

## **From the Memory of Things to the Remembrance of The Thing**

Thank goodness I remembered. Thank goodness I remembered to arrive here at the right time, in order to speak to you. Had I not remembered, you were sitting here in front of an empty podium, wasting your time in vain. Memory, so it seems, enables our life and governs them. Without memory, with its archiving mechanisms, our life, both our personal and professional, would have been turned into a nightmare. We would be confused and disordered, forgetting what we are ought to do and when to do it.

How did I remember? I did so with the help of the archiving mechanisms which are at my disposal, which are at your disposal too. In my case, I just wrote down in my diary that today I have to talk here in front of you. You too have probably wrote down in your personal diary, whether digital or manual, that today a talk about memory is about to be held, as part of the international week taking place in Bielefeld. This mutual inscription is, after all, what enabled our encounter. Otherwise we would have forgotten about the whole affair, and would not have come to the right place at the right time.

This, of course, is only a small example of the importance of memory and of its archiving mechanisms, which enable us to put our lives together: the clocks, the calendars, the diaries, and so forth. One can also add the economical archiving mechanisms, including the cash registers, the bank accounts, the credit records, the balances, invoices and receipts, and so forth. And why shouldn't we mention also the political, medical and legal archiving mechanisms. All these are meant for one thing: to enable us to remember, and hence to live. Without Memory and its archiving mechanisms, so it seems, we would not have been able to live at all.

But memory, as just described, enables our lives only in their technical aspect. Memory addresses the question of "how", but not the question of "why". We know, with the aid of memory, that we do pay our bills, draw money, meet with other people, coordinate our movement in space and time, and so forth. But the question why should we bother to do all this remains unanswered. What this fuss is all about?

In order to address this question, I would like to introduce the notion of remembrance, which is not to be confused with memory. These two notions – remembrance and memory – draw on Plato's distinction between *mneme* and *hypomnesis*, as they appear in his famous myth of writing in *Phaedrus*. Let us delve for a while on these two Platonic

notions: The myth of writing is grounded on Plato's assumption that true knowledge, which is always knowledge of Being, and in the Platonic context, knowledge of the Ideas, is not acquired through experience, but implanted in the soul prior to its incarnation. Hence knowledge and memory are one and the same. The soul in its Platonic sense should therefore be viewed as the inner space in which the living remembrance of the Ideas pulsates. In this respect, knowing is nothing other than the renewed presencing of the Ideas implanted in the soul prior to its incarnation.

In this context, Plato distinguishes between the notion of *mneme*, the memory, where the real and live remembrance of the Ideas is stored, and the notion of *hypomnesis*, the archive, where the fixed imprints that stand in for the remembrance of the Ideas are stored. Knowing is identified with remembrance (*an-a-mnesis*), that is, with the Ideas' renewed presencing in memory, and *not* with being reminded, that is, with the production of an imprint, mark, or sign, in the archive, that is added to the living remembrance of the Ideas. The remembrance of the Ideas is *not* presence itself, but rather, a *re-presentation of presence*. Plato seeks to reduce the representation of living memories to the point where the representation of presence as remembrance is deemed tantamount to presence itself.

As we are about to see, these two notions, memory and remembrance – as in the case of Plato's notions – are separated by an abyss. The first difference between them is that while memory could be described as that which is stored in the archive, remembrance is that which eludes the archive, that which is un-archivable, so to speak. The second difference is that memory enables us to live technically, while remembrance has to do with what we live for.

And what is that thing we live for? That thing is what I call "the Thing". I call this thing "The Thing" since it belongs to the order of the un-named, to all of those things for which a name, or any other form of signification, cannot be given. The Thing is that which is, that which is perhaps the most present, but at the same time it is that which eludes naming, definition, characterization, and so forth. More precisely, the Thing is not what is now, but that which once was and is now no longer. That Thing is what stands at the core of our lives, toward which we are always already oriented. The Thing is that which we constantly and relentlessly long and strive for, that which we wish to raise, like a phoenix, from the ashes of the past, and to relive it again, if only for a brief moment.

