism, as it is of history, according to Jacques Le Goff; or is memory created, instead of inherited, by medievalism? Le Goff argues against those who tend to identify memory and history, and even tend to “prefer, so to speak, memory, that is allegedly more authentic, more ‘true’ – history being artificial, and, above all, a falsification of memory.”¹² For Le Goff, the hierarchy is much different: “Memory is the staple [*matière première*] of history. Either spiritual, oral, or written, memory is the breeding ground” for historians.¹³ Should one follow this suggestion, at least in the case of the learned side of medievalism, and consider that anything like *memory* exists in itself, that could be used as *matière première*?

In *Realms of Memory*, Pierre Nora defines *lieux de mémoire* as objects, places, landscapes, symbols, institutions, or characters.¹⁴ Medieval and postmedieval *realms of memory* include, in the three-volume project, monasteries, royal sanctuaries, cathedrals and churches such as Notre-Dame de Paris and Vézelay, medieval cities such as Rheims (site of

⁷ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 5.

⁸ See Elma Brenner, et al, ed., *Memory and the Commemoration of Medieval Culture* (London: Ashgate, 2013), and Bernard Andenmatten, Panayota Badinou, Michel E. Fuchs, Jean-Claude Mühlethaler, eds., *Lieux de mémoire antiques et médiévaux. Texte, image, histoire: la question des sources* (Lausanne: BSN Press, A contrario Campus, 2012).

⁹ Frances Yates, *Art of Memory* (New York and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966).

¹⁰ Gil Bartholeyns, “Le Passé sans l’Histoire. Vers une anthropologie du temps,” in *Médiévalisme. Modernité du Moyen Âge*, ed. Vincent Ferré (Paris: ILTC, 2010): 47-60.

¹¹ Jeff Rider, “L’utilité du Moyen Âge,” in *Médiévalisme. Modernité du Moyen Âge*, ed. Vincent Ferré (Paris: ILTC, 2010): 35-46 (35).

¹² Le Goff, *Histoire et mémoire*, 10.

¹³ Le Goff, *Histoire et mémoire*, 10.

¹⁴ Pierre Nora, ed. *Lieux de mémoire* [1984-1992]; abridged transl.: *Realms of Memory*, Columbia University Press, 1996-1999; transl. *Rethinking France: Les Lieux de mémoire*, 4 vols., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999-2010.

coronations), feudal borders, Viollet-le-Duc's restorations, and medieval people such as Joan of Arc. This list shows that *memory* is close to *legacy*, and that patrimony is often used for commemoration. Two comments are to be made with regard to the historical context and the cultural frame. First, the issue of *memory* was especially relevant at the end of the twentieth century: Nora establishes a parallel between the nineteenth century's discovery of Gothic art and patrimony and the last decades of the twentieth century, "obsessed with the Middle Ages" and "by a desire for memory," and characterized by an "extension of the notion of patrimony."¹⁵ Second, *Lieux de mémoire* focuses on French history, but Nora contemplates the possibility of exporting the notion not only to other European *lieux de mémoire*, but also to the United States; and the fact is that similar endeavors have been undertaken in the Netherlands, Central Europe and Spain.¹⁶

In the same essay, whose title (*Présent, Nation, mémoire*) insists on the relation between present and memory, Nora explores the value judgments common to all statements about memory. Such judgments have varied in the course of centuries. In ancient Greece, memory was symbolized by the goddess Mnemosyne, who was herself the mother of the nine muses: Calliope (eloquence and epic poetry), Clio (history), Erato (elegy), Euterpe (music), Melpomene (tragedy), Polyhymnia (lyricism), Terpsichore (dance), Thalia (comedy), Urania (astronomy); this genealogy is another proof of the link between imagination and memory. Plato's *Phaedrus* reflects a positive judgment on (oral) live memory, and the criticism against writing, accused of being a "dead" and useless memory. This legacy from Antiquity was reinterpreted through the Middle Ages, when Thomas Aquinas and Albert the Great (among other philosophers and theologians) commented upon theories by Plato, Aristotle, Augustine: Aristotle's *De memoria et reminiscencia* (in a Latin translation) was viewed as an "art of memory" (*ars memoriae*) like the *Ad Herennium*, erroneously attributed to Cicero.¹⁷

Although memory as a faculty has sometimes been criticized, the memory of the medieval past, that is the image of the Middle Ages, was in the nineteenth century instrumental for the construction of a national conscience and of a "collective memory" – in the sense of Maurice Halbwachs¹⁸ – even though the phenomenon appeared earlier, as soon as "postmedieval" times began, with the sixteenth century.¹⁹

