

FICKLE MODELS AND FLEXIBLE MEMORIES:

A cultural memory perspective on humanist
interaction with the past



By Lærke Maria Andersen Funder & Trine Arlund Hass

As every Renaissance scholar knows, Petrarch rediscovered Cicero's letters to Atticus, Brutus, and his brother Quintus in the Biblioteca Capitolare of the Cathedral in Verona in 1345. The letters were not lost as such, as they were sitting on the shelves of the library; but they had been lost to memory. Petrarch quite literally pulled them out of oblivion and brought them into the light. In announcing his findings through the publication of a comparable collection of his own letters, including two addressed by him to Cicero, Petrarch made clear that the content of Cicero's letters had changed and expanded both his knowledge and his conception of Cicero.

In transcending the time gap, Petrarch was attempting to reach back in time and piece together a picture of his hero from the scraps that had made it through to his time. As he salvages these sources from oblivion, Petrarch is not so much reminded of Cicero as he is recollecting and constructing an idea of that person from the past by fitting the newly acquired pieces into the existing puzzle. The memory of Cicero he establishes is thus a construction as well as an interpretation. This is true for the humanist understanding of the past in general, just as it is for ours today.

The humanists ventured to recover remains from the classical era and piece them together into as complete images as possible. The ancient texts, artworks etc. were considered canonical, but not untouchable. When new pieces were discovered (as with the Cicero letters) or new insights and new hypotheses emerged, or following changes in the scholars' own context, the value and meaning of the canonical texts were continually discussed and renegotiated. More than that, the humanists to a higher degree than today activated the classical remains by intervention: incomplete works were mended with new parts, such as the legs added by Guglielmo della Porta to the Farnese Hercules, or Maffeo Vegio's supplement to Virgil's *Aeneid*. The humanists' use of intertextuality – the interweaving of new works, be they of architecture, art, or literature, with borrowings from the classical – is an expression of the same praxis.

In order to examine the role of the classical heritage and the mechanisms of the humanists' way of engaging with it, this volume studies the Renaissance humanists' interactions with the classical past within a cultural memory framework. Considering this as a memory process emphasizes the fickleness of the humanists' grasp of the models after which they were shaping themselves and their works. It allows us to focus on the role of the individual and the individual's cultural context in the appropriation of the vast potential of the past into memories that are meaningful to that individual's world. Memory studies, likewise, enable us to explore how the relationship between individuals and their cultural contexts strikes a balance between the successful reinvention of parts of the past and the continued oblivion of others.

Memory studies

Memory studies originate in Maurice Halbwach's concept of collective memory: of how not just individuals, but communities too "have" a memory or construct versions of the past.¹ Memory studies blossomed in the 1980s with Pierre Nora's significant contribution of the concept "lieux de mémoire", still gaining an ever surer foothold in all sorts of disciplines performing studies of culture. Memory studies approach memory as the culturally embedded act, practised by individuals and groups, of recollecting elements of the past. Memory is not factual or objective; it is a selective and subjective act. The act of remembering places the remains of the past within the context of the present of the remembering subject or community. And when talking of cultural memory, it is clear that it transgresses the limits of personal experience. Considering memory as a cultural phenomenon also emphasizes that it is inherently precarious, operating between the individual and the collective:

Memory nonetheless captures simultaneously the individual, embodied, and lived side as well as the collective, social, and constructed side of our relations to the past.²

The example of Petrarch who, having recovered Cicero's letters from oblivion, in response addresses his idol of the past, is an image of this complexity. Petrarch treats his reading experience as a lived encounter with a colleague: this seemingly very personal experience first results in a reorganization of his own ideas about the past, but soon this expands to include a reconsideration of his community's and his culture's memory of one

¹ Halbwachs 1925, 1941, and 1950; Erll 2008, 1.

² Citation from Erll 2008, 2.

of the finest and most important idols of their model culture. This example similarly confirms remembering to be a creative act that enables individuals and cultures “... to build new worlds out of the materials of older ones”.³ We may add here that forgetting can serve the same purpose.

