

THEORIES OF MEMORY

A READER

Edited by Michael Rossington
and Anne Whitehead

Contributing editors:
Linda Anderson, Kate Chedzoy,
Pablo Mukherjee and Jennifer Richards

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6. In his study of Holocaust literature, Alvin Rosenfeld suggests that Holocaust literature in general has a fragmentary quality, 'more impressive in the sum of its parts than as a separate statement.' *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 34.
7. Terrence des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (New York: Pocket Books, 1977).
8. Robert J. Lifton, *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 479.

5.3

JAMES E. YOUNG: FROM THE TEXTURE OF MEMORY: HOLOCAUST MEMORIALS AND MEANING

Forgetting the extermination is part of the extermination itself.

– Jean Baudrillard

No one can become what he cannot find in his memories.

– Jean Améry

So this story will not finish with some tomb to be visited in pious memory. For the smoke that rises from crematoria obeys physical laws like any other: the particles come together and disperse according to the wind, which propels them. The only pilgrimage, dear reader, would be to look sadly at a stormy sky now and then.

– André Schwartz-Bart¹

The further events of World War II recede into time, the more prominent its memorials become. As the period of Holocaust is shaped in the survivors' diaries and memoirs, in their children's films and novels, public memory of this time is being molded in a proliferating number of memorial images and spaces. Depending on where and by whom these memorials are constructed, these sites remember the past according to a variety of national myths, ideals, and political needs. Some recall war dead, others resistance, and still others mass murder. All reflect both the past experiences and current lives of their communities, as well as the state's memory of itself. At a more specific level, these memorials also

Source: James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 1–8.

reflect the temper of the memory-artists' time, their place in aesthetic discourse, their media and materials.

Memory is never shaped in a vacuum; the motives of memory are never pure. Both the reasons given for Holocaust memorials and the kinds of memory they generate are as various as the sites themselves. Some are built in response to traditional Jewish injunctions to remember, others according to a government's need to explain a nation's past to itself. Where the aim of some memorials is to educate the next generation and to inculcate in it a sense of shared experience and destiny, other memorials are conceived as expiations of guilt or as self-aggrandizement. Still others are intended to attract tourists. In addition to traditional Jewish memorial iconography, every state has its own institutional forms of remembrance. As a result, Holocaust memorials inevitably mix national and Jewish figures, political and religious imagery.

In Germany, for example, memorials to this time recall Jews by their absence, German victims by their political resistance. In Poland, countless memorials in former death camps and across the countryside commemorate the whole of Polish destruction through the figure of its murdered Jewish part. In Israel, martyrs and heroes are remembered side by side, both redeemed by the birth of the state. As the shape Holocaust memory takes in Europe and Israel is determined by political, aesthetic, and religious coordinates, that in America is guided no less by distinctly American ideals and experiences – such as liberty, pluralism, and immigration.

By themselves, monuments are of little value, mere stones in the landscape. But as part of a nation's rites or the objects of a people's national pilgrimage, they are invested with national soul and memory. For traditionally, the state-sponsored memory of a national past aims to affirm the righteousness of a nation's birth, even its divine election. The matrix of a nation's monuments emplots the story of ennobling events, of triumphs over barbarism, and recalls the martyrdom of those who gave their lives in the struggle for national existence – who, in the martyrological refrain, died so that a country might live. In assuming the idealized forms and meanings assigned this era by the state, memorials tend to concretize particular historical interpretations. They suggest themselves as indigenous, even geological outcroppings in a national landscape; in time, such idealized memory grows as natural to the eye as the landscape in which it stands. Indeed, for memorials to do otherwise would be to undermine the very foundations of national legitimacy, of the state's seemingly natural right to exist.

The relationship between a state and its memorials is not one-sided, however. On the one hand, official agencies are in position to shape memory explicitly as they see fit, memory that best serves a national interest. On the other hand, once created, memorials take on lives of their own, often stubbornly resistant to the state's original intentions. In some cases, memorials created in the image of a state's ideals actually turn around to recast these ideals in the memorial's own image. New generations visit memorials under new circumstances and

invest them with new meanings. The result is an evolution in the memorial's significance, generated in the new times and company in which it finds itself.

