

From *Lieux de mémoire* to *Realms of Memory*

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These three volumes of *Realms of Memory* are, in the strongest possible sense, a translation of the seven volumes published in French under the title *Les Lieux de mémoire*. They offer what Rabelais would call the *substantifique moelle*, the very marrow of the work, and are the concentrated, condensed product of a lengthy intellectual and publishing venture that developed over a period of almost a decade, from 1984 to 1992. This venture was collective as well as individual: collective, because it involved nearly 120 contributors, most of them French, to whom I owe a very real debt of gratitude, for without the effort and talent of each and every one of them this work would be of little interest; and personal, because the project as a whole—its overall conception and detailed structure, revised at various stages along the way—was a solitary work, which evolved as it progressed.

The point of departure, the original idea, which I first tried out on my seminar at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris, was to study national feeling not in the traditional thematic or chronological manner but instead by analyzing the places in which the collective heritage of France was crystallized, the principal *lieux*, in all senses of the word, in which collective memory was rooted, in order to create a vast topology of French symbolism. Though not really a neologism, the term did not exist in French when I first used it.¹ It met with remarkable success, however, to the point where it was included in the 1993 edition of the *Grand Dictionnaire Robert de la langue française*. I took it from ancient and medieval rhetoric as described by Frances Yates in her admirable book, *The Art of Memory* (1966), which recounts an important tradition of mnemonic techniques. The classical art of memory was based on a systematic inventory of *loci memoriae*, or “memory places.” In French, the association of the words *lieu* and *mémoire* proved to have

profound connotations—historical, intellectual emotional, and largely unconscious (the effect was something like that of the English word “roots”). These connotations arise in part from the specific role that memory played in the construction of the French idea of the nation and in part from recent changes in the attitude of the French toward their national past. The goal of this book is to shed light on that specific role and to illustrate those changes in attitude—in short, to elaborate and make sense of the very term *lieu de mémoire*.

From the first I envisioned a work in three parts: *La République*, *La Nation*, and *Les France* (although the last remained rather vague in my mind). The intention was to move from the simple to the complex, from content to form, from what was most easily dated to what was most difficult to pin down, from the most local to the most general, from the most recent to the most ancient, from the most political to the most carnal, from the most unitary to the most diverse, from the most evident to the most problematic. But if the English-speaking reader is to understand the scope and ambition of a project of which these three volumes can be seen as both a culmination and a synopsis, I must take a moment to explain the slow process by which that project came into being. For the work is in no sense linear; each of its three segments has, like the stages of a rocket, its own internal logic and dynamic.

La République (1984) required only one volume, but *La Nation* (1986) took three. For the study of the Republic, it proved sufficient to look at a selection of sites and illustrative examples mainly from the founding years of the Third Republic. But “the nation,” whose conceptual underpinnings were not as thoroughly explored as one might expect, called for a more systematic, sweeping, and carefully structured investigation.

The first volume of *La Nation* deals with what might be called the *immaterial* aspects of memory: the long-term “legacy” of the monarchy as embodied in *lieux* such as the anointment ritual of Rheims; the key works that enabled “historiography” to revamp the very foundations of historical memory; and, finally, the way in which scholars and painters organized the “landscape” of France. The second volume deals with the *material*, namely, “the territory” of France, its borders, and its symbolic representation as a hexagon; “the state,” with its monumental or symbolic instruments, like Versailles; and “the patrimony,” or legacy of historical monuments and sites, together with the men who did most to preserve it, such as Prosper Mérimée and Eugène Viollet-le-Duc. The third volume is concerned with the *ideal*, namely, the two fundamental ideas upon which the nation was built: “glory,” both military and civilian, and “words,” France being a country in which the relation between language and literature on the one hand and political power, the state, and the national idea on the other hand has always been close. Here, for instance, one finds “Verdun” alongside “La Coupole” (the familiar term for the Académie

Française), and "The Louvre," that residence of kings that became a temple of the arts, alongside "Classic Textbooks."