In order to properly understand the nature of this Thing, perhaps it will be better to halt for a while the flow of argumentation, and turn to an example. Marcel Proust's acclaimed novel "In Search of Lost Time" could be seen as a voyage to the Thing, in an attempt to salvage it from oblivion by inscribing in language that which cannot be inscribed in language. The novel could therefore be seen as an immense fabric of signifiers with which Proust desperately tries to capture the remembrance of the lost Thing.

The Proustian Thing is, of course, the little French village of Combray, in which he used to spend his joyful childhood vacations. Those vacations seem for Proust as the embodiment of happiness, as experienced during a springtime stroll along the river banks teeming with life; during a visit to the family household saturated with odors and aromas. This childhood happiness results from the wonder about the gift of life, as well as from the adolescent experience of life without worry and anxiety, that is, of life that have not yet been burdened by the knowledge of sexuality and death. Proust, in contrast to us, has never parted from his childhood. His entire adult life could be viewed as a desperate attempt to capture the lost Thing.

What is important for us is that in order to revive the remembrance of that unburdened happiness of childhood, no glancing at the village's photographs, at the chart of its roads and houses, no browsing through the village's archives – where events of birth and death, marriage and divorce, are inscribed – could come to our aid. The village's archive – wherein its official memory, whether geographical or genealogical – is stored, could not come to our aid in attempting to capture its thinghood, so to speak. This is precisely the thinghood of the Thing, which Proust missed so much in his adult life, and that evaded him like water dripping away from a palm of a hand.

What do arise in Proust the remembrance of the lost Thing? As we just said, it is not the archive, but rather, the intoxicating smell of the Madeleine cookies that have just come out of the oven. The cookies' smell – which Proust used to feast on at the house of his aunt Leonie – is what instantly ignites the remembrance of the Thing, bringing it to life again. The recollected Thing is present here and now, at once, live and vibrant more than ever, in all its plenitude, as if it was always here; as if it has not been crushed to dust under the burden of the years.

The agents of the remembrance of the Thing – and here a first conclusion can be drawn – are not the numbers, the letters, the graphs, nor any other

means of inscription used to archive memory. The agents of remembrance belong much more to the senses than to the order of the signifier. The agents of the remembrance of the Thing are the smells that once intoxicated us; the tastes that once filled our mouth; the melody that once carried us to sleep; the touch that once bewitched our body with its calming warmth. Remembrance belongs much more to the body than to language and thought. The body is that blank slate – as it is referred to by philosophers in their tiring discussions – on which the Thing inscribes its mark. Language and thought perhaps memorize things, but the body remembers the Thing.

And what is "that Thing" – if to borrow from Derrida, who borrows this term of speech from Shakespeare, as he refers to the ghost of Hamlet's dead father? – What is that Thing that the body remembers? Here we stand in front of a paradox: one cannot speak about the Thing because speech and the Thing are contradictive. Speech, as Derrida shows us, is an archiving mechanism of itself, and hence can express only memory but not remembrance. How, then, could we speak about the Thing? How can we bring the Thing into speech? Perhaps only by way of a speech that speaks other than speaking. That is, by way of the scream, the whisper, the hum, the mumbling, and the sigh of love.

Since I'm not at home at the moment, but rather, here, speaking to you, you would definitely agree with me that I would better not utter, in front of you, all those weird voices. Nevertheless, I will try my best to say something about that Thing.

What is that Thing on which I do not cease speaking about? It seems it could be sketched in terms of some kind of wholesomeness before its inevitable loss. The Thing is the wholesome, the exuberant, the saturated, the excessive. It is that which is denied of any lack or scarcity. It is that which is not yet familiar with the slit of the sword of the irretrievable loss. We all commence from the Thing and then depart from it, fall outside of it, expelled out of it without ever returning to it again.

I shall speak about the Thing in the psychoanalytic context. In this context, we have already addressed the affinity, in Proust's case, between the Thing and childhood. But here I refer not only to childhood alone, but more broadly, to what can be termed as life before life, that is, life before being aware of the fact that we are alive, that is, life prior to its doubling by the concept and the signifier.