The capacity for change in memorials has not always been so apparent, however. For, traditionally, the monument has been defined as that which by its seemingly land-anchored permanence could also guarantee the permanence of a particular idea or memory attached to it. In this conception, the monument would remain essentially impervious to time and change, a perpetual witness-relic to a person, event, or epoch. Hence, the first monuments mentioned in the Bible: a small pillar and a witness heap of stones (*gal-ed*) gathered to mark the agreement between Laban and Jacob (Gen. 31:45–48); the matzevah (tombstone) Jacob erected on Rachel's grave (Gen. 35:20). In both cases, the monuments would suggest themselves as everlasting remnant-witnesses by which subsequent generations would remember past events and people.

At this point, a clarification of terms may be in order. Many presume that 'memorials' recall only past deaths or tragic events and provide places to mourn, while 'monuments' remain essentially celebratory markers of triumphs and heroic individuals. In this vein, Arthur Danto has written that 'we erect monuments so that we shall always remember and build memorials so that we shall never forget. Thus, we have the Washington Monument but the Lincoln Memorial. Monuments commemorate the memorable and embody the myths of beginnings. Memorials ritualize remembrance and mark the reality of ends . . . Monuments make heroes and triumphs, victories and conquests, perpetually present and part of life. The memorial is a special precinct, extruded from life, a segregated enclave where we honor the dead. With monuments, we honor ourselves.'²

But in fact, the traditional monument (the tombstone) can also be used as a mourning site for lost loved ones, just as memorials have marked past victories. A statue can be a monument to heroism and a memorial to tragic loss; an obelisk can memorialize a nation's birth and monumentalize leaders fallen before their prime. Insofar as the same object can perform both functions, there may be nothing intrinsic to historical markers that makes them either a monument or a memorial.

[. . .] I prefer to distinguish a memorial from a monument only in a broader, more generic sense: there are memorial books, memorial activities, memorial days, memorial festivals, and memorial sculptures. Some of these are mournful, some celebratory; but all are memorials in a larger sense. Monuments, on the other hand, [. . .] refer [. . .] to a subset of memorials: the material objects, sculptures, and installations used to memorialize a person or thing. [. . .] I treat all memory-sites as memorials, the plastic objects within these sites as monuments. A memorial may be a day, a conference, or a space, but it need not be a monument. A monument, on the other hand, is always a kind of memorial.

In the last century, the very idea of the memorial-monument and its place in modern culture has grown no less contentious than its definition. Indeed, the traditional assumption of the monument's timelessness has nearly relegated it

all monuments are memorials, but not all memorials are monuments

that people are able to acquire and then recall their memories at all.⁹ That is, both the reasons for memory and the forms memory takes are always socially mandated, part of a socializing system whereby fellow citizens gain common history through the vicarious memory of their forbears' experiences. If part of the state's aim, therefore, is to create a sense of shared values and ideals, then it will also be the state's aim to create the sense of common memory, as foundation for a unified polis. Public memorials, national days of commemoration, and shared calendars thus all work to create common loci around which national identity is forged.

To the extent that all societies depend on the assumption of shared experience and memory for the very basis of their common relations, a society's institutions are automatically geared toward creating a shared memory – or at least the illusion of it. By creating the sense of a shared past, such institutions as national memorial days, for example, foster the sense of a common present and future, even a sense of shared national destiny. In this way, memorials provide the sites where groups of people gather to create a common past for themselves, places where they tell the constitutive narratives, their 'shared' stories of the past. They become communities precisely by having shared (if only vicariously) the experiences of their neighbors. At some point, it may even be the activity of remembering together that becomes the shared memory; once ritualized, remembering together becomes an event in itself that is to be shared and remembered.

THE SITE OF MEMORY

In keeping with the bookish, iconoclastic side of Jewish tradition, the first 'memorials' to the Holocaust period came not in stone, glass, or steel – but in narrative. The Yizkor Bikher – memorial books – remembered both the lives and destruction of European Jewish communities according to the most ancient of Jewish memorial media: words on paper. For a murdered people without graves, without even corpses to inter, these memorial books often came to serve as symbolic tombstones: 'The memorial book which will immortalize the memories of our relatives and friends, the Jews of Pshaytsk, will also serve as a substitute grave. Whenever we pick up the book we will feel we are standing next to their grave, because even that the murderers denied them.'¹⁰

The scribes hoped that, when read, the Yizkor Bikher would turn the site of reading into memorial space. In need of cathartic ceremony, in response to what has been called 'the missing gravestone syndrome,' survivors thus created interior spaces, imagined grave sites, as the first sites for memory.¹¹ Only later were physical spaces created. While the function of place in mnemonic memory has been well examined, starting with Cicero, and re-examined through the brilliant studies of Yates and others, the reciprocal exchange between a monument and its space is still too little studied. For a monument necessarily transforms an otherwise benign site into part of its content, even as it is absorbed into the site and made part of a larger locale. This tension between

site and memorial can be relieved by a seemingly natural extension of site by monument, or it can be aggravated by a perceived incongruity between site and monument. It is better in the view of many contemporary monument makers, in fact, to provoke the landscape with an obtrusive monument than to create a form so pleasingly balanced that it – and memory – recede into the landscape (and oblivion) altogether.