It is well known that in England, Italy, Germany and France, for instance, a certain image of the Middle Ages has regularly been summoned by partisans of a national, and even nationalistic, sentiment. A "national memory" emerged – according to Pierre Nora – between 1820 and 1840 in France; and as history became both a "science" and an institution at the end of the nineteenth century, it subjugated this memory, which gave birth to official history, to the authority of the state. Nora suggests the phrase "nation-mémoire" [*nation-memory*] to comment upon the association of memory, state, and nation in France.²⁰ The medieval past was later summoned to explain historical events, as Stefan Goebel has shown, to understand, and overcome, the disaster of the Great War, which was perceived by a general audience as a Crusade, and soldiers viewed as knights.²¹

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. II, 3, p. 657

¹⁶ Pierre Nora (*Présent, Nation, mémoire*, 373-374) mentions research programs in Spain, Italy, Germany, The Netherlands.

¹⁸ Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective* [1950]; *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

¹⁹ See for instance Richard Utz's essay on the "invention" of Arthur by sixteenth- and seventeenth- century authors: "Hic iacet Arthurus? Situating the Medieval King in English Renaissance Memory," *Studies in Medievalism*, XV (*Memory and Medievalism*) 2007: 26-40.

²⁰ In his conclusion to the section on *Nation*, in the second part of *The Realms of Memory*.

²¹ Stefan Goebel, *The Great War and Medieval Memory: War, Remembrance and Medieval Memory in Britain and Germany: 1914-1940* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 14 ff. on memory.

But what is the impact on the general idea of the Middle Ages in such a case, when a model of a “Middle Ages” that has never existed is created from a modern point of view and for political purposes? Not only is this model used to “explain” the Great War, but it also contributes to the creation of a biased image of the Middle Ages, of a medieval reference that does not exist in itself, but is a construction.

Literature and the arts – and particularly epics – were objects of political interest at the turn of the nineteenth century. In keeping with medieval epics, loaded with a political and “national” purpose,²² readings of *The Song of Roland* or of the Nibelungen tradition included biased interpretations in France and Germany, influenced by the context of the Franco-Prussian war. Fifty years later, in Germany, the Nazi regime used such interpretations – as did the fascist regime in Italy with the Roman Empire – to try and legitimate its power.

To mention a less famous example, the singer Yvette Guilbert, Elizabeth Emery has shown how the manipulation of medieval heritage may take over the desire for preservation in less literary genres like songs. Famous for her performance of “medieval songs” at the turn of the nineteenth century, Guilbert was viewed as an embodiment of France, despite the fact that “the art of performing medieval song ha[d] been lost over the years.”²³ What would constitute an aporia for a modern reader was not perceived as such, at the time; Guilbert’s audience appeared receptive to her attempt “to make the characters and emotions of old songs come alive for audiences unfamiliar with them.”²⁴

More generally, literary works of the twentieth century configure the relation between the medieval past and political or national issues. According to historians such as François Hartog, the first quarter of the past century underwent a crisis of temporality reflected in its literature.²⁵ It is not surprising that Hartog should mention Proust in his analysis, and present *In Search of Lost Time* as a symptom of this historical moment when memory came to the foreground, as it did again at the end of the same century, suspending the movement and the projection toward the future. One may add that this novel, in which the Middle Ages plays such a great part, and is present through characters – the Guermantes family as well as Françoise, the servant, who is called a “medieval peasant (a survivor in the nineteenth century)” – places (Combray), names, and stories as examples of the plurality and complexity of memory with regard to the Middle Ages.

In Proust’s novel, memory is both individual and collective. A distinction between voluntary and involuntary memory lies, for example, at the core of “Combray,” the first part of the first volume, and is theorized in *Time Regained*, the last volume; the volumes in between progressively constitute a memory for the reader, who follows the thread of the hero’s life, and benefits from the help of the narrator. *In Search of Lost Time* also appears as a shrine for the memory of an epoch: the turn of the twentieth century, characterized with the rise of *bourgeoisie*, and the end of aristocratic rules, aristocrats being, in the novel, remnants of a medieval heritage.

In literature, in cinema (and also in games and videogames), in *fantasy* works less canonical, but typical of the end of the twentieth century, memory is at stake, as a reinterpretation of medieval *topoi* or elements, and in imitation of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* (1954-55). First, with the influence of G. R. R. Martin’s *Game of Thrones*, *fantasy* novels have been, quite lately, claiming fidelity to the “real” Middle Ages, either medieval mentalities or medieval weapons. For instance, Mary Gentle’s *Book of Ash* (2000), which describes the life

²² Paul Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiévale*, 1972; transl. *Toward a Medieval Poetics*, University of Minnesota Press, 1992.