This is the life of the infant amidst his mother's bosom, wherein both are one flesh—one Thing—so to speak. In this form of formless being of the

infant within the maternal Thing, milk flows like water, love is lavished endlessly, and no threat is to be seen. The Thing, so it seems, is the place where nothing is lacking. All this could have go on forever, where it not the appearance of the Father in the midst of the infinite universe of the infant, which, by means of the sword of the law – as a function of negation and prohibition – severs the infant's mouth from the mother's nipple, and by that banishes the infant to the exile of the world.

Having portrayed the Thing in its psychoanalytic aspect, it is now within our reach to sketch an initial outline of the thinghood of the Thing. Firstly, the Thing could be characterized by plenitude and exuberance, by wholesomeness and innocence. Secondly, The Thing could be characterized by loss. The feature of loss is no less essential to the Thing than that of plenitude.

But the Thing does not get lost as if it has never been. As a stone that sinks into the water, so the Thing, in its sinking into oblivion, leaves behind ripples, that is, traces. These traces that the Thing leaves behind as it sinks into oblivion are, precisely, what I call remembrance. This thread of traces, the traces of remembrance, is what we follow throughout our lives in our incessant chase after the lost Thing. Here we arrive at what I really wanted to say: memory remembers things. Remembrance

remembers the Thing. Memory remembers times and events. Remembrance remembers *the* Time and *the* Event. Remembrance remembers the time before time, that is, it remembers the being of the time before anything has come into being.

After sketching the outlines of the Thing, it is time now to sketch the outlines of remembrance. Firstly, memory is always public, while remembrance is always private. Memory is confiscated by what could be termed the Big Other, whether it is identified with the state, the Father, the priest or the rabbi. The Big Other is the sovereign of time and space. As such, he determines for us the time of commemoration, that is, what are the occasions in which we are obliged to remember. Memory is therefore formulated by the Big Other as a decree: we are obliged to remember. At Saturday, for example, we are obliged to cease from all work and to commemorate the wonder of creation. At the day of independence, we are obliged to commemorate the formation of our country, and so forth.

The Big Other does not only determine the time of commemoration, but also its character. It generates an entire economy of memory, incorporating festivities and sermons. Those festivities and sermons could be viewed as manifestations of the appropriation of remembrance by the Big Other by means of converting it into memory. By doing so, the Big

Other turns remembrance into a costum with a distinct protocol of conduct. It subdues the remembrance of the Thing into an economy of space and time, which he himself governs. In particular interest for us is the case of mourning: The commemoration of the private loss is appropriated by the Big Other who regulates it by giving it a distinct form: the sister who lost a brother; the wife who lost a husband; the parent who lost a son (as in the case of the film "Frantz" that we saw in the course of the workshop); the son who lost a father, are all directed by the Big Other to mourn their dead in the same manner.

And remembrance? Remembrance is, as we said, private and personal, and as such eludes the economy of memory as dictated by the Big Other. It is perhaps the private and personal as such, in the sense that it defines our singularity. And what is that remembrance all about? First and foremost, it is the remembrance of the maternal Thing, which, as discussed earlier, is lost forever. We do not cease to seek after that lost Thing in our current lovers, which serve as our objects of desire precisely because we unconsciously identify in them a trace of the lost maternal Thing. Furthermore, such a trace could be found in almost anyone that has anything to do with the lost Thing: It could be found not only in the lover, that the sword of fate had set apart from us, but also in the son that

has fallen in battle; as well as in the mother who has departed from us to soon, without leaving us the time to tell her all what we wanted to say.

Remembrance is always ours and ours alone. That particular taste, that arises in each and every one of us his or hers childhood. That particular smell, that carries each and every one of us to remote places in which he or she have once been. Remembrance cannot be shared. It cannot be explained. Only you can recognize it; only you can feel it; only you can know about its existence. Remembrance is hence the most private and the most personal. Its singular nature is singularity itself. Remembrance is therefore a secret. It is the secret of the Thing that each and every one of us carries along with him or her to wherever he or she goes, without being able to share it with no one else.

Additionally, memory takes place in regular occasions, and by that regulates the flow of time. We are familiar with the sequence of the year according to the holydays taking place along its course. Remembrance, on the contrary, comes in surprise, without anticipation and warning. This uninvited guest does not regulate the course of time, but rather disrupts it. Remembrance tares a hole in time, through which long forgotten experiences suddenly resurface. Not only that remembrance tares up time, it also threatens its due course. Remembrance, if to adduce Shakespeare's

famous line from Hamlet—Time is out of joint—un-joins time by subverting its regulation.

