

In our Time Programme 33
Memory

Melvyn Bragg : Hello, as every second passes humanity has a moment more to remember, and perhaps this fact alone goes some way to explaining the ever changing role of memory both in the mind of individuals and at the heart of the body politic. Memory has personal and national implications, whether we look to Chile, South Africa, Germany or Northern Ireland, these are all societies where the issue of memory is at the centre of the dilemmas and challenges they face, and for the individual too, as ever more forms of information crowd for space in our minds, and the image from *someone else's* photograph can be more enduring than our own first-hand experience of an event, can memory itself forever remain unchanged in its role within our psychology?

Malcolm Bowie is Marshall-Foche Professor of French Literature at Oxford University, and also the director of Oxford's European Humanities Research Centre. He's a scholar of Proust, Freud and Lacan, and his most recent book is, "Proust among the Stars". Dr Nancy Wood is Head of Media Studies at the University of Sussex where her research is chiefly in the areas of popular history and memory. She's the author of, "Vectors of Memory", which is to be published in September this year.

Malcolm Bowie, at the start of this century, Freud came up with an idea that had huge....that has had a huge impact on the way that we think about our own past. He put memory, I think, right at the heart of where we form ourselves as individuals. Could you tell us about that?

Malcolm Bowie : I could. I need to begin by sketching out something that he wasn't doing. he wasn't coming up with a theory of memory in general, he wasn't trying to work out the internal systems that might comprise the neurophysiological functioning of the brain. He was only in a very limited sense, a cognitive psychologist, trying to work out what was happening cerebrally. What he was interested in was a certain class of memories, and a certain special role that those memories could have in therapeutic treatment. These were the memories of painful early events which had proved intolerable Malcolm Bowie to the individual, which the individual had repressed, had no longer direct access to, and so the famous Freudian dialogue between analyst and patient was set up in order to allow the patient to get back down into contact with those hidden recesses of the mind, and to control potentially dangerous material, by way of conversation, by way of building a future self, that had been, somehow, purged, of those pains, difficulties, emotional disturbances and so forth. So memory of a quite special kind was placed at the centre of the Freudian method.

Melvyn Bragg : Yes, in this programme we're not talking about neurobiology of memory. We're not talking about where it resides in the brain, we're talking about the culture of memory. Before Freud, were there any theories of memory as powerful, or was he challenging already existing theories of memory?

Malcolm Bowie : There were numerous theories of memory going all the way back to Plato and the pre-Socratics. I think what Freud did that in large part caused him to achieve this extraordinary celebrity which for better or for worse goes on to this day was to think of memory as a dramatic device. Certain memories were very much more potent than others. They could be placed at the centre of an entirely new sort of conversation between clinician and patient, and so memory became, if you like, a suddenly new sexy subject on the European agenda, from having been the sort of thing that philosophers, psychologists, moral enquiries of one kind or another would explore in their spare moments and write treatises and tomes about, it suddenly became of urgent import to you me and everyone.

Melvyn Bragg : But it also became...it was seen as the key to unlocking this great subterranean reservoir called the unconscious, for better and for worse it could bring to mind what was thought of as a 90% of stuff, or 95% down there under the surface of what we deal with every day. How far do you think this is true as a theory?

Malcolm Bowie : I don't know...it's very difficult to apply the ordinary truth tests to it, when you talk about a reservoir, subterranean recess which is the unconscious, which is the storehouse of forbidden, forgotten, difficult memories and so forth. There really are no ways of testing for presence or even partial presence of that with an average human mental functioning. I think if one thinks of Freud as a dramatist, as somebody who has one singular and splendid intuition at an early stage in his life, and carries on working out the consequences of that in more and more refined versions of his therapeutic technique, you get further. So you don't ask the question "how true is this?", so much as the question "does it work?", in helping people to come to terms with their problems, and in constructing

futures for themselves.

Melvyn Bragg : And the drama was enhanced by the fact that he proceeded in his cures through conversation, through dramatic conversation, through dialogue I suppose?

