Memory and Egodocuments in Early Modern Europe

Memory is strongly tied to identity in as much as a person is that which he remembers, and in general it is possible to have an idea of the individual or collective identity, or self-consciousness by the way in which the memories of a person or group are expressed. This equation between memory and identity is a concept expressed by John Locke\(^1\) early in the Enlightenment, but comes down to us directly and little modified by later thought.

There are, certainly, different written forms of this type of memory. Up until recent times it was thought that there were essentially three codified genres that expressed personal memories: the diary, memoir, autobiography, with their respective characteristics. In the diary, the subject tends to remember and write every day, while memoirs are written from a distance in time and often at maturity or in old age. In both cases, it is possible to distinguish between more “external” and more “internal” forms of memory, and even “intimate,” as in diaries.\(^2\) Autobiography instead, according to an authoritative dictionary, is the “recounting that an author makes of his own life, or a part of it, above all as a literary work.”\(^3\)

It is this conception of autobiography as a “literary” genre, with certain aesthetic or stylistic characteristics, or with an intention of publication, that has until recently strongly limited historians’ use of autobiographies that did not adhere to the norms of literary criteria. When these too rigid classifications were finally abandoned – among other things they did not allow for medieval examples, since diary, memoir and autobiography proper do not appear until the early modern era – historians came across memory texts that, even though imperfect under existing definitions, were representative of “genres” different from the usual. The majority of concrete late medieval and early modern memory writings are very hybrid. They are texts in which the subject narrates himself, and up until a certain era, mostly events surrounding himself,

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2. Already G. Gusdorf, La découverte de soi (Paris: PUF, 1948), pp. 39–40, was distinguishing between “external diary” and “intimate diary.”
often mixing in traits that should, according to a strict canon, belong to other genres.

In part for this reason, and in part in response to the need to find texts that could furnish information on aspects not covered by other sources (private life, more humble social subjects lacking direct documentation, formation of individual self-consciousness), in recent years there has been an elaboration or rather a re-use of a category: egodocuments. This term, which started being commonly used by historians in the early 1990s, defines a text “in which the author writes of his own actions, thoughts or sentiments,” and therefore it comprises memoirs, diaries, autobiographies, travel journals, family books, and private letters. More recently (1996) Winfried Schulze has proposed to consider all those documents in which a person gives information about himself, including even texts that were not written intentionally, or were not autograph: court testimony, petitions, interviews made during pastoral visits, tax declarations, wills, etc. I however think that this is too broad an interpretation that risks making the concept too vast to be useful, over-stretching the quantity of sources that can be so labeled and making it difficult to define critical and methodological instruments.

Another kind of document for which a definition has recently been created is the “family book,” which is included in the above, discovered and theorized by my compatriots Cicchetti and Mordenti in the early 1980s, and defined as “a memorial diary text, plural and multigenerational, in which the family represents...both the prevailing argument (or content)..., and the sender and recipient of the writing.”

The family book is to a degree the origin of all modern memory writings because it is in a way the archetype, present also in Europe – as we are beginning to reconstruct – in various situations. The oldest forms are the Florentine and Tuscan, surviving from the end of the thirteenth century: these are the books of ricordi or ricordanze, that evolved from merchants’ account books as the author broadened out from company accounts to include the family’s wealth, and to introduce, along with other notes of private and family events, the principal steps of his own life and the evolution of his family, the never ending cycle of births, marriages, and deaths. These books, which have been studied mostly for the 14th–15th centuries, have a strong continuity into the