

Premio «Antonio Feltrinelli» per le Scienze storiche

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Conferenza di

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## **THE FATE OF HISTORY IN THE AGE OF TWITTER**

President, Ladies and Gentlemen of the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei,

Though I am here before you for my words, none of those at my command adequately describe the deep sense of honour at receiving the Premio Antonio Feltrinelli. I hope it's not too presumptuous for me to express a connexion with the Accademia for no less than three reasons (it's rule as you know for historians to divide everything into three). First, since your founding in 1603 by Federico Cesi you have been the *Lincei*, the lynxes, the beasts whose sharpness of sight is such that it pierces rocks and walls. Now I am a professor of art history as well as history, so the first condition of the work I have tried to do depends on the equal attention paid to text and image; which commands above all else the thoughtfulness of *looking*, a discipline common to the arts and the sciences. Second, the *Lincei* began with a famous collaboration of Dutch and Italian minds, with the transalpine enthusiasms of Johannes van Eck, in itself an expression of the needful union between the classical and the empirical - something also dear to my heart and way of thinking. And third, and not least, I would not be standing in front of you at all, were it not for the man whose work I read with avid wonder but also a shock of recognition, when I was at school: namely Benedetto Croce, a historian for whom - in the end - moral decency came to be inseparable from intellectual penetration. It is in fact with Croce's most famous epigram in mind - "all history is contemporary history" - that I want to offer some remarks about the fate of history in our own time.

I forget just when it was when I realised that when the young spoke of memory it was more likely to be about computers than history; a while back at any rate. It was my much missed colleague Hayim Yosef Yerushalmi, the author, among other works, of *Zakhor*, his *tour de force* about the conflicting claims of memory and history in the Jewish tradition, who first told me about *CRUCIAL MEMORY*, which I hasten to add is not a region of the hippocampus (or maybe it is) but a web site located in Memphis, Indiana, a town whose name itself might have provided a whole chapter of speculations and meditations for Giambattista Vico. I was myself then busy writing the book which, fatefully, had in its title the M word (Landscape and Memory - the title was not casually chosen), news of which prompted Yerushalmi to tell me that the subject had become something of a craze in advanced circles of cultural history especially in Paris. So fashionable was it, he said that he had been invited to a colloquium on the subject at the EHESS but had not gone since he couldn't remember where he had put the invitation. To this day I'm not sure whether he was joking.

*CRUCIAL MEMORY* of Memphis Indiana (or as it now sometimes likes to present itself *Crucial Memory Ballistix*) is still the go-to site for expanding your storage all the way up to a gigantic 960GB which ought to be enough to accommodate everything every piece of data ever generated, say, in the Republic of San Marino. Years ago, when I first visited the site, I remember encountering the friendly command - yet definitely a command - that "*All memory slots should be fully populated.*" and thinking "you're telling me." More surprisingly perhaps it doesn't seem to have been superseded by the infinite memory storage of The Cloud (and we don't have time to ponder the semiotics of that choice of nomenclature with its associations of celestial omniscience). But if *history* is your business, the extraordinary revolution in data harvesting we are currently living through, can't help but trigger a moment of reflection on that perennial issue - the complicated relationship between history and memory.

The default temper of such reflections, these days, tends to pessimism; clouded, you might say, by gloom. The cyber-universe, the truism runs, is profoundly unhistorical. It is dominated by two modes both of them inimical to history's self-definition as a critical

discipline, a sifter of fact from fancy, significance from indiscriminate recall. The input side is accommodated by infinite storage; the output, at least in the form of the tweet, by its opposite, enforced compression; the sovereignty (if you're lucky) of aphorism; if you're unlucky, pointless exclamation. Communication is then conducted by strings of these aphoristic exclamations (and denunciations): slogans, mottos, epithets, the occasional epigram, anything within the 140 character rule (what criteria governed the setting of that particular number you wonder?) Even more hostile to history's craving for endurance, the battle against oblivion which embodied in the opening sentence of Herodotus's history, its hippocratic oath, is programmed self-erasure; the ease of delete. This mostly happens in visual documents, at its most extreme in Snapchat which erases an image exactly ten seconds after it is received (and thus operates as an anti-archive or gallery). But very often we treat texts (and how revealing it is in this company to be using that word to describe SMS messages) perishably. (Although somewhere or other, of course, every text has been digitally warehoused). When asked about the paradox of self-liquidating images, the CEO and Founder of Snapchat responded (in a very postmodern way) that understanding sent images as portraits, in the sense of something meant to persist, was a mistake; that the identification of a persona with its momentarily and arbitrarily caught image was the romance of the elderly; that there *was* in fact not essential us to be caught, framed, perpetuated; that we were no more than a succession of equally random and ephemeral impressions; each one superseding the last. We are all, in fact, serial.