Malcolm Bowie : That's right. Two people.....only two people working together could have access to either person's unconscious, and then only glancingly and momentarily.

Melvyn Bragg : I'll come back in a moment to whether you thought he had a big influence on Proust and other writers. But, Nancy Wood, do you think that the individual still uses memory in the way that Freud described?

Nancy Wood : Yes I do. I think that we still use memories to establish our identities through time. I think that is a key function of memory. We tell **narratives of the self**, if you like, as a way of establishing who we are. I think perhaps, what's changed is that society has come to value that function in a different way. It's not simply "that's what memory does". It's that society assigns a very high social value to that process. We can see that in the proliferation of psycho therapies that are designed precisely to try and probe our memories in search of self knowledge. I think we can see it the kind of value that's put on autobiography, individual memoirs, as forms of testimony about ourselves. So while I think the function of memory remains for the individual, telling narratives of the self and when unable to do so, trying to fill in those gaps as Freud would have it, I think we have as a society come to give it a particular premium.

Melvyn Bragg : Do you think that we use memory or employ memory or go to memory in a significantly different way at the end of this century? Let's say we're talking about the western with a small "w" world in this case. Are we doing it in a significantly different way than a couple of hundred years ago or....?

Nancy Wood : I think we are. I think if you look at the broad sweep of memory, previous societies created environments of memory, if you like, they lived memory unselfconsciously. Memory was more a spontaneous phenomena. It was embedded in rituals and in traditions. I think what modern societies have done is separated memory off, put it on forms of cultural display. The French historian Pierre Nohar uses the term (indistinct) de memoire or "sites of memory" to try and indicate the extent to which we have separated ourselves out off from the experience of memory.

Melvyn Bragg : Can you give us some examples of this so the listeners can get a finger hold on this?

Nancy Wood : Certainly, if you think about the growth of the museum, museum industries, the extent to which are interested in commemorating our past. The.....

Melvyn Bragg : But haven't civilisations always been interested in commemorating their past?

Nancy Wood : Yes, I think commemoration is again something that is part of our social lives. I think at the end of this century we do it more and more, and we can ask ourselves whether we do it because we have less of a faith in the future. The future appears perhaps more capricious, more uncertain, and in that sense we turn to memory as a sort of refuge.

Melvyn Bragg : Do you think that the memories of the individual are as important as they once were?

Nancy Wood : I think they're even more important. I think we don't rely on tradition, rituals in the same way. I think individuals themselves come to embody memories in a certain way. We're memory individuals, to a great extent, and society expects us to be so.

Melvyn Bragg : Can you just disentangle what "memory individuals" in a certain sense, means?

Nancy Wood : Well, I think it's the expectation that our sense of continuity will no longer be guaranteed through tradition. But that it will be guaranteed through the self and through the extent to which individuals find other individuals to whom they can refer, to whom they can share memories, and I think that has become more and more a function of individual memories in society, to join them into a group memory.

Melvyn Bragg : Malcolm Bowie do you think that this idea of putting memory in such a prime, prize position in our culture, is right, is something that you agree with, is something - I'm not asking you to flatly contradict Nancy - what I don't know...what's your view of that? Because **Freud's ideas have been severely re examined**, by two of the people that you're very interested in, well by Lacon, but also by Satre with his existential notion of how we live. What's your view of the primacy almost, of memory as Nancy Wood was discussing?

Malcolm Bowie : I think the problem for psychoanalysis and a variety of other therapies that put a particular emphasis on memory is that unless you do a thing in a particularly subtle and wide ranging way, it can become terribly narcissistic and self enclosed. You're dealing with your own autobiography, digging up your own reminiscences, reprocessing them conversationally, as we were saying. But you're not connecting yourself back to the community, back to any sense of public responsibility.

You're not really taking part in the, if you like, the institutionalised forms of memory that help to create certain sorts of cohesion on the one hand, and of inventiveness and innovation on the other. So there's something slightly, can one say, "self - preening" about certain of these therapies as if the answer to the individuals problems always somehow lay within, and lay retrospectively within, rather than in the public sphere and prospectively, taking the person out into new forms of connection with others.

