Reviews


Reviewed by Michael Bernard-Donals, University of Wisconsin at Madison

As I write this, the fifth anniversary of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington is underway. Reports on the evening news, newspaper articles and editorials, and other forms of historical and memorial writing are being aimed at a public that may or may not be ready to remember what happened five years ago. The 9/11 Commission Report is perhaps the most comprehensive assessment of what happened in written form, although it’s CNN’s or MSNBC’s rebroadcast images of planes slamming into buildings while horrified onlookers second-guess themselves (“am I really seeing this?”) that bring home the idea that written accounts of horrifying events and our recollection of them are different orders of reality altogether. What we know about what happened on September 11, 2001, and what we remember (regardless of whether we were in New York or Washington, or watching events unfold on our televisions) are distinct, and the tension between them is both problematic and creative. It’s this thesis—that the distance between remembering and knowing causes “crises of memory”—that drives Susan Rubin Suleiman’s book on our memories of the Second World War and the Holocaust over the last sixty years.

Think about where you were when you first realized what was happening five years ago, and then think about what you've read about the events since that time. That simple exercise brings to life the words of André Breton, which Suleiman cites in the opening of the seventh chapter of her book: “Life is other than what one writes” (159). She goes on to say that this doesn't mean “that writing is a lie, but rather, that writing is always one step behind or ahead of or next to the facts of lived experience” (159). As with reading the 9/11 Commission Report and watching CNN, remembering what happened and attempting to explain or write about it can never quite be squared with one another. Suleiman is interested in the displacements that are inherent in memory, in the substitution of words and images, in temporal locations and in social and political sensibilities, that transform what we remember into another experience, or at the very least another memory, altogether. Just as the memories of 9/11 that were attached to a heroic and victimized United States have been utterly transformed into a sense of American hubris and helplessness, Suleiman traces how, for example, the reality of the splintered French resistance during the German occupation was transformed into a memory of heroism and a unified France by 1950, and how later that memory was found wanting (it was, after all, a mythic memory) in the wake of the Algerian war and the unveiling of France's collaborationist history. The events that form the object of history didn't change; however, the writing that took account of it was completely "other" than the events themselves.

The temporal displacement involved in any memory is caused by the interanimation of three distinct temporalities. The occurrence of the event takes place before the eyes of the witness, and depending upon the event's character—whether something like it has been experienced before, or whether it is of an order of magnitude that causes it to be seen as utterly distinct from other events—it is apprehended, but not necessarily understood. Understanding the event, writing it, most often takes place after the event's occurrence. My watching of the events of 9/11—on a television screen in the upper Midwest (I asked, when entering the
office in which the TV was on, "What's going on?" and someone answered (I thought facetiously): "It's the end of the world")—and my unfolding understanding of them (no, this wasn't an accident; those were people leaping from the building; the cheering of individuals in Gaza suggested this was an international event) diverge significantly. Finally, any writing of the event has to take into account both the event itself, as it made itself apparent to the witness at the moment of its occurrence, and our understanding of the event, as it conforms to or diverges from the language we have ready to describe it. The reason the myth of a united French resistance fell into disarray had as much to do with the incoherence of the narrative built to contain the events between 1940 and 1944 as it did with the war in Algeria and the influx of North African immigrants in the 1950s and 1960s. The events of the resistance itself did not change; aspects of those events—individual acts of collaboration and resistance, often in the same instant by the same person—are rendered visible or invisible by the passage of time between event and knowledge of the event, and between the event and the writing of it by either the witness or by the historian. Life is other than what one writes; but as often as not, the writing is all we have. The consequences of this problem in the context of the Second World War are the subject of Crises of Memory.