Taken further, a monument becomes a point of reference amid other parts of the landscape, one node among others in a topographical matrix that orients the rememberer and creates meaning in both the land and our recollections. For like narrative, which automatically locates events in linear sequence, the memorial also brings events into some cognitive order. In this sense, any memorial marker in the landscape, no matter how alien to its surroundings, is still perceived in the midst of its geography, in some relation to the other landmarks nearby.

A stainless steel obelisk situated in an empty field, for example, generates different meanings from that situated in a neighborhood shopping mall. Instead of being the only thing standing, it is one of several towers, barely noticed, surrounded by large buildings. American monuments, in particular, are placed often to maximize opportunities for symbolic meaning: the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum on the Mall in Washington, D.C., necessarily resonates to other nearby national monuments. The Museum of Jewish Heritage: A Living Memorial to the Holocaust, planned for the Battery in New York, will form part of an immigrant triad, with Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty in sight. Likewise, the Liberation monument in Liberty Park in Jersey City, New Jersey, echoes the ideals and theme of the Statue of Liberty on the skyline in the background. A new Holocaust memorial in Boston, whatever shape it finally takes, will derive further American meaning from its place on the 'Freedom Trail.'

NOTES

1. Epigraphs: Jean Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images* (Sidney, 1988), 23; Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington, 1980), 84; André Schwarz-Bart, *The Last of the Just*, trans. Stephen Becker (London, 1961), 409.
2. Arthur Danto, 'The Vietnam Veterans Memorial,' *The Nation*, 31 Aug. 1986: 152. This particular definition is repeated in an otherwise excellent analysis of the memorial by Marita Sturken, 'The Wall, the Screen, and the Image: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial,' *Representations* 35 (Summer 1991): 118–42.
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, trans. Adrian Collins (New York, 1985), 14–17.
4. Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York, 1938), 438.
5. For the full, much more complex, context of Broszat's remarks, see his series of letters to Saul Friedländer and Friedländer's excellent replies printed first in *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 36, no. 2 (April 1988): 339–72, subsequently translated and reprinted as 'Martin Broszat/Saul Friedländer: A Controversy about the Historicization of National Socialism,' in *Yad Vashem Studies* 19 (Fall 1988): 1–47; also reprinted in *New German Critique* 44 (Spring–Summer 1988): 85–126.

The exchange between Broszat and Friedländer was initially sparked by Friedländer's response to Broszat's 'Plädoyer für eine Historisierung des Nationalsozialismus' [Plea for a historicization of National Socialism], *Merkur* 39 (1985): 373–85.

Broszat's specific reference to monuments comes in his comments on 'mythical memory,' which he distinguishes from 'scientific insight' (*New German Critique* 44 [Spring–Summer 1988]: 90–1).

6. Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1988), 280.
7. Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,' trans. Marc Roudebush, *Representations* 26 (1989): 13. Reprinted from Pierre Nora, 'Entre mémoire et histoire,' *Les Lieux de mémoire*, vol. 1: *La République* (Paris, 1984), xxvi.
8. John Hallmark Neff, 'Introduction [to Public Art]: Daring to Dream,' *Critical Inquiry* 16 (Summer 1990): 857.
9. See Maurice Halbwachs, *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris, 1952); also see his *La Mémoire collective* (Paris, 1950).
10. From 'Forwort,' in *Sefer Yizkor le-kedoshei ir (Przedecz) Pshaytask Khurbanot ha'shoah*, p. 130, as quoted in Jack Kugelmass and Jonathan Boyarin, eds., *From a Ruined Garden: The Memorial Books of Polish Jewry* (New York, 1983), 11.
11. On the missing grave syndrome, see Joost Merloo, 'Delayed Mourning in Victims of Extermination Camps,' in Henry Krystal, ed., *Massive Psychic Trauma* (New York, 1968), 74.

SECTION 6 TRAUMA

Edited by Anne Whitehead