After the publication of the three-volume edition of *La Nation* in 1986, the project came to a temporary halt. Following a lengthy period in which the country's leading historians seemed to have rejected the nation as a framework for doing history, numerous signs pointed to a return to a more nation-centered history. A number of "Histories of France" suddenly appeared. Indeed, Fernand Braudel himself, the leading light of the *Annales* movement, seemed to move in this direction with his *Identité de la France* (1986). To be sure, *Les Lieux de mémoire* began with a different premise and reflected a radically different point of view. Yet if, initially, it had seemed possible to define the idea of a *lieu de mémoire* and demonstrate its fruitfulness by bringing together, for example, such subjects as "monuments to the dead" and the widely read children's text entitled *La Tour de la France par deux enfants*, I felt that in order to go on, to treat such often-studied yet inevitable subjects as Joan of Arc, the court, or the Eiffel Tower as *lieux de mémoire*, it would be necessary to take a more theoretical approach. It was no longer enough simply to select objects; instead those objects would have to be *constructed*: in each case one would have to look beyond the historical reality to discover the symbolic reality and recover the memory that it sustained.

In fact, planning *Les France* forced me to move from a relatively narrow to a relatively broad concept of *lieu de mémoire*. The narrow approach had consisted in taking actual memorials such as the Pantheon and showing how these were actually closely related to such seemingly different objects as museums, commemorations, emblems, and mottoes; as well as to even more remote objects, including institutions such as the Académie Française, realities such as borders, regions such as Alsace and the Vendée, and men such as François Guizot, who was responsible for creating so many of the instruments by means of which memories are perpetuated; and, in addition, to more abstract notions such as that of a dynasty, which did so much to preserve the memory of the high and mighty. Now, this broader conception, which emerged only with the third part of the series, entitled *Les France*, involved a systematic analysis and dismantling of the most typical forms of French national symbolism and mythology, of the most expressive and revealing elements of "Frenchness." If the expression *lieu de mémoire* must have an official definition, it should be this: a *lieu de mémoire* is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community (in this case, the French community). The narrow concept had emphasized the *site*: the goal was to exhume significant sites, to identify the most obvious and crucial centers of national memory, and then to reveal the existence of invisible bonds tying them all together. As revealing and sweeping as this approach was, however, it tended to create the

impression that *lieux de mémoire* constituted a simple objective category. The broader conception required by the planning of *Les France* placed the accent instead on *memory*, on the discovery and exploration of latent or hidden aspects of national memory and its whole spectrum of sources, regardless of their nature. This simple change of method, this natural extension of the original notion of a *lieu de mémoire*, in fact gave rise to a far more ambitious project: a history of France through memory.

This was of course a far more difficult project, but also a tempting one. Whatever "France" may be, neither science nor conscience can today show it to be the culmination of a single, unitary pattern of development or even the product of a variety of clearly identifiable deterministic processes. If, instead, it were possible to show that France is an entirely symbolic reality, then those deterministic processes could be seen for what they are: namely, inexhaustible, hence justifying the plural of the title, *Les France*. Such a symbolic unity would justify the disconcerting approach of studying the subject in terms of independent symbolic entities and would clearly reveal the unifying logic. What began as an empirical, experimental, almost playful attempt to track down *lieux de mémoire* would thus open up infinitely more exciting new vistas: a notion improvised for the needs of the moment would then become a category in terms of which contemporary history could be made intelligible, or perhaps even more than a category, a "concept"—a thing quite rare in history. This might help to institute a symbolic history better suited than traditional history to the civic as well as intellectual needs of our time. The French case, which is particularly apt for an exercise of this kind, would then serve to demonstrate a new approach to national history that might prove useful in other national contexts. It was this prospect that impelled me to go back to work and solicit sixty-six additional essays, constituting three thick new volumes of a thousand pages each. These new volumes were conceived to follow the natural articulations of memory itself, which the historian can only approach by way of its divisions, its real or imaginary continuities, and its symbolic fixations. *Les France* (1992) can thus be seen as the culmination of the whole enterprise, its most complete achievement, its most vital and expressive component. That is why I chose its overall architecture as the framework and foundation for putting together this American edition.