The remembrance of childhood, for example, can resurface in the middle of a work meeting, just because someone had opened a window and let the intoxicating smells of spring to burst in to the room. The special way of walking of the dead brother can re-appear in the walk of the son, who is now turning into a man. The face of the departed lover is embodied in the face of a woman who passes us by on the street. A song played on the radio can remind us of past, happier, times, that is, times that were closer to the Thing.

Memory is governed by command: we can be ordered to remember in a specific date, as often happens in various sermons that commemorate an important past event in the life of a nation. The Big Other, so it seems, can command me to memorize, but it cannot command me to remember. The Big Other can raise a memory within me, but not remembrance. Remembrance has its own rules. It comes and goes as it pleases, in accord with its own weird logic and without any foreseeable reason. And it does so usually in the most inappropriate time and place.

Time has come now to address the spectral character of remembrance, if to adduce a Derridian term. Not only that remembrance surprises us by its sudden eruption, which un-joins time, in the middle of driving, for example, or in the middle of a lecture, remembrance also haunts us. It resurfaces again and again when we are sure we managed to get rid of it; when it seems we have already forgotten all about it, and that it would never bother us again. In the midst of all that, remembrance, just like a ghost, suddenly bursts into our lives, tearing up our thread of thought, disrupting our flow of speech, cutting off our work and forestalling our plans. Not only that remembrance bursts in to our lives, sometimes it takes control over it too. We become petrified in the face of the spectral re-appearance of the dead one, who comes to visit us. We are helpless in the face of the spectral re-appearance of the departed lover in the midst of a new date.

It is impossible to ignore the re-appearance of the specter of remembrance in our daily lives. It is impossible to set it aside and focus on the matter we are dealing with at the moment. It is impossible, because strangely enough, this uninvited guest—the guest of the ghost of remembrance—is somewhat more alive than life itself.

The remembrance's appearance is bright and scintillating, undeniable and certain as a mathematical axiom. As it comes to stand in front of us it declares itself as an undeniable fact. Anyone who ever experienced such a phenomenon (or, should I say, *spectro-menon*) surely knows what it feels like. The dead one, who comes to visit us in our dream, is more alive than he was during his entire life. The remembrance of the departed lover is more vital than her actual presence at times we were together. And still, she cannot be touched. She disappears in to thin air as we approach her.

And this is the reason – as stated earlier – why remembrance, and not memory, grounds our life, and by that imbues it with meaning. Remembrance, as that which haunts us, is that which impels us toward the Thing. Remembrance is that which impels us toward the Thing that once was, after which we do not cease to pursue. Life could be portrayed as a ceaseless pursuit of the Thing; as a yearning for its return. Life are guided by the hope to have once more that which once was; by the aspiration that that which once was will be again. Life promises nothing were it not the return of the Thing. In this promise we must put our trust.

But this promise should be treated ironically: we must pursue the Thing while knowing that we will never fully attain it. We must pursue the Thing while knowing that the Thing will always evade us. We must

pursue the Thing while knowing that the Thing will never be again what it once was.

Moreover, we must pursue the Thing while knowing that the Thing never actually was, because it does not belong to the order of Being. We must acknowledge that the Thing belongs to an order of another kind; to an order that could perhaps be termed the Order of Alterity. This means that the Thing can be present only as remembrance, that is, only as a specter and a trace. Remembrance as specter and trace is the only possible presence of the Thing. The promise of the return of the Thing is our future. Not the foreseeable future, the calculable future, but the future as such, the future that evades all calculation. This is the future to come, the future as *a-venir*, if to put it in Derridian terms, which is the return of the past. The return *of* the past of the Thing, and the return of the past *as* the Thing. This return of the Thing, which is our future, which is our past, is the thing which we live for.

Although it is impossible to say anything about the Thing, I will nevertheless give it two possible names. One name would be redemption, and the other would be love, which are two names for one and the same thing, that is, the Thing.

Thank you!