INTRODUCTION

Literature and/as (Cultural) Memory

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Literature and (cultural) memory have long been assets of humanity, though their relationship has been only too often either implicit or concealed, if not brushed aside as some weird exercise hardly worth institutionalizing. Fodder for thought, literature and memory traverse cultures all the way back to the burgeoning of Western civilization, while accounts of how they came to be held in esteem suggest accolades that have in time transcended accepted temporal borders. The Judeo-Christian tradition amounts to cultural accumulations by “peoples of memory”.\(^1\) We find this asserted over and over again in so many narratives ordered under the two emblematic headings: The Old Testament and The New Testament. These are doubtless texts from before literature was born, not only in our modern sense of the word, but even in the ancient classical one. Put together and centuries on circulated as The Bible, literally “the little books” (τὰ βιβλία), they stood at least as proof of the foundational urge by Christ in the Gospels: “Remember me!” What better testimony for a culture of commemoration with underlying texts as testaments? What more obvious confirmation of its cult of tradition as legacy? What finer manner of defining “the fusion of the past with the present […] in a single collective entity”\(^2\) as the very foundations on which rises our Western culture?

In Pericles’s Greece the lyric poet Simonides seemed to have become a prominent figure owing to his invention of a “memory palace” or “theatre”, none but a clever method to make mnemonics a useful tool. Legend has it that he saved his life by leaving the hall of a rich nobleman who was carousing with his guests, right before an earthquake crushed the company of merry diners. Simonides has since been said to have retrieved the memory and therefore the identity of every single guest by tracing them to the place where they had been seated. He thus established a table of isomorphic correspondences between the space of the world and that of the mind, aware of the spatial nature of remembering. Placed in the Pantheon of Memory by the Romans, Cicero was

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1 Pim den Boer & Willem Frijhoff (eds.), Lieux de mémoire et identités nationales (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1993), p. 35.
of the opinion that “Memoria est thesaurus omnium rerum e custos” (Memory is the treasury and guardian of all things). He too was certain that who wanted to make best use of the faculty of memory must select places and form mental images of them to which they could best refer their recollections. These were preserved by oral cultures as treasures of an “art of memory” in its own right till early modern times, when this spatial skill or art did become the accredited Western “art of memory” hosted by institutionalized “theatres of memory”.

As a sign of the utmost praise of memory in classical culture, the ancient Greeks venerated this stupendous quality by embodying it as the goddess Memosyne, mother to the Nine Muses, each responsible for a particular art, each art standing for a form of knowledge, each such form of cognition securing the overall memory of the world. The Muses’ maternal instance stood for cosmic memory as such and kept the perfect balance of “mémoire et savoir” (memory and knowledge).\textsuperscript{3} The Romans gave the mnemonic goddess the Latin name of Monēta and witnessed her greatness multiplied in numberless sites of memory called coins. L. moneta, of which Fr. monnaie and, in the last instance, E. money, designated the place in which money was coined, and, by extension coined money or merely money. It recalled the semantic kernel of L. verb monere “to advise, to warn”, the latter echoing mens “mind, understanding, the faculty of reason(ing)”, and memini “I remember”, mentio “remembrance”. Wherever on Roman territory, coins (monetae) were the warrant of Romanness, with collective memory and current proofs of it working together as identitary symbols. There were other forms of mnemonic conservation, such as a monimentum, from which the linguistic corruption monument, their physical presence confirming the onetime mythical role played by Juno, assimilated with Monēta. Monuments raised to recall Roman grandeur and splendour emphasized the providential status of Roma aeterna in the words: “Remember, ye Romans, that you are universal masters over all nations”.\textsuperscript{4}

In the Phaedrus Plato speaks about the Egyptian god Theuth or Thoth, the inventor of writing. The Greek philosopher laments this, to his mind, unnecessary innovation, as writing is likely to put the mind to rest and entice it to stay lazy. As it usurps cosmic memory’s genuine power to retrieve things from the past, writing is a mere support for technical memory. Moreover, Plato maintains, writing flaws the innermost conformity holding between language and truth and can serve as a carrier of lies. No wonder his master, Socrates, is the