The conceptualization of memory as *culturally embedded* is core to memory studies. This allows for the approach not only to encompass multifaceted memory practices, such as memory as a social practice, a material and mediated practice, and a cognitive practice, but to transcend the boundaries between these distinctions.⁴ While one may theoretically distinguish between memory as a personal praxis that is cognitive and actual on the one hand and memory as a collective, societal and symbolic praxis on the other, Erll argues that:

... in practice the cognitive and the social/medial continuously interact. There is no such thing as pre-cultural individual memory; but neither is there a Collective or Cultural Memory (with capital letters) which is detached from individuals and embodied only in media and institutions.⁵

In this volume, we add to the development of memory studies by engaging with core theoretical and conceptual aspects. We see Renaissance humanism as a turning point in the European culture of memory, and as formative for all later interaction with the classical heritage. This culture is marked by a meta-discursive turn: the humanists actively theorized and debated how they were to engage with the past, developing a culture that incorporated critical reflection on its practices as a key element.⁶ Renaissance humanists were acutely aware of the power of memory in their engagement with the past. At first they addressed mainly the legacy of classical antiquity, but as the humanist culture spread to regions beyond the Roman territories with their own local pasts, such as the Gothicism of Scandinavia, remembering – and forgetting – became a cultural practice that enabled the humanists to actively shape the narrative of their past as well as future. By the early sixteenth century, the humanist understanding of the power of memory had come to influence such diverse fields as literature, historiography, and natural history. Just as the focus expanded over time from literature and language to encompass all aspects of ancient culture, the material remains became just as important for the constructions and reconsideration of the memory of the past.

³ Rothberg 2009, 5.

⁴ Erll, 2008, 4.

⁵ Erll 2008, 5.

⁶ Horster & Pade 2020; den Haan 2016.

The primary point of convergence between past and present – the classical texts – was more than just media through which memory could be conveyed. The very act of reading and writing in the style of the ancients was an act of memory practised (*imitatio*). As Aleida Assmann succinctly puts it:

As long as there was some kind of spiritual kinship, a later reader could communicate with the author across a wide expanse of time, because the writing could synchronize their communication.⁷

Writing in imitation of the ancient models was a way of drawing them out of the distant past and into the present – just as Petrarch treats Cicero as if he had been brought back to life. The distance between now and then was erased.⁸ This praxis was expanded to a holistic engagement with the past: besides collecting and restoring the material relics of the past, this also included imitating past practices – establishing academies and developing methodologies for natural history and historiography based on ancient examples, for instance. Remembering the past was performed both on an individual and collective levels; it involved the mental act of remembering while also expressing itself through actions.

The field of memory studies has developed rapidly over the last three decades. Its scope – ranging from studies of the cultural memory of the Holocaust to the exploration of memory as an industrial complex embodied in the heritage sector – is remarkable in its breadth.⁹ Memory studies are part of a larger wave of approaches to the interpretation of the past, also encompassing branches such as critical heritage studies and reception studies,¹⁰ all of which share the same general view of the past as a construct made up of a plurality of subjective interpretations of events rather than as an objective entity. Thus a scholarly perspective entails acknowledging the subjective quality of our sources as we engage with the past, and demands that we understand the context and vantage point of those sources. This allows for an increasingly sophisticated understanding of both historical and contemporary uses of the past. Through reception studies, for example, which originated in Classics, we have come to understand the heritage of classical antiquity not as an objective monolith, but as a mosaic of complex appropriations reflecting the cultural contexts both of historical individuals and of groups of recipients.¹¹ Memory studies have been influential in critical

⁷ A. Assmann 2011, 193.

⁸ A. Assmann 2011, 180.

⁹ See e.g. S. Macdonald 2013; Rothberg 2009.

¹⁰ L. Hardwick & Stray 2008; Whitehead, S. Eckersley, M. Daugbjerg & G. Bozoğlu 2019.