Crises of memory "are moments that highlight the relations between individual memory and group memory, concerning a past event that is stipulated as important by the group at a given time" (5). Suleiman, like the historians whose work has followed that of Yosef Yerushalmi and the historians who founded the seminal journal History and Memory, distinguishes among three kinds of memory. The first is personal memory, the memories of the individual witness; the second is social memory, those memories that are sanctioned (stipulated, in Suleiman's terms) as having importance to the social or national whole, and that may diverge significantly from any individual's memories of the events; and the third is historical memory (or written history), the more-or-less settled account of what happened based upon the methodological and narrative tools of the professional historian. Crises occur when
the memory of the individual diverges significantly from either the social or cultural memory of the community in which the individual resides, or the historical memory that has been written for it. Because "how we view ourselves, and how we represent ourselves to others, is indissociable from the stories we tell about our past" (1), crises of memory are crises of the self, and to confront these crises requires that we "rewrite" our selves inasmuch as we are forced to rewrite our memories of the past. The Second World War and the Holocaust represent, for Suleiman, important test cases because they are both traumatic instances—instances in which what happened seems to defy the categories of apprehension and the language that might easily contain them—and because they are events whose memories have been stipulated by national entities (particularly in Europe) as being foundational to their self-representation. Suleiman calls her book a "poetics of memory," an examination of written and other texts in order to illuminate perspectives on memory and self-representation that might be applied more broadly across a range of texts during the period of the war and its aftermath. Of the book's eight chapters, three are devoted to the "myth" of French resistance, two to recent films on collaboration and complicity during the Holocaust, two to testimonial accounts of the war and the camps, and one to the experimental writing of "generation 1.5," those who survived the war as young children and whose memories of the war are not, quite technically, theirs. Suleiman concludes with some remarks on cultural amnesia and processes of national forgiveness often called "amnesty."

What haunts this book repeatedly is Breton's dictum about the distance between writing and memory, a distance worth paying attention to as we try to make sense of our own individual and cultural memories of events in the United States. One of Suleiman's founding assumptions, one she shares with historians such as Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Peter Novick, and others who have examined the role of memory in our understanding of the traumatic events associated with the Holocaust, is that events have a certain durability or intransigence. It's this intransigence that makes itself visible in all accounts of history, whether by those who were there
or by those who are temporally and spatially removed from the events. Events' durability, what Walter Benjamin calls the "eventness" of the event, resists writing as often as it is represented in writing. So, in Suleiman's account of the Aubracs' "affair" in France, the heroism of Raymond and Lucie Aubrac became undermined decades later when the question of whether the Aubracs had a part in the "betrayal" of a member of the French underground to German authorities was further deepened by inconsistencies in the documentary record. The episode itself is complicated; however, the main question is whether, out of a kind of "narrative desire" for accounts of resistance fighters that had a public face, the stories of the Aubracs' work during the war were destabilized because of the documentary inconsistencies or certain aspects of the "affair" that could simply not be accounted for by history but which had a durability—an "eventness"—that brushed against the grain of any narrative account. It is that durability—aspects of events witnessed but not written, inconsistencies in human action that work against the historians' narratives that are supposed to make sense (59)—that comes back to haunt those narratives, and that squelches the historians' and the witnesses' desire for coherence.

The distance between the event and writing is complicated by the tension between traumatic memory and narrative memory. Paraphrasing Freud, Suleiman writes that narrative memory is "characterized by fluidity and variability" and in which the subject "is essentially active, able to situate the traumatic memory in the past and therefore to gain some emotional distance from it." Traumatic memory, on the other hand, "is characterized by compulsive repetition and inflexibility" and in which the subject "is essentially passive, locked into a repetition that abolishes the difference between past and present" (139). Traumatic memory can't be shaken off and constantly insinuates itself into the present of the witness, whereas we can find language for and tell stories about events in narrative memory. In her chapter on Jorge Sempurun's memoirs of his time in the Buchenwald concentration camp, Suleiman is attentive to revision, the repetition of the traumatic
event *with a difference*, in different terms with each retelling. It is revision that lies at the heart of the witness’s ability to work through the event, but it also shows us the difference between what is true and what happened. The “revised” account of Semprun’s entrance to the camp (the focus of the chapter) as it is rewritten over decades destabilizes the narrative, and makes the reader aware that neither he nor the writer knows what *really* happened. However, it also makes clear, in an especially self-conscious way, that “factual truth and truthfulness do not always coincide—and sometimes, the factual truth will never be known” (149). This tension between traumatic and narrative memory is akin to the tension between individual and collective memory. “Testimony is always of necessity individual; but if it refers to a collective historical trauma, it will, also of necessity, be about more than the experience of a single person” (134). But testimony, by dint of its discursive nature, is always collective as well as individual. While the event takes place independently of the language we might use to describe it or to make it known, it is unavailable *except* through the shared medium of language. To complicate the distinctions Suleiman is working with, then, the difference between traumatic and narrative memory, and between individual and collective memory, is not one of kind but of degree, and all memories, regardless of their traumatic nature, suffer from the tensions between them. All memories are susceptible to crisis, because all memories are discursive.

