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On the Uses of Memory
As Monument, As Reflex, As Disturbance

ALESSANDRO PORTELLI

Memory is often discussed as an asset or a liability. Memory can function as "monument" in the form of commemoration and celebration of a proud collective identity, and a foundation on which individuals build their own identity. The function of memory, however, can be that of making us uneasy about ourselves and our history. This paper discusses in these terms the memory of two events that have shaped Italian national memory and identity: the *Risorgimento* (the war of national independence and unification) and the Resistance (the war of liberation from Fascism and Nazism). While both episodes are often celebrated in (literally) monumental terms, oral histories reveal hidden contradictions.

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A recent book on the forms of contemporary linguistic communication (Bartezzaghi 2011) repeated a worn-out cliché: an excess of memory, the author writes, is harmful, because it dooms us to repeat always the same actions and thoughts; it overwhelms us with the weight of the past.

Memory and History

This cliché has been with us for quite a while. I recall a 1981 conference in which a heated debate broke out between followers of Foucault and followers of Marx, "against" or "in favour" of memory: the Foucauldian members of the Workers Autonomy movement claimed that real revolutionaries have no memory and are thus free to conceive new ideas and create new forms of struggle (Bermani and Coggiola 1986).

This kind of debate, however, makes no sense at all for a number of reasons, in the first place because memory is neither good nor bad, memory just *is*. We cannot control whether we remember or forget, and have only partial control over the content and the functioning of memory. Most of the time, memory acts like an involuntary muscle, a sheer reflex independent of our intentions and will. In a way, memory is like breathing: we can teach ourselves to breathe better, we can breathe cleaner air, but we cannot stop ourselves from breathing. Like breathing, memory is a function that we can train, practise and improve, but never suppress. No wonder, then, that the literary figure of "involuntary memory" recurs in a number of key texts, from Marcel Proust's "Madeleine" to Toni Morrison and Don DeLillo.

Furthermore, we may object that if too much memory can choke the imagination, an absence of memory causes us to forget that certain actions and ideas have already been tried in the past, so that we repeat the past while deluding ourselves that we are inventing something new (which is indeed what so many of those Workers' Autonomy members were doing in the 1970s). Both the weight of memory and the lightness of forgetting militate against a critical, conscious relationship with the past – and with the present.

As linguist Susanne Kolb wrote recently:

> History resurfaces cyclically, and carries with it ideas, concepts, words. Even those we thought had vanished, uprooted and forever extinct, may return clad in the fashion of modernity, hidden within the deeper folds of the language of advertising, of politics, of the media. This is partly due to the fact that politics has no historical memory, and therefore much of the people do not remember that certain words and expressions had already been used in the past, and are no longer aware of their meaning and echoes. Political scientists describe this phenomenon as *criptomnesia* (Kolb 2012: 8).

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Memory as Process and Selection

It is not, however, only a matter of words. For instance, Italian culture seems obsessed with anniversaries and centennials, and thus obsessed with a ritual load of memory. However, a centennial that occurred in 1912 was entirely overlooked: the anniversary of the Italian invasion and occupation of Libya. We chose not to remember that the first aerial bombing in history was carried out by Italian planes in Libya; we chose not to remember the concentration camps in which, in 1914 – thus, long before the advent of Fascism – Italy imprisoned Libyan resistors (Del Boca 2010). This erasure of memory has allowed us to repeat exactly the same actions as 100 years ago: participate in the bombing of Libya and send migrants back to Libyan concentration camps, even after Khadafy was overthrown. The fact that we have forgotten the deportation of more than 3,000 Libyan resistors and the uncivilised conditions in which they were held makes it easier to do the same with the Libyan refugees who have crossed the Mediterranean during the civil war. And all the while, as we erased this disturbing memory, we kept regaling ourselves with the false memory of a benevolent, paternal and civilising Italian colonialism. In this case, then, it was oblivion, not memory, which prompted the repetition of the past.