¹¹ Zuckerberg 2018; Quinn 2019; Hall & Stead 2020.

heritage studies, where both cultural memory (often institutionalized) and individual memory have been shown to be instrumental in defining identities and normative discourses and in challenging and disrupting them.¹² The influence on critical heritage studies is just one illustration that memory studies is an interdisciplinary field held together by a set of common theoretical assumptions and concepts across a wide spectrum of empirical and disciplinary traditions.¹³

Cultural memory in this volume

The articles in this volume explore the concept of memory across a range of materials and contexts from the development of Neo-Latin in fifteenth-century Italy to historiographical conflicts in sixteenth-century Scandinavia. Focusing on written sources, the case studies show how the humanist engagement with memory places the act of remembering between the individual and their cultural context in a dialectic mediated through the re-imagining and reproducing of meaning.

In most of the contributions, Aleida Assmann's distinction between active and passive memory – what she terms *canon* and *archive*, or *functional* as opposed to *storage* memory – is of particular importance. The archive is also explained as a *reference memory*. A concrete example might be an actual archive or library, or the storage holdings of a museum: each of these is an institution of “passively stored memory that preserves the past past”,¹⁴ holding memories that are not in active use, that may be forgotten but are not lost. For this reason, Assmann describes the archive as “a space that is located on the border between forgetting and remembering”.¹⁵ Storage memories are uninterpreted; they are a mass of potential that can be reactivated – as were Cicero's letters on the dusty shelves of the library in Verona. Following Petrarch's announcement of his find, Cicero's letters were read by his fellow humanists and they became part of the canon, which Assmann has defined as “actively circulated memory that keeps the past present”.¹⁶ But one of the steps towards admission of the new texts to the canon also has to do with mechanisms of forgetting. In Petrarch's account, his immediate reaction to the discovery of the letters was to write a letter to Cicero himself, in which he reproaches Cicero for the less attractive character traits reflected in the letters: Cicero had not always been the great philosopher and statesman that Petrarch

¹² Gentry & Smith 2019.

¹³ Erll 2008, 1–3.

¹⁴ A. Assmann 2008, 98 [*sic*].

¹⁵ A. Assmann 2008, 103.

¹⁶ A. Assmann 2008, 98.

knew from the philosophical works and the speeches available. Petrarch seems here to be urging that these new-found character traits of Cicero's be suppressed; but rather than doing just that and letting this new and less appealing side of his idol sink back into oblivion, Petrarch uses it to promote his find. He pinpoints it and dwells on it to highlight how different these texts are from all the others currently known (or remembered) from Cicero's hand. It is an effective way of adding Cicero's letters to the canon, signalling that not only is a new genre being inscribed in the catalogue, but a new insight into one, if not *the*, primary icons of the humanist culture.

Marianne Pade uses Aleida Assmann's concepts to describe the development and use of the humanist variant of Latin that is now called Neo-Latin. She argues that it can be shown that the humanists were capable of writing in more than one stratum of Latin depending on the context and the recipient, thus activating and suppressing (or forgetting and remembering) different styles and vocabularies even if these differed from their preferred variant. Neo-Latin imitates ancient Latin, but it is an active and, if not independent, then at least a particular variant. A central component of Assmann's theory of cultural memory is forgetting. Like memory, forgetting can be active and passive: a matter can suffer willed destruction, or simply fall out of use.¹⁷ Through an examination of the prescriptions for writing Neo-Latin of influential humanists like Niccolò Perotti and Lorenzo Valla, Pade explores their construction of a language canon by means of active as well as passive forgetting.

Johann Ramminger examines the relationship between language and memory in the *Antiquitates* of Annius of Viterbo, a work of purported source texts or translations of source texts of named authors that were in fact fictional, having been composed by Annius himself. After identifying connections between what were considered to be the earliest languages (including Etruscan, in Annius' view), Annius goes on to develop, on the basis of his invented "sources", a theory of language change that allows him to identify the Etruscan substrate of contemporary toponyms and ethnonyms. Ramminger complements Aleida Assmann's takes on cultural memory in his analysis with those of Jan Assmann, as well as a schema developed by Jakub Mlynář in which cultural memory emerges from language, memories are structured linguistically, and patterns of cultural memory affect language. Following this schema, Ramminger shows how Annius presents a coherent argument, which subsequently became influential in language studies even though his fakes were scorned by Annius' contemporaries.

¹⁷ See A. Assmann 2008, 97–98; Pade (this volume), 12.