Melvyn Bragg : Would you say though, from what your studies of Jacque Lacon, he did what you think should be done? He suggested his theory took us in that direction?

Malcolm Bowie : His was a theory of what he called, "Inter - subjective speech" that's to say of things that happen between people, between the analyst and the patient, in the first instance, but between the speaker and the speech community at large, secondly, and that sounds to many of his defenders and enthusiasts, like the beginnings of a very important new, psycho analytically based social theory. If you get a Lacanian hold on language, and on the centrality of language within the human subject, you're thereby, it's claimed, getting a hold on all sorts of social mechanisms and modes of production and meaning within society. Now it seems to me that's difficult, in that different levels of social activity, different kinds of meaning within society, might need to be treated as quasi-autonomous systems, rather than brought together into one embracing cult of human language as the be-all and end-all of all kinds of meaning whatsoever. So there's a problem there, but there's a certainly a much more thoroughgoing attempt to situate the life of the individual, memories of the individual within the social sphere, in Lacon than in Freud.

Melvyn Bragg : You, Nancy, you stressed the importance of the individual memory but, how important are individual memories? It's almost impossible to get the balance, but anyway that's what you've been working on, compared with collective memories? I mean there's a collective memory, in this country of wars in this century and the collective memory of the Holocaust, even though for many people, many people below a certain age, just to take one section of people, it was nowhere near their direct experience, and yet it's part of the collective memory. We all know, I mean I was born in 1979, but I know from what I've read and seen about the first world war, and about of course, what happened all over the first world war, particularly about the British contribution in the first world war, and the images of the trenches, and so on, are very strong in my mind. There as strong as memory, and I know it's a collective memory in this country, most people I talk to, well, they would know what we're talking about, it's part of what we are, part of what we come from. How do you put that in your theory, your idea of memory?

Nancy Wood : Well I would make a distinction between individual memory and what you call collective memory. I think only individuals remember, but societies organise those memories or indeed other representations of the past into particular scenarios for us, and I think that what is important, in those scenarios we establish some relationship to the past. Some type of judgement of it, some type of identification with it or some ethical view of it, and I think that is really the function of what we might call collective memory, is to establish our relationship to the past, and I think when you mention the example of world war one, it's interesting that in so far as that has come back into public culture, it has come back in a critical form. We're looking at those representations of the trenches, of the soldiers who were shot at dawn, of the soldiers sent on impossible missions in barren landscapes and we are critical of those, and I think that is one of the functions of memory. Memory is not only a kind of commemoration and celebration of the past, I think it is also a form of critical reflection.

Melvyn Bragg : Malcolm Bowie, do you think that memory, the ideas of memory and that we remember are too dominating in the culture at the moment and the idea of the past is too dominating, and the idea that the past is sacred and sacred is too dominating?

Malcolm Bowie : I think we're coming up to...we're in the middle of a rather difficult period at the moment, where everybody but everybody is introspec..... a retrospective as well as introspective, with **advent of the millennium**. This is time for the usual end of year stock-taking, it's the end of the century stock-taking, it's the end of the millennium stock-taking, as you, yourself know from your ventures elsewhere , it's a whole stock-taking exercise on Christianity itself, and on that as an underpinning for much in Western culture, and this constant retrospection, I really do find alarming. It's a difficult question to know. Are we going to emerge from this fixation on the remembering mode and get ourselves into the new millennium, the new century on day one, and inventing new forms of experience for ourselves. The example at the end of the last (indistinct), if you like, in the period 1890-1910 was an example of an extraordinary new fertility, and forward-lookingness and invention, before the horrors of the first world war were unleashed, as Nancy was describing. One thinks of that extraordinary cultural resurgence in Paris in the years up to 1913. Now, I don't see any sign, apart possibly from relatively trivial things, like large wheels on the South Bank and Millennium Domes and so forth, I don't see any sign of an impending cultural or personal **renaissance**. A new form of imagination coming into being for the 21st century.

