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## **Writing and Memory**

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### **1.**

That writing is one of the most sophisticated forms and practices of human memory is not a new discovery. Since Plato’s infamous warning against the consequences of trusting an anonymous script instead of the spoken word from a person with a present and accountable mind, the western tradition has viewed writing as a way to expand memory. In fact, writing has been conceived of *as* memory, at least as a kind of memory.

How striking the idea of writing as memory has become is obvious when we consider that this analogy unfolds even in the reverse sense: with writing serving as a powerful metaphor and model to represent and explain memory. This view has gone as far as to conceive of the very workings of memory in terms of writing, that is, of memory *as* writing. We can trace this tradition from the scripted wax tablet (the most common metaphor and model of memory in Greek and Roman antiquity, besides that of the storage space) to the “memory” of a computer (one of the most common meanings of the term in the digital age), and to the paradigms and vocabulary of traditional cognitive psychology of memory. To be sure, the explanatory scope of the analogy of writing and memory is broad; and this has made its plausibility even stronger.

There is, however, a complication with reconstructing the mutual configuration of writing and memory along these spacious paths. Our knowledge of how both writing and memory work has changed significantly over the last few decades, and so have the meanings of both notions. One aspect of Jack Goody’s ground-breaking studies on the mnemonic function of writing is that he drew attention to an important dialectic in operation here, a dialectic that, again, is all but new. While the development and societal

institutionalization of writing as a “technology of the intellect” has improved and expanded memory capacities (both in terms of individual cognition and socio-cultural accumulation), it simultaneously has undermined old habitual forms of remembering and forgetting. And by questioning and transforming traditional oral memory practices, it has questioned and transformed traditional oral notions of memory. A telling case in point is the emergence, in the European Middle Ages, of a body of legal scripts, of written law, and the related distinction between common law, which is oral and local, and codified law, which is written and universal (see Goody, 1986, Chap. 4).

The same kind of dialectic can also be identified in the radical changes the notion of memory has undergone in recent years. The picture of memory emerging in a number of research areas is that of a dynamic process of construction and reconstruction, replacing the traditional idea of a storehouse, or archive, or library of information. There have been, of course, precursors of this idea – from Maurice Halbwachs *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1925) to Fredric Bartlett’s *Remembering* (1932). But it is only recently that this fundamental transformation of our very notion of memory has taken place within the borders of traditional psychological memory research. Dispensing with the paradigm of encoding, storage, and recall of information considered sacrosanct until only a few years ago, the focus now is on investigating ever-fleeting neuronal networks and circuits that are linked to mental activities which are similarly difficult to exactly fix in time and place.

Central aspects of the new scenarios of memory have been described not only in terms of construction and recurrent reconstruction, but also in terms of interpretation and imagination. The complex processes of meaning-making that in this way have come to the fore encompass all three modes of time, past, present, and future. What we call “remembering” refers to the temporal configuration of experiences, including (but not exclusively) past experiences, in the light of a lived present. This configuration is an interpretation of our experience as that of episodes that can be temporally localized (but not necessarily have to be). Philosophically, this view draws on a long tradition of seeing

“time” not as something ontologically given (for example, as a physical or otherwise objectified reality), but as a subjectively imposed ordering. Subjective imposition, in this context, does not mean just an individual process but implies a complex cultural and historical economy.

Viewed in this way, remembering and forgetting are sign-mediated cultural activities; they appear as what Vygotsky called “higher psychological processes.” Mediated by symbol and sign systems, they are embedded in discursive and institutional contexts and intermingled with manifold social and cultural practices. Among the mediating sign-systems involved here language and, particularly, narrative features prominently – especially if it comes to complex temporal self-constructions as in the autobiographical process.

## 2.

In the emergence of this new view, a combination of different factors have been instrumental. They include developments in the neurosciences and digital memory technologies, as well as clinical, social, cultural, and literary memory studies. Obviously, all these factors belong to what might be called the field of memory. Yet there also are changes in the field of writing that have influenced the new view of memory – and this brings me back to the work of Jack Goody. For these changes are linked to the shaping of a novel understanding of the nature and role of writing. In fact, it seems that the radical way this novel understanding has broken with the previously hold idea of writing is comparable to the radical way things have changed in the field of memory. What has changed decisively is the traditional western view of writing that, from Aristotle to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has taken the written word to be nothing but the spoken word “put down.” The last decades have witnessed, in various areas of research and scholarship, a shift to an idea of writing as a form of linguistic communication that, in contrast with the phonocentric conception, is not reducible to a visible imprint of spoken discourse; it rather constitutes a reality in its own

right, a reality that can be described in linguistic, social, and cultural terms (Olson, 1994; Harris, 1995, 2000; Brockmeier & Olson, 2002). Given the long history of the phonocentric paradigm, this is a remarkable epistemic shift. And as by now has been abundantly confirmed, this shift reflects several fundamental transformations in western communication technologies, culminating in the digital revolution.

The actual rise of the new literacy episteme – the discovery and acceptance of writing as a reality in its own right – started in the 1960s. It was associated with the publication of major works by the first generation of theorists of writing and literacy, including Jack Goody, Eric Havelock, Walter Ong, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Jacques Derrida (Brockmeier & Olson, in press). The historical significance of this group of literacy scholars has often been discussed, although it consisted no doubt of very different types scholars who, furthermore, began developing the new view of writing without any significant connection or knowledge about the work of each other. Yet against the backdrop of the mutual configuration of writing and memory I think it is especially Derrida's notion of writing that can help us, from today's point of view, to make sense of this configuration.

### 3.

Why Derrida? Why is he – after all a philosopher – important in a context mainly defined by empirical anthropologists, linguists, philologists, information scientists, psychologists and neuroscientists? With his notion of *écriture*, Derrida (1967) established for the first time a conceptual link between the field of writing and the field of memory that reflects the fundamental changes in both fields; to be historically more precise, I should say it anticipates these changes.

Outlining a philosophical theory of writing as memory, and of memory as writing, Derrida's conception of *écriture* does away with the idea of a substantial and atemporal inscription – be it of information, meaning, or any other stable “trace”. Not surprisingly, then, the entire conception was highly contested at the time. And that it served as the

starting point of far-ranging poststructuralist and deconstructionist debates did not simplify it for many. But with the historical distance of a few decades and the shifts in the epistemic architecture of our ideas of both writing and memory outlined above, the concept of *écriture* might make new sense. Perhaps today, the idea of writing – and memory – as permanently moving is more intelligible: as a movement that neither ever reaches an ultimate end point, nor can be nailed down, at any moment, to one definitive meaning because it is continuously deferring its presentation and, thus, its final interpretation, while, in the process, generating new differences and new meanings.

Forty years ago, the idea of such a constitutively open-ended process seemed to have been so outlandish that Derrida, in lack of an adequate philosophical term, dubbed it with a neologism, *différance*. But, in the meantime, the epistemic situation has changed. Recent developments in the fields of writing (e.g., in the area of digital literacy) and memory (e.g., in neurobiological and sociocultural research) situate such views in a more resonating intellectual and cultural environment. Viewed in this manner, the idea of a process that continuously generates new differences and, in this way, produces new meanings and new interpretations allows us to understand the apparently ineradicable metaphors of memory as writing and of writing as memory in a new light.

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