Now the temporal flicker and the infinitely elastic warehouse seem, as I've said, to be hostile to the most basic operational mode of history, which is committed to a hierarchy of significance, and to endurance. History, the commonplace, goes, defines itself *against* memory; it is judgement not recollection, a process of ordering rather than a mere receiving station. The very word, *historia* for the Greeks, connoted, inseparably, the analytical element of inquiry, of question-posing, along with its other conjoined sense of story-telling report. Clio, our muse, like her sisters was begotten from nine nights of passion between Jupiter and the goddess of memory and imagination, Mnemosyne. She was born from, but not at all identical to, her mother. To put it another way, she left home. And what she was destined to

make, first in the chronicles of antiquity; then of the monks, then of the humanism reborn in the Renaissance, then in the self-consciously *histoires philosophiques* of Voltaire and Gibbon and the consummate epics of Macaulay, Jules Michelet, Leopold von Ranke, Bancroft and Parkman, were master narratives; texts, generated as literature but towards the end of the nineteenth century at any rate yearning after the methodology of science and claiming - at their most ambitious - something of its empirical validity. At its most extreme (J. B. Bury for instance) history was supposed to be science or nothing. And - in the French *grandes écoles*, in the colleges of Oxbridge (or later the LSE); German seminars; history was taken to be instrumental for the formation of a governing elite. The purpose of Lord Acton's immense - and mercifully self-dooming - Cambridge History was that it should function as a primer for British (and perhaps world) statesmen who might, if sufficiently immersed in its fine detail, heed its cautionary lessons. (For Clio's attitude was the sobering frown). Once institutionalised and professionalised, faculties and departments of history had two functions: that of public civic instruction (the Thucydidian vocation) and that (of course) of collective self-reproduction; the begetting of ever more professors. Standard operating procedure was the construction of authority; the rejection of the incidental or the suspicious in documents; a clearing of the highway to the truth. Hence the vast editions of documents characteristically produced by the likes of F. W. Maitland or in my day G. R. Elton; offered in print with the benison of their exegetes as the Real Thing. What was *not* real or at least not real *history*, was the work of loose imagination, discounted, in this more severely flinty mode as amateur entertainment, otherwise known as history for the people (rather than their governors and betters) for children, works of romance; perhaps even, Clio/God forbid, *fiction!* Whatever else it was that *War and Peace* or let us say *Il Gattopardo* were, it was not history; which would have upset Tolstoy who to the end of his days insisted that his masterwork was not a novel, either.

It is this classic form of history: extended discursive texts, aspiring to the definitive; positioning themselves in the battle of competing authorities; going through the rituals of professional differentiation (as much as we owe a debt in originating this line of inquiry; Professor Y noticed some inevitable errors of interpretation while failing to notice his own

errors which I, professor Z, am now in the business of correcting) - this kind of history even restored to its narrative voice - requiring concentrated attentiveness, the sovereignty of pure text (with images and artifacts reduced to illustration, rather than treated constitutively in their own right) which, for better or worse, has a hard time commanding the attention of the young - visually prompted, interactively alert; constantly responding to micro-communities of their own making. It is not, I want to say, that the twitter generation is at all history-averse - resistant to stories of the dead, produced by people heading that direction. It's rather the *forms* in which history habitually clads itself (at its most grotesque the American High School text book; an atrocity inflicted on the young simply as matter of gross commercial exploitation - a feedback loop between two industries - educational and orthopaedic) is not well-tuned to command concentrated attentiveness. Radically new forms of history-telling *are* available. The cult of the hip-hop musical, *Hamilton* about the American revolution tells us that - and it has had measurable success in sending high school students back to the histories, especially Ron Chernow's excellent biography from which it took its cue. But like the best screen histories - Spielberg's *Lincoln* for example - it succeeds by taking some liberties with content as well as form. Television (pardon the self-promotion here) when it gets the chance - witness the Ken Burns epics on the Civil War and the Roosevelts - can be as powerful an educational tool as anything in print; its success - measured in hundreds of thousands or even millions.

We need to find new ways to make history be as present as Croce wanted. In the *Twitterzeit* historical literacy matters just because it is so casually and often so meretriciously abused. At the heart of the agonising conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is, as has often been said, a bitter argument over historical narratives: one side claiming the perpetuity of Jews in the Holy Land; the other its complete absence. Perhaps it was the self-evidently absurd and unhistorical claim by the present Mufti of Jerusalem that there had never been a Jewish temple on the Mount (just what he thought those walls were he didn't say) which prompted Benjamin Netanyahu into the equally absurd claim that the wartime Mufti, Haj Amin al Husseini, invented the Shoah, the Final Solution, and suggested it to a grateful Hitler in the summer of 1941. We need to find forms then which will capture attention since

present ones are in retreat (which is not to say that the truth will necessarily set us free much less give us peace: the aim is to pay attention to each other's narrative).