Maren Rode Pihlkjær examines Lorenzo Valla's Latin translation of Pericles' funeral oration in Thucydides' *Historiae*, today a key text in the classical canon. Thucydides' work had been subject to passive forgetting in the West along with the rest of the Greek literature. Pihlkjær finds that Valla's translation is both a symptom of and an agent in the humanist attempt to reinsert the Greek authors into their own cultural memory of classical antiquity, next to the Roman writings that were linguistically (if not necessarily physically nor culturally) more accessible. Combining Aleida Assmann's concepts with translation theory, Pihlkjær examines how "democracy" is translated and transferred by Valla. Valla's contemporaries had no practical experience of the concept and knew it only from Aristotle's work, where it was criticized; whereas in the funerary oration, "democracy" is a positive, connecting factor for the people of Athens. Pihlkjær shows how Valla handles this by attempting to reproduce the intended effect of Thucydides' text, finding that rather than letting the text play on a sense of "belonging", Valla turns to the effect of "othering". Thus in Valla's translation the mood of unity is constructed by highlighting the opposition between the Athenians and their foreign enemies rather than by appealing to their commitment to the particular democratic state of which they were part.

Anders Kirk Borggaard's paper modifies Aleida Assmann's concepts of canon/functional versus archive/storage memory with a conceptual framework for reception studies developed by the project "Transformationen der Antike". Using this blended approach, he considers classical literature to have become in Renaissance humanism what he calls a *canonical archive*, as the classics had become just that, classics, through long-time preservation and a high degree of familiarity with the texts of the ancient authors. Borggaard applies his memory framework to the examination of how a hitherto unstudied epic edition by the Dutch/Danish humanist Johannes Sakerides imitates and fuses elements of two different canonical archives in order to construct what Sakerides intended to be an enduring memory of the Danish King Christian III. Here, Borggaard demonstrates how the cultural memory frameworks helps in the extraction and explanation of how new meanings were constructed from past models.

Trine Arlund Hass uses Jan Assmann's modified version of Aleida Assmann's distinction between passive storage memory and active functional memory. Jan Assmann offers alternative descriptions of these two states as *latency* or *potentiality* on the one hand and *manifestation* or *actualization* on the other.¹⁸ Hass examines intertextual loans from Lucan's *Pharsalia* – that

¹⁸ J. Assmann 2008, 117–118.

is, the actualized parts of its potentiality – in the biography of Julius Caesar as presented by the Danish poet Erasmus Lætus in *Romanorum Cæsares Italici* (1574). Lætus himself embeds his work within a memory framework when he states in his preface that he expects learned readers to be reminded of his sources and young readers to be stimulated to seek them out. Following Renate Lachmann in understanding intertextuality as the embedding or storing of (elements of) texts within a new text, Hass finds that there is a mnemonic relationship between the stored and storing texts.¹⁹ Using Lachmann’s typology, she analyses cases of intertextuality in central passages of Caesar’s biography in order to determine how they are used to construct Lætus’ own image of Caesar – which is quite unlike that of his source, Lucan.

Lærke Maria Andersen Funder combines Aleida and Jan Assmann’s concepts of passive storage memory and active functional memory with Ludwick Fleck’s theoretical concept of *thought collectives* as a way of conceptualizing museography as an emerging academic discipline in the seventeenth century. Jan Assmann argues that culture is intertwined with memory and that, through remembering, a given culture constitutes itself at the crossroads between past, present, and future. Funder explores how remembrance and forgetting have been employed as strategies in the making of a scholarly tradition. Analysing the direct references to Ole Worm’s influential *Museum Wormianum* in the later museographies, she shows which parts of Worm’s work were seen as worth remembering and which ones were marked for oblivion in the emergent narrative of the new discipline of museography. Especially the act of active negation – that is, creating a discourse arguing that some things ought to be forgotten while others remembered – reveal how mechanisms of remembering and forgetting are employed strategically to shape academic disciplines in their socio-cultural frameworks.