On the other hand, contrasting memory and oblivion is also a mistake, because oblivion is a necessary part of memory. As Uruguayan poet Mario De Benedetti said, in a phrase that overlooks such a tragic place of memory as Villa Grimaldi in Santiago in Chile, "*el olvidoestálleno de memoria*". Or, as Jorge Luis Borgés wrote, "*el olvidoesuna de lasformas de la memoria, suvagosótano, la otra casa secreta de la moneda*" – the deep cellar, the other, secret side of the coin (Borges 1969). Thus, remembering everything – as in Borgés' metaphor of the emperor's cartographers – means remembering nothing. Memory is not a storage of data; it is, rather, a permanent search for meaning, in which forgetting filters out the traces of experiences that no longer have meaning – or that mean too much. Thus, Borgés' image of the "*sotano*", the cellar, connects with Mario Benedetti's image of forgetfulness as a "*gran simulacrorepleto de fantasmas*", a huge simulacra filled with ghosts. Ghosts are the memories that are not forgotten but suppressed, and surface again to trouble us as soon as control is relaxed. This is why the involuntary memories in Don DeLillo's *Underworld* or Toni Morrison's *Beloved* do not evoke idylls of the past, but the sense of guilt over an old crime – the violence of the slave plantation. Sethe, the ex-slave protagonist of *Beloved*, is flooded with involuntary memories evoked by the smell of lavender flowers or the sap of chamomile plants that streams over her legs as she crosses a meadow to fetch water at the river. The pastoral beauty of scents and flowers evokes horrors in the very process of covering them up:

> Nothing else would be in her mind...Nothing. Just the breeze cooling her face as she rushed toward water... Then something. The splashing of water, the sight of her shoes and stockings awry on the path where she had flung them; of [the dog] Here Boy lapping in the puddle near her feet, and suddenly there was [the plantation] rolling, rolling, rolling before her eyes, and though there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. Fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacy groves. Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world (Morrison 1987: 6).

The contrast between the beauty of the landscape and the violence that inhabits it suggests two possible modes of memory: memory as pacifier and memory as disturbance. The cliché of memory as weight and mere repetition is, ultimately, the result of an idea of memory as mere container, unchanging, forever frozen in a single, intangible, established meaning. We might describe this image as memory as monument. It is the mode of memory usually imposed by the institutions and the state in the form of commemoration and celebration of past glories, the narrative of a proud collective identity in which shadows and contradictions are smoothed out. Often, however, this is also a foundation on which individuals build their own identity. In other words, memory is something that makes us feel good about ourselves and at peace with ourselves, so that we can go on being what we have been thus far. Memory, however, is also – and, I would argue, much more useful as – a process that makes us uneasy, that questions the certainties and the beliefs on which we rest.

Memory as Disturbance

I would like to discuss this function of memory as disturbance in the context of a memory event widely and publicly celebrated in Italy in 2011: the 150th anniversary of the establishment of Italy as a united country (Mack Smith 1968). On 17 March 2011, in a radio broadcast in which this anniversary was discussed, one of the speakers criticised the use of metaphors in historical discourse – and it suddenly occurred to me that the whole celebration was built upon a memory: the definition of the process that ended with the unification of Italy as "*Risorgimento*" – a rebirth, literally, a re-rising. Something dead that comes back to life. And I recalled what Toni Morrison says about this: "Anything dead coming back to life hurts." We cannot understand the meaning of Risorgimento unless we ask where it is that this thing, coming back to life, hurts.

So, where does the memory of the rebirth of our nation hurt? We can find hints not so much in the consolidated memory told in the many, very good and useful books, celebrations, and museums, but rather in the more secret and ungraspable memory that is passed on in families, in personal and private narrative – in other words, in oral history. In these memories and narratives, the rebirth of our nation sounds much more problematic and less respectable than it appears in official celebrations, and even than what the narrators themselves are aware of.

Many years ago, in Terni, in an interview that was supposed to be about something else, a lady told me the following story:

> My father's father, he joined Garibaldi and went away with Garibaldi the day he married my grandmother. She was fourteen and he was eighteen. (After the wedding) and he said, "All right, I'm going to the store to buy some meat, you go home and wait for me." And on the way he ran into Garibaldi and all his troops that were on their way to Sicily and he up and went to Sicily with them. (My grandmother) waited at home for three days, waiting for her husband to come back from the

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store. Anyway, grandpa came back after a long, long time. He had been in the war.[1]

In this case, the foundation narrative – the glorious ancestor of whom we are proud because he fought with Garibaldi in the Risorgimento – is also a memory of abandonment and irresponsibility. "After that", she went on, "the family disinherited them. He said, I don't want anything. So (they) migrated and came to Terni."