²³ Elizabeth Emery, “From Cabaret to Lecture Hall: Medieval Song as Cultural Memory in the Performances of Yvette Guilbert,” *Memory and Medievalism* 15 (2007): 3-25 (3).

²⁴ Emery, “From Cabaret to Lecture Hall,” 10.

²⁵ *Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2003).

of a female warrior and gives many details about her armor, appears as a byproduct of *war studies*, studies in military history; and many contemporary writers are involved in associations aiming at recreating medieval scenes and battles.²⁶ It is also common to the many rewritings of the Arthurian matter of the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century.²⁷

Second, since the end of the sixties imitators of the prominent features of Tolkien's romances and epic poems have flourished: the last March of the Ents (against Saruman), the desperate challenge of Sauron's armies by Aragorn, the death of Théoden, King of Rohan, the outcome of Frodo's journey [...] are all celebrated by songs created to commemorate these deeds, which become "the brave things in the old tales and songs," as Sam says on the Stairs of Cirith Ungol²⁸.

On a deeper level, memory is not only a motive but also the foundation of *The Lord of the Rings*, since Tolkien creates – for the reader, who does not have a "direct" experience of the Middle Ages, not even through contact with medieval artifacts such as manuscripts – an artificial (fictional) memory by means of allusions to poems or narratives that he has previously written and which are referred to by the narrator; and those texts themselves are based on a rich intertextuality, that is a way of conveying a literary patrimony. Memory has many aspects in this work, especially since one of Tolkien's originalities is an intimate contact with medieval texts, as a philologist: It has been shown (by Tom Shippey, in particular) that Tolkien's literary achievement may be seen as a kind of *fictional philology*,²⁹ in keeping with his own definition of philology, explained in the *Valedictory Address to the University of Oxford* (1959): "Philology rescued the surviving documents from oblivion and ignorance, and presented to lovers of poetry and history fragments of a noble past that without it would have remained forever dead and dark."³⁰

More broadly speaking, Tolkien's entire work might be examined in the perspective of *memory*, and in relation to political interpretations of medieval heritage and memories. His essays on *Beowulf* underline the importance of *lof* (praise) in the poem; a shorter work like *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* (1953), a sequel to the medieval *Battle of Maldon* in the form of a dramatic dialogue, exemplifies the danger of memory, through the description of the fascination exerted by literary models on Beorhtnoth, an Anglo-Saxon chief who wishes to imitate Beowulf. In Tolkien's interpretation (Tolkien develops historical facts and transforms the character), Beorhtnoth dies because he wants to remain in memories and to behave according to literary (epic) memory, as does Don Quixote. The political role of Beorhtnoth is a sign of the fundamental issue at stake, for this English writer who, in his youth, had a mind to make "a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story – the larger founded on the lesser in contact with the earth, the lesser drawing splendour from the vast backcloths – which I could dedicate simply to: to England; to my country."³¹

Does Tolkien's work represent a degree further in the "democratization" of memory, this time through the appropriation of Western memory by the common reader? Most of his work was created between World War I (1916) and after the end of World War II (1955), at a time of methodological change in historical approaches. Step by step, history as a field became

²⁶ These remarks follow Anne Besson's analysis in her volume on *Fantasy* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2007).

²⁷ Anne Besson, 'Le *topos* de la mémoire dans les réécritures arthuriennes contemporaines', in Hélène Bouget, Amaury Chauou, Cédric Jeanneau, eds., *Histoires des Breagnes 4. Conservateurs de la mémoire* (Brest: CRBC / UBO), 2013, 56 ff.

²⁸ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 50th Anniversary Edition (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 711.

²⁹ See Ferré "Tolkien ou la philologie fictionnelle: du mot à la fiction", *Fabula LHT* 5 (2009), published online: <<http://www.fabula.org/lht/5/ferre.html>>

³⁰ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), 235.

³¹ J. R. R. Tolkien, *Letters* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), 144.

less subjugated to national discourses; with the help of the humanities and social sciences, it offered an alternative narrative of modern societies. Still, one should never forget that, because “medievalists have often based their interpretations on post-medieval sources,” both in the academic field and in literature or the arts, their achievements have often resulted in manipulating, transforming, and even creating, memory.³²

Further Reading

Studies in Medievalism, XV (*Memory and Medievalism*). London: D. S. Brewer, 2007.

Goebel, Stefan, *The Great War and Medieval Memory: War, Remembrance and Medieval Memory in Britain and Germany: 1914-1940*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Brenner, Elma, ed., *Memory and the Commemoration of Medieval Culture*. London, Ashgate, 2013.

³² Karl Fugelso, “Editorial Note,” *Medievalism and Memory*, 2.