The problem of reducing the seven volumes of the French edition to three volumes for the English-language version imposed a number of difficult choices, which I discussed at length with the American publisher. Sacrifices were inevitable. But we were determined to come up with a well-designed, well-balanced structure, one that makes sense rhetorically and that, far from watering down the original conception of the work, fully embodies its method, principal results, and theoretical reach. Since each stage of the French edition reconsidered, expanded on, and deepened the work of the preceding stages, it seemed natural to use the final stage of the

thing to describe the prehistoric paintings on the walls of Lascaux and quite another to analyze, using the speech delivered by the President of the Republic on the fiftieth anniversary of the cave's discovery, how archaeology provided France with a memory extending back in time well beyond "our ancestors the Gauls." It is one thing to recount the history of the Tour de France bicycle race since 1903, to revisit its great moments, its heroes, its reporters, and its gradual commercialization, and quite another to use the race to show how that "democratic horse," the bicycle, by retracing, initially, the route once followed by apprentice craftsmen as they toured France to acquire the skills of their trades, enabled ordinary people to learn the country's geography, to discover its plains and coasts, in the very year that the learned geographer and historian Paul Vidal de La Blache described France's geographical diversity in his celebrated *Tableau de la géographie de la France*, which served as an introduction to Lavis's *Histoire de France*. It is one thing to analyze the work of Marcel Proust, the man widely acknowledged to be "the greatest writer of the twentieth century," and even to enumerate the many *lieux de mémoire* that appear in his text, from the *petite madeleine* to the uneven paving stones in the courtyard of the Guermantes to the steeples of Martinville; it is quite another to study, as is done here for the first time, how a writer who stood at first outside the dominant currents of French literature—a homosexual, a Jew, and a social butterfly whose literary talents were underestimated by André Gide and André Breton, André Malraux and Jean-Paul Sartre—came to occupy the zenith of the literary firmament. And so it is with all the subjects treated in these volumes.

Readers are of course free to group these subjects as they will, as one might group the cards in a hand of poker. One can proceed chronologically, for example, to reveal a strong, centralizing continuity in the creation of which the nineteenth century played a preponderant role, but beyond which we can make out several sedimentary layers corresponding to the key stages of nation-building, none of which has dropped out of memory or lost its symbolic effectiveness: we go from a "royal memory" of the feudal age to a "state memory" of the absolutist monarchy to a "national memory" of the immediate post-Revolutionary period, and from there to a "citizen memory" of the republican schools and finally to the "patrimonial memory" of our age. Or one can group the subjects thematically to reveal how this type of symbolic history, which points up the links between the material base of social existence and the most elaborate productions of culture and thought, allows specialists in such diverse fields as art history, literary history, political history, the history of law, historical demography, and economic history to work together. In each case the goal is the same: to restore the original strangeness of the subject, to show how each element reflects the whole and is involved in the entire national identity. It also allows us to explore radically new subjects, which no linear thematic or chronological history of France would have any reason to take into account, such as the sol-

dier Chauvin. Everybody is familiar with the term "chauvinism," which has found its way into many languages other than French. Some may know that the word comes from the name of Nicolas Chauvin, a veteran of the wars of the Revolution and Empire, who allegedly returned home to his native La Rochelle covered with wounds and medals, "to live out his days among his people," to borrow a celebrated line of Du Bellay's. But in fact Chauvin never existed. He was a myth forged by the caricaturists and *chansonniers*, or songsters, of the Restoration and July Monarchy, a "remake" of the peasant-soldier of Roman Antiquity and Rousseauist ideology whose ghost has returned countless times in such diverse forms as the "unknown soldier," the heroic peasant soldier of Pétainist ideology, and various figments of rural Catholic nationalism. When juxtaposed with the inevitable article on Verdun, however, a detailed analysis of this myth takes us deep into the heart of French identity and reveals a distinctive feature of the French tradition.