Suleiman is right to point out that there are several pernicious consequences that come with the tension between what we remember and what we can say about that memory. One of them is the inevitable and always retroactive creation of a collective or community (a “we”), which stipulates the importance of a narrative account of events. We are constrained by our common language in what we can say about the events we see unfolding before our eyes—that, for example, the repeated image of the airplanes flying into the World Trade Center five years ago was “like something out of a movie,” or that Bruno Doessekker’s harrowing abandonment and subsequent adoption was (as Binjamin Wilkomirski, author of the false memoir *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*
argues) like the Holocaust. We can far more easily construct a narrative of events that makes sense if we include ourselves in a collective “we,” one in which we find solidarity with others who may have experienced the event as we have. The result, however, is that in building such a collective, we always leave something out, not only of the narrative account but also of the collective. French men and women felt able to exclaim, after the war, that “we were all the resistance,” just as the editorial in Le Monde on September 12, 2001, could exclaim, “We are all Americans.” The collective “we” helped make narrative sense of the horror of the violence of the German occupation and of the terrorist attacks. However, it’s also true that both expressions carry with them an excluded other, one whose intransigence will always trouble the exclamation. As Suleiman points out, Sartre made clear that all French men and women were not on Ily the resistance, but they were all also, with few exceptions, collaborators (living, however grudgingly, with Germans and anti-Semites in their midsts). And while Le Monde gave expression to a sense of solidarity after the attacks, it’s also true that in the eyes of many Americans, Muslim residents of Paris, New York, and Gaza instantly became complicit with the nineteen hijackers, all of them from Muslim countries, not a “we” but a “they.”

In fact, while Suleiman doesn’t make the point quite as explicitly as I’m about to here, the Jew functions as a kind of indexical “other,” the paradigmatic excluded and altogether other whose presence in the Third Reich had to be expunged and whose memory, even in those European countries that were nearly made judenrein, can never be integrated into the national collective. It’s this remnant—what is excluded from the collectively forged national memory (or even the discursively formed individual one)—that makes itself apparent as a contradiction, or a silence, in texts as wide ranging as W.G. Sebald’s novel Austerlitz, István Szabó’s film Sunshine, or Georges Perec’s hybrid text W or the Memory of Childhood.