So where do we go to find the future of history? Perhaps, most paradoxically, to the deep past, the pre-literate speaking to the post-literate. I'm not the first of course to suggest this - the scholars Walter J. Ong and Eric Havelock, both of whom worked on the momentous change from oral to written cultures (and thence to print), both, perhaps over-romantically, thought the electronic (and now the digital) present and future might usher in a "second age of orality" as Ong called it (oddly I think marginalising the role of the visual). Both of them, like others who understood memory as something more than the primitive, embryonic form, naively enchanted, myth-encrusted form of chronicled recollection, destined to be superseded by a rationally-driven critical method, but a form of history in its own right, thought of themselves as did other memory-scholars and workers like Maurice Halbwachs, as the heirs of Giambattista Vico; the first to break with a mechanistic view that history was defined by its sharp separation from myth, oral tradition and legend. It was Vico of course who insisted that the Homeric epics, and more controversially the Roman Twelve Tables of Law, derived their power from being a syncretic accumulation of inherited, largely orally transmitted stories; the work of many hands, many interventions, augmentations and revisions. This was the point, albeit made in the blazingly uncompromising and provocative way that got him into deep trouble, that made by Baruch Spinoza of the Bible. It was - as it still is - the pluralism which offends, and what it offends against of course is the *singularity* of revelation. That singularity, locked into the belief that scripture, whether Jewish, Christian or Muslim, was the ineffable, unalterable directly revealed word of God, which cannot brook the least amendment. From which it follows that adulterers and sodomites must be stoned and all the rest. The *history* of many hands and voices; the allowance of pluralism, was invented in the first place to contest those claims of singularity, of unchallengeable authority, whether coming from priests of the state. Notice the hearing Thucydides the Athenian gives to sides other than his own; notice too the tragic form of that book, structured as it is around a calamitous defeat, the expedition to Syracuse. The honour of such texts is their embrace of simultaneous alternatives, the liberty of the biting gadfly.

It was, however, the writer who became something of a *bête noire* for Thucydides, namely Herodotus (whom he accused of playing fast and loose with sources when he himself conceded that the funeral oration of Pericles was based largely on hearsay that he deemed reliable) whose work most embodies the openness, the pluralism, the looseness of early history. It's now believed that Herodotus was the last of the great *rhapsodes*, expected to declaim history on *agonistic* occasions at Delphi and Olympus; that his history was written always as performance with the expectation of a live audience. (As an antidote to academic decorum, my Cambridge professor-doctor-vater Jack Plumb used to remind me of this saying "never forget you belong to an ancient craft of people shouting in the marketplace") . There is not a trace of defensiveness in this alternation between as it were eavesdropping and declaiming, precisely because what he meant in the famous first opening line was that his book was written so that the deeds of the Greeks and Persians should not "fail of report" by which he meant die out when the witnesses on whose chain of memory he depended had all died out. He was just their collector, their archivist, their perpetuator.

It was the shamelessness of what might be called the *gazza ladra* method habitual to Herodotus the Ionian; of picking up stories - and candidly admitting that as such, hence his habit, which was no more than an admission, of stating "the Lydians say" or "the Egyptians believe" and weaving them into a quilt of utterance; not so much prescribing credibility as allowing us to judge for ourselves. It's this porosity, the resistance to hard and fast rules of authority, which takes us into the mind set - the *mentalité* as the Annales school has it - of the adversary; all that time spent with the Persians; his ear cocked to voices not like his own, is something you can't help but feel the mutually alienated parties in the Middle East conflict could use a little more of. [*The divide between these two founding fathers of the craft is psychologically profound, I think, for all their shared Hellenism: (and it persists) for one, history was essentially a communion with ancestors, for good or ill; for the other, history was an encounter with people not like you.*]

Now you would assume, I think, that the work I'm presently involved in - namely Jewish history - is the least susceptible to this engagement with the world beyond itself; that *its* memory forms - to take the Haggadah as an example - are supremely inward looking. But

so much of Jewish tradition is in fact deeply imprinted with the voices of neighbours, outsiders. The most ancient literary form of all - the "songs" like the Song of the Sea ascribed to Miriam as a triumph following the destruction of the Egyptian host and written in an archaic Hebrew strikingly different from later books and the main body of Exodus - is a borrowing from Phoenician and northern Canaanite poems. Biblical Hebrew in its many mutations is at once constructive and impressionable: it has its Canaanite passages; its Mesopotamian borrowings and even its Greek *koinè* moments. Nothing could be a more open-ended memory bank than the Talmud, where on a single page, protagonists separated by great distances of time and space dispute each other as if in interactive hypertext.