Such juxtapositions and short-circuits, which distinguish this work from other works of history, may trouble or even shock some readers. The approach taken here may seem to deny that a national dynamic of any kind exists, be it spiritual or material, nationalistic, patriotic, or revolutionary. To set an ironic, almost caricatural symbol such as the Gallic cock alongside the palace of Versailles or the battle of Verdun, to treat the French taste for gastronomy in the same analytic terms as Joan of Arc or General de Gaulle, to focus the same kind of attention on the Bicentennial of the French Revolution as on the Revolution itself, is to blur the distinctions between the greatest and most brilliant accomplishments of French history and tradition and the humblest instruments for fabricating that history and that tradition, and to do so runs the risk of appearing to diminish those accomplishments. Therein, however, lies the very principle of this project, whose ambition is to think about the nation without nationalism and about France without any universalistic *a priori*; whose inspiration is almost ethnographic; and whose method therefore consists in shedding light on the construction of representations, the formation of historical objects over time. It incorporates a dimension of analysis familiar to Americans but by its very nature long foreign to the spirit of French history: the historiographic dimension.

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Adopting a historiographical approach is not intended to sidestep the many difficulties—political, scientific, moral, and civic—that a synthetic approach or unitary narrative would present in the France of today; it is an approach dictated, I feel, by current tendencies in history and historiography.

Ever since history, and particularly national history, first emerged as a scientific discipline, advances in the field have depended on methodological revisions. Such revisions require historians to distinguish clearly between what contemporaries believe they have experienced or are experiencing and what critical evaluation can

reveal about this common fund of beliefs and traditions. To make such distinctions is to mark a discontinuity in the discipline. Moreover, every important advance in the field of history has been associated with a major historical upheaval, as a result of which historians have been led to explore new sources, methods, and interests. Thus France's traumatic defeat at the hands of the Prussians in 1870 and subsequent rivalry with Germany led French historians to develop a new categorical imperative, not to say a civic and national duty: to test the whole received national tradition against the archival evidence. This led to a sharp, clear distinction between narrative sources, which were viewed as suspect, and archival sources, which were seen as proof positive. For the "methodical" or "positivist" school of historians, this was a *critical* discontinuity. Then World War I, followed by the Crash of 1929—the year in which the celebrated *Annales* were founded—revealed the importance of economic trends and statistics, particularly demographic statistics, and this new emphasis led to the discovery of a *structural* discontinuity. Historians saw an opposition between individual and collective consciousness of historical experience and the undeniable consequences of long-term deterministic processes, of medium-to-long range historical cycles that affect how groups of people live, love, and die. A clear expression of this kind of structural discontinuity can be seen in Braudel's famous *durées*, which taught us that the apparent homogeneity of historical time is largely illusory. As this historical process continued, the impact of decolonization and economic "takeoff" made us aware, intimately as well as scientifically, of how alienated we can be from ourselves in space as well as time, and this "inner distance" became even more familiar as a result of the growing influence of psychoanalysis in the same period. Call this third discontinuity *ethnological*. It gave rise to the history of "mentalities" and to a new interest in marginal social groups, to the "colonized" within our own societies: workers, women, Jews, provincials, and so on. It also led to historical study of apparently atemporal topics, such as the body, climate, myths, and festivals, as well as of seemingly trivial subjects, such as cooking, hygiene, and smells. Meanwhile, along with the rise of the media, it provoked a surge of interest in public opinion, images, and "events"—new themes that Jacques Le Goff and I tried to survey in a three-volume work entitled *Faire de l'histoire*.³