Melvyn Bragg : Do you think that the idea that memory is so important to us as individuals and collectively, and that we explore it so much in our own lives -we'll all except that I think - and in the media in different ways, the films about the past, we have access to it, they are fascinating , do you think that means that we are rather afraid of what is and what might be, or do you think that's just the luxury of a particular period in our development?

Malcolm Bowie : I think it is very luxurious to have by way of the media and extraordinary explosion in publishing what seems like instantaneous access to the past, in all its highways and by ways, and **cross - culturally**, we can imagine ourselves back into the skin of any one of our human predecessors and re examine his/her lifestyle with aid of this now very subtle and often, sort of **on-line** and instantly retrievable information that we have about the past, and that luxuriance, that sense of slightly deliquescent lingering over things that have ceased to be, does seem to me to be in danger of sapping the inventiveness, the system-building, the hypothesising, the future-imagining capacities of the human mind.

Melvyn Bragg : Except that, that very acceptance of the past has inspired one of your greatest heroes and arguably one of the greatest novelists who ever lived?

Malcolm Bowie : That's right, well he, Proust is thought of as the person who somehow monumentalises and fetishises memory. He gives memory a special role at the beginning of his novel and he comes back to a further account of memory much later in the novel , in order to give it one of its sense of over all completeness and closure. So he's thought of as a man who is famous for remembering. Famous for remembering what it feels like to be a child, as an adolescent, and then as an adult and so forth. But if you look at the texture of Proust's writing you can see that it's full of, what I would call, model-building ingenuity, forward-flung anticipation, of new modes of awareness, new patterns of thinking, and so the, if you like, the act of memory is the motive, the spur, the trigger to a whole lot of prospective imagining inside the texture of that book.

Melvyn Bragg : Nancy Wood, I'd like to come back to this notion of the collective memory, and if you could explain why you think that the collective memory is important and what it is about the collective memory *today*, that is significantly different -I know I've asked this before, but if we can take a bit more time -significantly different from collective memories in previous times?

Nancy Wood : Well, I think again, in thinking of the way we talk about sites of memory, memory as areas within culture to which we can refer, with which we can identify, I think that is very different than the way we've have related to memory in the past. But I think there's probably a sharper way of examining that question, and I think it's to look at societies who are examining their past, who are examining their collective memories. If you think about South Africa for example, the example you mentioned at the start of the programme, where there is an attempt to establish a consensus about what happened under the years of apartheid, in order to move forward, in order to make that transition to democracy, one in which people feel has involved some type of "reckoning" with the past, and the

crimes of the past.

So I think at that level, societies need to work through their pasts in order to move forward into democratic futures, which isn't to say that's easy, but I think it's a necessary process, particularly for societies coming out of authoritarian regimes.

Melvyn Bragg : It's very prescriptive though isn't it? It's saying, "we will look at our past in that way", or in the case of Chile, "we will forget those crimes", "You will forget those crimes, otherwise we can't move forward". Do you think this is at all effective?

Nancy Wood : I think the case of South Africa's very instructive, and particularly through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was the South African attempt to come to terms with the past. I think truths about the past, and I would emphasise truths in the plural did emerge. Whether reconciliation was achieved, I think is another matter. I don't think reconciliation can be imposed by societies, I think it has to come from below, and primarily has to come from those who were victims or whose families were victims of regimes, and in that sense I think there is a question mark over whether that process was achieved in South Africa or could have been achieved by those institutional means. I do think Chile has to go through that process itself. I don't think the price of democracy can be merely a forgetting, a putting behind of crimes of the past. I think it will return, those crimes will return to haunt societies in the future.

Melvyn Bragg : Is it possible, do you think, Malcolm Bowie, for governments to as it were, direct the way its people think about the past? In other words to direct memory? Do you just think it's possible?