And by way of suggesting the elasticity of memory-driven history even in this tradition which seems most inward-looking, let me finish with very different examples in which Jewish histories embody all the features of the old new history I have been trying to characterise.

The first memory-bank is one of the four stone tablets standing in the great synagogue at Kaifeng, originally the capital of the northern Song dynasty. One of the tablets, the third, is dated 1663 and was written by a Jewish mandarin serving the 13th and last Ming emperor. The history it recounts - both to the ethnic Chinese and to the deeply Sinaicized Jews - was that of a Jewish imperial army officer, Major Chao-Cheng, who relieves the city besieged twenty years earlier by a rebel army, who at the end of the siege cut the dikes of the Yellow River submerging for a while the synagogue, forcing a mass evacuation. The stone which turns Major Chao into a Judeo-Chinese Nehemiah then recounts:

*"He repaired the roads, built bridges, and summoned the people to return to their occupations. Fearing that the members of his religion, through the ruin of their synagogue, might disperse and never come back together and unable to contemplate the work his ancestors had built and preserved through the centuries destroyed so suddenly, he posted troops to patrol and protect [the ruins] of the synagogue by day and by night."*<sup>i</sup>

Still more meaningfully, the history describes young scholars looking for the Scrolls of the Law that had been carried off by the flood water. Some of the scrolls were found in the mud for them along with ten sacred books, and were carefully dried out by the Rabbi and



the *man-la*, the spiritual leader. One Sefer Torah scroll alone was still legible enough to be used in the temporary synagogue before the restoration of the building on its old site. Some surviving fragments of those Hebrew scrolls do indeed show signs of water damage consistent with this history. From a flood, then, rebirth; out of calamity, redemption. When Major Chao, who had spent a great deal of his own money on the rebuilding, came back to his home after a military campaign in Shensi in the north west, he struck a grandly Biblical note: *"The glories which have been established for hundreds of years have returned and we behold their abundance"*<sup>ii</sup>

The Kaifeng stone chronicle is an instance of a memory bank which assumed a sympathetic audience both inside and outside the Jewish community - it was, after all, the work of the least separated, least ghettoised community of Jews we know of. The second instance, from three hundred years later, is a response to something like the opposite: the enforcement not just of mass death but total oblivion, the extermination not just of bodies but memories. In 1940 the historian Emanuel Ringelblum, finding himself trapped in the Warsaw ghetto and knowing pretty much exactly what would be the fate of its Jews, decided to create an archive of their contemporary history, in the desperate hope that it might be discovered after their annihilation as a witness of the truth. Accordingly he mobilised his graduate students and any willing helpers to constitute the Oyneg Shabbes: a daily collection of the proceedings of the meetings of the tenement and building committees who assembled each day to review the unfolding calamity: how many had died the night before, the spreading of sickness, the food situation; what medicines were lacking and so on, along with drawings, poems, micro narratives of the enclosing catastrophe. When in 1943 Ringelblum and his young friends joined the uprising, he buried the archive in milk churns underground. Only through a single survivor who escaped the killing by jumping off a train on the way to Treblinka was their whereabouts discovered in the 1950s - the churns and their contents are now in the Jewish museum in Warsaw.

At one point Ringelblum halts his work to record in his diary his anguish that he would not be there to witness the moment when the archive of Oyneg Shabbes saw the light of day; when the Nazi campaign to exterminate not just the bodies but the cultural memory of the

Jews would have been defeated even at the epicentre of their labours. But then this darkest of times witnessed all sorts of moments when historians had to be something more than academics, to improvise, to find new forms of utterance - and paid the price for their obstinacy; Johan Huizinga hounded from his faculty and then from life; Marc Block shot as a partisan of the Resistance - after he had been made a pariah of convenience by his lifelong friend and colleague Lucien Febvre.

History and historians don't face anything like that challenge in Europe any more - although there are places not too far away - of which you are all aware where history as the Greeks knew it, the vehicle of freedom's integrity still calls for its voice. The kind of challenge I have addressed today is less dramatic but the dangers of easy oblivion, the oblivion of short attention span might in the end be as serious. Those of us who still ply the trade in the conviction that something essential about humanity, something more serious than easeful strolls down memory lane is at stake, thank you with the deepest sincerity for the honour you do to me and my chosen craft.

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<sup>i</sup> Ibid., 71