The discontinuity that we are experiencing today can be seen as yet another of history's continual self-revisions, an expansion and deepening of the mechanism of discontinuity but with one important difference: this time the entire French historical tradition has been set aside and subjected to a fundamental rethinking. We have entered the age of *historiographical* discontinuity. This latest discontinuity is at once more diffuse and more radical than those that have gone before. More diffuse, because it reflects the convergence of a number of phenomena that are themselves complex and far-reaching: the political and national impact of de Gaulle's disappearance, the consequences of the demise of the revolutionary idea, and the after-

effects of economic crisis. But also more radical, because these three phenomena converged in the middle seventies to form a new constellation that profoundly alters our relationship to the past and to traditional forms of French national sentiment.⁴

The new importance of memory and the search for the *lieux* that embody it, the return to our collective heritage and focus on the country's shattered identities, are inscribed in this new constellation. This transition from one type of national consciousness to another, this shift from one model of the nation to another, is what underlies this project and gives it meaning.

A nation that was long agricultural, providentialist, universalist, imperialist, and state-centered has passed away, and in its place has emerged a nation conscious of its diminished power, reshaped by European integration and internal "regionalization," redefined by the fading of the national-revolutionary equation of 1789, and, finally, tested by an influx of immigrants not easily adaptable to the traditional norms of "Frenchness." At the same time, however, France has been revitalized and its attachment to its national roots has been transformed. That attachment is no longer based solely on history: it now includes a deep consciousness of its threatened countryside, lost traditions, wrecked ways of life—its very "identity." France has rediscovered its heritage.

This polyphonic study of *lieux de mémoire* is intended to be a response to this new historical turning point. It derives from a type of history that is at once highly traditional and yet quite new. Highly traditional because it does not assume any particular methodology and concentrates on subjects with which everyone is familiar. In some ways the work might seem to be a throwback to the era of positivist history or beyond, because it calls for an almost literary treatment. But at the same time it is quite new, because the history of memory is history that has become critical through and through, and not just of its own tools: history has entered its epistemological age.

There are, to put it strongly, three types of national history. The first type was the creation of Michelet: his goal was to integrate all the material and spiritual facts in an organic whole, a living entity, to present France "as a soul and a person." Here, post-Revolutionary romanticism achieved its culmination. The second type of national history is typified by the work of Lavissee: his goal was to test the entire national tradition against the documents in the archives. Lavissee's work stands as a monument to the age of republican positivism. The third type of national history was created by Braudel, who unfortunately died before his work was complete: His goal was to use the results of the social sciences to characterize the various stages and levels of *durée*; to integrate the geography of Vidal de La Blache into history; to extrapolate from economic cycles; and to make Marxist concepts less rigid and adapt them to the French climate. This is the fruit of the *Annales*.

✓ || These three types of national history are now joined by a fourth, exemplified by the present attempt to write a history in multiple voices. The central point, the goal is to reinterpret the history of France in symbolic terms, to define France as a reality that is entirely symbolic, and thus to reject any definition that would reduce it to phenomena of another order. Adopting such a view opens the way to a new kind of history: a history less interested in causes than in effects; less interested in actions remembered or even commemorated than in the traces left by those actions and in the interaction of those commemorations; less interested in events themselves than in the construction of events over time, in the disappearance and reemergence of their significations; less interested in "what actually happened" than in its perpetual reuse and misuse, its influence on successive presents; less interested in traditions than in the way in which traditions are constituted and passed on. In short, a history that is neither a resurrection nor a reconstitution nor a reconstruction nor even a representation but, in the strongest possible sense, a "rememoration"—a history that is interested in memory not as remembrance but as the overall structure of the past within the present: history of the second degree.

I am not unaware of how ambitious this project is. But experience has shown that only such a history, at once scholarly and accessible to the broader public, is capable of responding to the needs of the moment, of reconciling, in France and perhaps elsewhere as well, the requirements of science with the demands of conscience.