And while writers have a responsibility to recognize and make plain the crises of memory associated with events like the Holocaust, the Second World War, and more recently, the terrorist attacks on the United States and their aftermath, there are few if
any guarantees that the results will have the intended effect, or that they won’t also traumatize the reader. Suleiman insists (in much the same way as Jean-François Lyotard, Maurice Blanchot, and Yosef Yerushalmi) that it is the language of the imagination rather than that of history that most effectively makes those crises of memory visible, but not because imaginative writing gets the events of history “right.” In fact, such writing is likely to lie, in Breton’s formulation, if we think of writing as making plain what actually happened. But in lying, such writing is also capable of making plain those aspects of events that are otherwise invisible to history. In her chapter on the writers of generation 1.5, exemplified by Raymond Federman’s novel *Double or Nothing* and Georges Perec’s *W*, Suleiman notes their use of the rhetorical figure of *preterition*, in which the object of a sentence or phrase is named as that which can’t be named or said. As a “structure of affirmation and denial,” it “keeps repeating that it is impossible to say what must be said, that there will never be a language adequate to express the enormity of the event” (211). Suleiman is right to say that such affirmations more often than not run to cliché: although it’s impossible to describe the Holocaust, people have been doing it for over sixty years. Still, preterition can also be “the motor for new ways of saying” (211), although those new ways of saying are sometimes quite harrowing. Writing of *Hotel Terminus*, Marcel Ophuls’ monumental film about Klaus Barbie (who was responsible for the deportation and torture of hundreds of Jews in Lyon), Suleiman draws attention to what she calls Ophuls’ “expressionist moments,” in which the filmmaker’s complicity in the creation of the film, and of his own discomfort for what the film itself reveals about its subjects (Barbie, French collaborators, and his own willingness to play along with these villains with a knowing wink and easy smile), are made evident to the viewer. The viewer is caught up short, realizing that maybe Barbie isn’t such a monster and that perhaps (as many people thought about Claude Lanzmann and his manipulation of subjects in his film *Shoah*) the Jewish filmmaker is. In her own “expressionist moment,” Suleiman wonders whether moving on from the Holocaust is possible. “Or,” she wonders, “is that just
a Jewish obsession?” (105). This is one of a number of viciously uncomfortable moments in which Suleiman gives voice to her own individual memory, one that comes of being both a writer and a Jew, and that haunts the text and threatens to undermine her own scholarly argument. However, if the writer is to be responsible to what isn’t readily apparent, then it is in these moments that we see the impact of events on individuals, one at a time, moments that historical writing—“getting it right”—seems to miss.

_Crises of Memory_ ends with a meditation on forgiveness. Suleiman writes that typically we think of the opposite of memory as “forgetting,” and that in the realm of politics, amnesty—a collective expunging of the (criminal) record—can be seen as a collectively sanctioned forgetting. She cites the examples of Argentina and Chile as governments that have recently given amnesty to government officials responsible for the torture and disappearance of thousands during the 1970s and 1980s. The problem, as she describes it, is that while the government, in the name of the people, may legally expunge the criminal’s record of a crime, the crime remains in the individual memories of the victims and, quite often, on their bodies as scars and as pain. How, Suleiman wonders, can we think of amnesty in terms other than a collective forgetting? To put this in other terms, how can memory, rather than forgetting, play a role in forgiveness? Citing Derrida, Suleiman writes that forgiveness must be absolutely unconditional: “Forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable” (230). What she means is that while forgiveness must have as its correlative the horrible event or the crime that must be forgiven, it must be given absolutely, without reference to “the order of conditions” (230). So, while forgiveness is conditioned by the circumstances of the event—the destruction of six million Jews, the disappearance of thousands in Argentina, the killing of almost three thousand on September 11th—it is given in the recognition that the guilty party is, as Ricouer explains, “capable of something other than his crimes and his faults” (qtd. in Suleiman 231). Not surprisingly, Suleiman suggests that writing plays a role in forgiveness. Just as the writer must be attentive to those aspects of events that are
invisible to the eye (and silent to the vocabulary) of the historian, so the one who forgives must be open to the possibility that the person she pardons is, to a certain extent, also not culpable, that the guilty party is also, in part, not guilty. (Klaus Barbie, like Adolf Eichmann, was a murderer; but he is also, like Eichmann, a person who isn’t defined by that term alone.) To forgive—to write under a condition of amnesty—requires that the writer be open to the possibility that in making plain the event, she will misrepresent it, or get it wrong. However, this isn’t the same as saying she will lie. It means that the writer must always be attentive to crises of memory, and that through these crises, we might see, in Breton’s terms, writing’s other.


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Sara Ahmed’s The Cultural Politics of Emotion provides a close reading of the everyday, lived emotions that are part of larger material and discursive structures of the nation-state. Specifically, she investigates the work that emotion does—and what it produces—in the current formation of the capitalist nation-state. Her inquiry traces how a cultural politics of emotion creates “others” by “working through signs and on bodies to materialise the surfaces and boundaries that are lived as worlds” (191). Ahmed’s book is part of emerging work on emotion in cultural studies and rhetoric, fields that share an interest in how discourses and practices construct possibilities and limitations for subjects in the current conjuncture.

For Ahmed, emotion works on the surfaces of bodies, aligning bodies with communities or situating bodies outside of communi-