Another lady, also a descendant of *"garibaldini"*, told a similar story: "My grandfather was studying to be a priest, and he ran away from the convent. He took to the bush, he was in the woods, and Garibaldi came through the woods and he went along with Garibaldi." He ended up spending the family fortune on the cause.[2] In each "birth of a nation", then, we have a break and a healing – the dynamics of revolution/constitution at the root of United States history, and perhaps Italian history, too, as Risorgimento/unification. In all the family narratives I heard, joining Garibaldi means a break. With the family: two brothers from Terni "joined up with Garibaldi unbeknownst to their parents, they left a note and went away with Garibaldi". With the church: the daughter of a partisan who was killed at the Fosse Ardeatine also told the story of a grandfather who "ran away from church seminar to go and fight with Garibaldi". With law and order: they take to the bush and to the woods, like outlaws. The priest who gave me my first communion told me, years later, that the "garibaldini were a hot-headed bunch", the followers of a "lucky bandit".[3]

There is a fault line crossing these memories: they are the backbone of family pride, but they retain the trace of the break. "People often tell me that those who joined Garibaldi were, I mean, adventurers, people like that. This isn't true, because this is not what my family is. They joined him because they felt the passion for this patriotic cause." A great-granddaughter explained that her family is very proud of their great-grandfather's friendship with Giuseppe Mazzini and Garibaldi, but they tend to downplay the fact that, because of these friendships, he spent years in jail. A hero ancestor is fine, but a convict ancestor is an embarrassment. Yet – and this is the dynamics of the birth of each nation – the liberators were convicts before they were heroes.[4]

Each birth of a nation, then, is not only the creation of a new order, but also the trauma of a break and violation of an older one. Memory, as is often the case with trauma, sets itself out to exorcise the conflict. Again, we are helped here by literature. The true narrative of the American revolution is Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle", who falls asleep before the devolution and wakes up again when it is all over: he goes from one order to another order without going through the trouble of disorder. The violence, the war, the contradictions out of which nations are born, are buried in the "cellar" of oblivion, but return to haunt us as ghosts and nightmares. Italian literature also has a similar narrative: in an 1871 story by the Tuscan author Narciso Feliciano Pelosini, "Mastro Domenico" falls asleep in the Grand duchy of Tuscany and wakes up years later in the Kingdom of Italy. Once again, from one order to another order, exorcising the trauma of the painful and messy Risorgimento (Portelli 1978; Pelosini 1871).

In many of these family stories, Garibaldi "happens to be passing by". There is no hamlet in Italy that does not sport a stone claiming that "Garibaldi slept here". Indeed, Garibaldi has been everywhere; he crossed Italy from end to end, from Sicily to the Alps, from Rome to the Adriatic coast. This long-haired travelling bandit hero is a true "on the road" character. Semiologist Omar Calabrese has suggested that Garibaldi's image may be behind a famous character in Italian popular fiction, the Malaysian pirate Sandokan, the hero of the adventure novels by Emilio Salgari on which generations of Italian boys, including myself, were raised (Portelli 2011). Indeed, like Garibaldi, long-haired and restless Sandokan was simultaneously an outlaw, a pirate, and an anti-imperialist fighter. In time, they will put up Garibaldi on horseback in every town square in Italy; but a folk rhyme still reminds us that before that happened, *"Garibaldi fu ferito"*, Garibaldi was wounded – in the mountains of Calabria, as he was attempting to complete the unfinished Risorgimento by marching on to Rome – and he was wounded by the Italian army, the army of the country he had helped be born. *Garibaldi fu ferito* is, in fact, also the title of a small but important book by historian Mario Isnenghi, which tells how the heroes of the Risorgimento were marginalised and ostracised once the unification was completed and order restored (Isnenghi 2007).

Risorgimento and Resistance

The three Rs of Italian history are *Rinascimento*, Risorgimento, and *Resistenza*. Of the three, only Resistenza is not a metaphor, because the partisan literally resisted the Nazi occupation in 1943-45. Yet, those who fill the airwaves and the media with talk of the homeland and of patriotism are precisely the ideological descendants of those who split Italy up, between the occupied North and the freed South – the monarchists and the fascists. In order to unify Italy again, it took the partisans. They, too, were called bandits – "we are the bandits of the mountain", says one of their songs – but many of them chose to be called "garibaldini".

Just like the Risorgimento, but more openly and publicly, the Resistance has been the ground of a conflict between pacifying, satisfactory public narratives, and suppressed troubling and problematic memories. Once again, the conflict hinges on the meaning of the birth and rebirth of the nation. On 8 September 1943, Italy signed an armistice with the Allies, breaking away from the alliance with Nazi Germany. Using a metaphor that is sort of a mirror image to that of the Risorgimento, a new birth, historian Ernesto Galli Della Loggia coined the fortunate phrase, "death of the nation": institutions were dissolved, the army disbanded, the king and his court and military commanders fled South. The Italy that had been born in 1861 – monarchic, liberal, fascist Italy – disappears (Galli Della Logia 1996).