Matthew Norris examines the sixteenth-century dispute between Denmark and Sweden over the right to use the three crowns in heraldic symbols, and in particular the evidence presented by Swedish antiquarians in favour of the Swedish case. He begins by considering what these “monumenta” meant to the humanists: as the etymology indicates, they were considered prompts, intended to remind their audience of something. Going back to classical memory theory, which distinguishes between the sensorial recollection of experienced past and memories “artificially” imposed through an anachronistic reminder, Norris embeds the antiquarian approach to memory within tradition. He moves from the classical theory of memory to neo-

¹⁹ Lachmann 2004, 165.

Platonic explanations, and their further development into a simultaneously psychological and metaphysical view of memory by the Franciscan and cabalist Pietro Galatino. Norris finds that this latter view fits with the antiquarian interest in monuments that were considered to be “the shared icons of communal or cultural memory”.²⁰ He shows how the field of cultural memory studies may provide a solution to historiography’s struggle to unite empirical approaches to material evidence with the imaginative approaches of the humanists.

Acknowledgments

This volume is a collaboration between the two projects “Cultural Encounter as a Precondition of European Identity” and “Our Caesar: Danish receptions of Gaius Julius Caesar”, both funded by the Carlsberg Foundation.²¹ The “Cultural Encounter” project studies the intrinsic drivers of Renaissance humanism as well as its journey to the North, while “Our Caesar” examines the reception of Julius Caesar in Denmark and adapted to Danish culture across time. Drafts of some of the papers in this volume were presented at The fourth conference of the Nordic Network for Renaissance Studies (Helsinki 2018), and we thank the audience there for providing constructive feedback.

²⁰ Norris (this volume), 127.

²¹ See project details at www.acdan.it/projekter/ce/index.html and https://www.carlsbergfondet.dk/da/Bevillingshaver/Formidling/Bevillingsoversigt/CF17_0622_Trine-Johanne-Arlund-Hass (visited 22 September 2020).

Bibliography

- Assmann, Aleida 2008, "Canon and Archive," Erll & Nünning 2008, 97–108.
- Assmann, Aleida 2011, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives*, New York.
- Erll, Astrid & Ansgar Nünning (eds.) 2008, *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Berlin & New York.
- Erll, Astrid 2008, "Cultural Memory Studies: An introduction," Erll & Nünning 2008, 1–18.
- Gentry, Kynan & Laurajane Smith 2019, "Critical heritage studies and the legacies of the late-twentieth century heritage canon," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 25, 1148–1168.
- Halbwachs, Maurice 1925, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, Paris.
- Halbwachs, Maurice 1941, *La topographie légendaire des évangiles en terre sainte: Étude de mémoire collective*, Paris.
- Halbwachs, Maurice 1950, *Mémoire collective*, Paris.
- Hall, Edith & Henry Stead 2020, *A People's History of Classics: Class and Greco-Roman Antiquity in Britain and Ireland 1689 to 1939*, London & New York.
- Haan, Annet den (ed.) 2016, *The Metadiscourse of Renaissance Humanism*, *Renaissanceforum* 11 (URL: http://www.njrs.dk/rf_11_2016.htm, visited 28 August 2020).
- Hardwick, Lorna & Christopher Stray (eds.) 2008, *A Companion to Classical Receptions*, Malden, Oxford & Chichester.
- Horster, Camilla P. & Marianne Pade (eds.) 2020, *Cultural Encounter and Identity in the Neo-Latin World*, Rome.
- Lachmann, Renate 2004, "Cultural Memory and the Role of Literature," *European Review* 12.2, 165–178.
- Lachmann, Renate 2008, "Mnemonic and Intertextual Aspects of Literature," Erll & Nünning 2008, 301–10.
- Macdonald, Sharon 2013, *Memorylands: Heritage and identity in Europe today*, London.
- Quinn, Josephine Crawly 2018, *In Search of the Phoenicians*, Princeton & Oxford.
- Rothberg, Michael 2009, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Palo Alto.
- Whitehead, Chris, Susannah Eckersley, Mads Daugbjerg & Gönül Bozoğlu (eds.) 2019, *Dimensions of Heritage and Memory: Multiple Europes and the politics of crisis*, London & New York.
- Zuckerberg, Donna 2018, *Not All Dead White Men: Classics and misogyny in the digital age*, Cambridge MA.