Malcolm Bowie : I think it's possible, it's certainly happening as we speak, in the sense that government agencies of one kind or another are responsible for what nowadays is called heritage, for as it were the official story, constantly modified but still constant in its broad outlines, of the nation state and its predecessor outfits, seen almost always as stories of grand linear development towards rewarding fulfilling goals, rather than a catalogue of disasters, and accidents. So a lot of government money is spent on that form of commemoration, and of encouraging a certain sort of, if you like, "buying -in" on the part of the populace to officially or semi-officially sanctioned versions of the past, rather than **encouraging critical scrutiny of the national myths**.

Melvyn Bragg : Because in this country at the moment we're told again and again in newspapers or people discuss, and I think quite rightly, about the what the particularly the English are at the moment. The Scots seem to have, from Braveheart to their own parliament, and so on it goes, and that is very much to do with how we remember ourselves isn't it?

Malcolm Bowie : I think that's right but there's no particular reason when the Englishness of English history has been disentangled from the Jacobite rebellion and certain uncomfortable things happening on the Welsh marshes...marches and so no reason why that should be a story of uniform success and fulfilment. I mean it seems to me that we owe it to the past to look at the dark eclipses in the history of the nation state, not for pious reasons, reasons of sort of national self-improvement, but just as a way of telling a certain new range of truths about what actually happened.

Melvyn Bragg : But in this collective memory, Nancy Wood, are we talking about memory or are we talking about politics? That is to say, when in Ireland for instance, people remember Oliver Cromwell, are they remembering Oliver Cromwell in any sense that makes sense, or they using Oliver Cromwell to get on with what they want to do tomorrow morning?

Nancy Wood : Well I think the term "Politics of Memory" is very instructive in this respect, because it says that any memory responds to certain intentions, and those intentions are usually political intentions of states. Of course those intentions can come from below as well. I think one is talking about a balance of power, and certainly I think memory is subject to those forces as much as its something that **emerges** out of some particular interests in the past. I think intentionality drives memory and its presence in the public sphere.

Melvyn Bragg : Do you think the widening amount of information, Malcolm Bowie, to people, through television, and now we have the internet, and the radio, which is largely shared over particular groups, so you think

that in any way is overwhelming individual memory?

Malcolm Bowie : I think it's overwhelming memory in certain cases and individual creativity. The sense that it's possible for individuals to make a difference to have ideas that change things.

Melvyn Bragg : Is being....?

Malcolm Bowie : I think that's being compromised. I think people are often, sort of nostalgically and sentimentally afloat in various versions of the past. Sometimes kind of hyper real versions of the past, coming at us by way of the new technology, and losing any sense of personal wilfulness, inventiveness, the word I keep using, and the power to affect change within society, or in the sense of their own individuality.

Melvyn Bragg : Do you think that the emphasis, as I said at the top of the programme on memory at the moment, which is in -as Malcolm Bowie has hinted at - is in various forms, both academic and cultural and popular and so on, do you think this is something that you think will pass or do you think it is something that we will want to keep exploring intensively for any foreseeable future?

Nancy Wood : I think we will probably want to keep exploring it. What I think we have to do is avoid turning it into a cult of memory. I think we have to keep realising that memory is for uses in the present, ought to inform us about the present and guide or actions in the present and cults of memory will not do that.

Melvyn Bragg : Malcolm Bowie we've kept away from neuroscience, neurobiology, but do you think maybe discoveries in the brain, finally, will change the way that the culture of memory is perceived?

Malcolm Bowie : My greater hope would be of cognitive science. That's to say that people will make models of brain process that will enable us to understand the functioning of memory and the different systems that combine to produce complex memory performances and states of attention based on memory. But I don't think that neuroscience in itself is going to tell us how to conduct ourselves in the new millennium!

Melvyn Bragg : Well thank you very much. Thank you very much Professor Malcolm Bowie and Dr Nancy Wood. Next week I'll be joined by John Keen and Al Ferguson and we'll be talking about the concept of the Just War, which I think came from Aquinas. Thanks for listening.