Yet, on the very same day, the very opposite happened. Individual citizens and loosely organised groups took to the streets near Porta San Paolo in an attempt to stop the Nazis from

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occupying the city. The day ended in defeat and a massacre of resistance fighters; yet, other narrators and other memories see that day not as the death of the country, but as the birth of a new Italy, an Italy founded on the sovereignty of its people, the active participation and the subjectivity of its own citizens. No wonder the communist underground cells chose to call themselves Patriotic Action Groups, as patriotism was being redeemed from the corrupt and irresponsible ruling classes that had abandoned Rome to its fate. Maria Teresa Regard, one of the women who fought that day and joined the partisan underground, said, "I didn't go to San Paolo following party orders; I went because I thought it was our duty to fight for Italy."[5] This was the beginning of the Resistance with a capital R: after 20 years of silence under Fascism, and after almost 100 years under the rule of the bourgeois elites, Italy returns, as a democracy founded on the active participation of its own working people. No wonder, then, that a frequent metaphor is that of the Resistance as the "second Risorgimento"; and the theoretical journal of the Communist Party would be called *Rinascita*, new birth – as if the "death of the nation" were a necessary passage for the birth of a new one. Once again, something dead coming back to life hurts.

Yet, democratic Italy uses the metaphor of the new Risorgimento very much in the mode of memory as monument. Thus, the official narrative of the Resistance describes it as a united, spontaneous movement of the Italian people; and the representation of the partisans is always in terms of the sacrifice of their lives for the love of country and freedom. Once again, public memory omits many problematic, troubling aspects: on the one hand, the fact that many Italians joined Mussolini's so-called Social Republic and continued fighting on the side of Nazi Germany, perpetrating massacres and cooperating with the deportation of Jews; on the other hand, the fact that the Resistance was a war, and therefore partisans also used violence, and that violence continued in many acts of individual and collective revenge even after the was over (Pansa 2003).

Memory-as-Monument in Italy

The memory-as-monument of the "democratic republic born out of the Resistance" represents itself in monuments to "the dying partisan" – never to the partisan who, in the just war against fascism and Nazism, shoots and inevitably kills. There is no trace of the conflict that historian Claudio Pavone, in an important 1991 book, recognised – to great scandal – as a "civil war" (Pavone 1991). A much-used high-school history textbook explains "that in order to represent the new Republic as everyone's homeland, some felt it necessary to alter the representation of history" by pretending that all Italians who were not active fascists were ipso facto anti-fascists, and denying that those who fought with Mussolini were also Italians and forgetting "the shame of the foibe" (the gulches in the Easter Alps where Yugoslav partisans murdered thousands of Italians, not all necessarily fascists (Camera and Fabietti 1997; Portelli 2011: 181 ff)).

"These acts of falsification and censorship", the book concludes, "must cease", because "no sound National unity may be founded on the suppression or the alteration of historical truth". Indeed, the construction of a unified memory has resulted in a deep split within both public and personal memories. The memories stowed away in the "cellar" of oblivion resurface as frightful spectres. In public memory, the oblivion on the foibe (and other crimes committed by partisans) has allowed the unreconstructed Fascists of the Berlusconi coalition to set themselves up as the custodians of historical truth, and to establish commemorations alternative to the memory of Fascist and Nazi crimes, intended to delegitimise not just the anti-Fascist resistance, but the very foundations of the democracy that emerged from it. On the other side, the memory of the Resistance as armed struggle was claimed by terrorist groups like the Red Brigades, in order to legitimise their use of violence and murder in a totally different historical context and political environment.

The personal memories of many partisans are even more troubled. As they fought in the Resistance, they were inevitably involved in actions that were necessary then, but conflict with their own conscience and with the ethics of the peace time in which they are remembered. Unlike the fascists, the partisans were not the bearers of an ideology of violence and death. The fact that they used violence, that they killed – and the fact that this dimension is erased from authorised memory – generates painful splits within their own conscience. "Killing is an act against nature", says partisan Carla Capponi, recalling her first armed action. Rosario Bentivegna, one of the heroes of the liberation war in Rome, recalled that he had chosen to study medicine because, "I thought that if I'm called to serve in [the] Army, I will not have to kill, but will do all I can to save lives." After his first guerrilla action, "we were in shock ...I had shot a man. I could not speak, I could not go back and be with my friends." The split begins at the moment of the action, and is perpetuated in memory: "It was as though we were shielded from everything, as though we wanted to protect ourselves from what we were doing, because it was so abnormal for people like us," said Maia Teresa Regard. And Lucia Ottobrini, a deeply spiritual woman who fought in the armed underground, sums it all up when she says, "During the Resistance, I thought: it's as though I were transgressing, I was ashamed to speak to Him [to Jesus]. When I think back on it, I say, how strange, was it really me?" Indeed, this question – was it really me? – is the key to all of this memory-as-trouble of the Resistance.[6]

For instance, in the battle that the partisans fought at Poggio Bustone, at the border of Lazio and Umbria, against the fascists on 10 March 1944, a few of the local fascist leaders died. There are many different versions of how they died; the most plausible, also accepted by fascist sources, is that they were killed after, finding themselves surrounded, they attempted a desperate sortie with weapons in hand. Partisan Dante Bartolini, who was not at the battle, narrated two different and incompatible versions of this incident. In a public performance, he described their death as a cold-blooded execution after they had surrendered; in a song that he wrote to commemorate the partisan's victory, he described it as though there had been a regular trial and they were in jail instead of being dead.

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If we put them together, these two versions do not so much testify to the fact as they do to the laceration of a conscience, between a nostalgia for legality and order on the one hand, and the awareness of having been possessed, in the heat of battle, by almost unspeakable feelings of hatred and wrath on the other. A war, even a just war of liberation, involves acts that can be understood in the name of contingent necessity as well as the states of mind that were inherent to these acts, but which are hard to acknowledge in the time of memory and commemoration. Indeed, in his ballad, Dante Bartolini describes his partisan comrades as "wolves thirsty for those traitors' blood", not the most pacific image of the resistance fighters (Portelli 1997).

Mario Filipponi, who was actually at the battle, recalled:

> After you've been six, eight months, a year, in the mountains, when you come down, you're a half animal. No two ways about it. I was no longer a normal human being. Today, I say: I was an animal. I realise that in those times I was out of my mind. You've come down the mountain, with all that hate, all that fighting, the guns ...all the time, you expected a shot in the back, so you brought yourself up to such a frenzy that (when it was over) it wasn't easy, it wasn't easy.[7]

Ultimately, the unspeakability of this disturbing memory ends in silence. "I was no longer able to speak," Rosario Bentivegna says. And partisan Mario Fiorentini says: "About this, we must never speak, today, tomorrow, or ever." These are unauthorised memories as far as public discourse is concerned, involuntary memories in personal recollection, disturbing memories in both.[8]

Conclusion

In Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), whenever the narrator is invaded by disturbing involuntary memories – his relationship with his father, the killing of a mafioso in the Bronx – the stream of consciousness is interrupted by formulas, repeated identically and out of context, boxed-in discursive fragments that emerge automatically to block dangerous thoughts – which, however, also contain them. The most frequent of these formulas concerns an obsession with the disposal of domestic waste – that is, objects out of place, impure, and unpleasant, precisely like those memories. Therefore, morphologically, the formula represents the obsession of control, and functionally, it represents the impossibility of controlling memory and consciousness. Ultimately, it works as the verbal equivalent of memory-as-monument – a commemorative stone, a hard object of marble or bronze that covers up and hides all that lurks underneath, all that we are pushing out of our sight. And yet, this is exactly what we need to see and hear, because it helps us better understand who we are and how we became who we are. Which, in the end, is what memory is for.

NOTES

1 Isolina Bastoni (b 1923), Terni, 1 May 1979. All interviews were recorded by the author.
2 Alba Froscianti (b 1912), Collescipoli (Terni), 16 June 1982.
3 Agata Trinchi (b 1909), Terni, 7 July 1982; Giuseppina Ferola (b 1932), Rome, 22 November 1998; Father Gino Paiella (b 1914), Collescipoli (Terni), 29 December 1982.
4 Agata Trinchi; Silvia Bonifazi (b 1965), Terni, 31 June 1982.
5 Maria Teresa Regard (b 1924), Rome, 20 April 1998.
6 Carla Capponi (b 1919), Zagarolo (Rome), 28 May 1997; Rosario Bentivegna (b 1922), Rome, 11 November 1998; Maria Teresa Regard; Lucia Ottobrini (b 1924), 15 July 1997.
7 Mario Filipponi (b 1924), Piedluco (Terni), 3 September 1982.
8 Mario Fiorentini (b 1918), Rome, 15 July 1997.

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