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Memory, Interpretation, Identity

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The three terms foregrounded in the title of this essay refer to questions so fundamental for contemporary culture that they have become almost clichés. Much critical writing has been devoted to each of those terms individually and – notably in the case of memory and identity – to the relations between their pairs. In my opinion, however, not enough attention has been paid – especially in theoretical terms – to the interrelationships amongst all three of them, and particularly to the role of interpretation with respect to the relation of memory and identity. It is on those co-dependencies that I wish to focus on in the following discussion. In order to narrow the subject down, I will consider the sphere of identity as an area where the remaining two protagonists of this essay – memory and interpretation – meet and cooperate.

I am aware, of course, that by evoking the category of identity, I simultaneously evoke wide-ranging modernist and postmodernist debates concerning questions of the subject and subjectivity. However, we do not need to enter these debates here because, irrespective of our stance, the heart of the matter remains the same: whether we understand identity as an independently existing core (Cartesian subject), or as a coherent, chronologically and plot-wise ordered narrative (Paul Ricoeur), or – as

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Bergson would have it – as a snowball, which grows bigger and bigger and changes its shape while tumbling down, building up new layers of itself, or as a nebula, or a cracked, fragmentary conglomerate of heterogeneous and sometimes even contradictory tendencies and moments, we can agree that memory and interpretation – in their various senses – continue to partake in identity. Of course, a certain concept of the subject will emerge in effect of this discussion of the involvement of memory and interpretation in the construction of identity, but rather as an end result than as a preliminary assumption.

Interpretation

I will begin with a statement which constitutes the fundamental premise of this argument: interpretation is a mode of our existence. However, I do not mean someone else's interpretation, where we – as a discursive construct, or a product of different technologies of power, knowledge and discourse – are interpreted from the outside by people surrounding us, or by a system of culture "interpreting" our place, role and meaning. Obviously, such interpretation grants us social existence, but it does not constitute – at least not directly – our internal self. When talking about interpretation as a mode of human existence, I mean what Charles Taylor expressed by calling man, maybe in a slightly oxymoronic way, a self-interpreting animal:¹ what sets human existence apart from other modes of being is the continuous interpretation of oneself and of our involvement in what surrounds us. It is interpretation construed in this way that constitutes the essence of our existence.

We could support and justify the above statement by referring to Martin Heidegger, who – beginning with the ontico-ontological difference – situates understanding, and hence also interpretation,² among the so-called *existentials*, or the conditions of authentic existence of *Dasein*. Understanding and interpretation, next to attunement (or rather state-of-mind, *Befindlichkeit*) and speech (*Rede*), constitute the fundamental ontological conditions for human existence in the world. "To exist," claims Heidegger, "is essentially, even if not only, to understand,"³ and hence also to interpret. The interpreting

1 Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 45.

2 "In it [interpretation, *Auslegung*] understanding appropriates understandingly that which is understood by it." Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993), 188.

3 Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. A. Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 276. See also "Understanding is the Existential Being of *Dasein*'s own Potentiality-for-Being [...]" Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 184.

understanding is the foundation for the existential constitution of the human being: any structure of meaning “is rooted in the existential constitution of *Dasein* – that is, in the understanding which interprets.”⁴

One could also follow somewhat similar, yet less travelled paths of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, each of whom – in his own way – expands the ontological dimension of interpretation by supplementing it with the epistemological dimension, or rather, after the radical Heideggerian turn, restores that epistemological dimension to the realm of interpretation, simultaneously subduing it to ontology: the interpretation of not only what is internal and closest to us, but also of what is external – especially interpretation of cultural texts – becomes a road to self-consciousness. Gadamer historicizes interpretation and links it with the hermeneutics of texts, while Ricoeur proposes a “detour” through methodology and the practice of interpretation in order to eventually reach the final *telos* which is self-understanding.⁵ For both of them, however, interpretation ultimately remains a mode of existence.

We could also follow an entirely different path, that of Charles Peirce, who identifies man with the signs man employs to learn about the world and himself: “the word or sign which the man uses is the man himself” – “my language is the sum total of myself.”⁶ And since all thought and cognition can exist only in signs, the human mind for Peirce, as well as human beings themselves, are complex signs. He expressed that conviction *verbatim*: “mind is a sign developing according to the laws of inference,”⁷ and “man is a sign.”⁸ And since

4 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 195.

5 “To understand oneself is to understand oneself as one confronts the text and to receive from it the conditions for a self other than that which first undertakes the reading” (Paul Ricoeur “On Interpretation,” in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?*, ed. Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge Mass., London: MIT Press, 1989), 376); “[...] interpretation in the technical sense of the interpretation of texts, is but the development, the making explicit of this ontological understanding, an understanding always inseparable from a being that has initially been thrown into the world” (*ibid.*, 373); “There is a short path [chosen by Heidegger], and a longer one, which I propose. [...] The longer path [...] has ambitions of placing reflections on the level of ontology.” Paul Ricoeur “Egzystencja i hermeneutyka,” trans. Karol Tarnowski, in *Egzystencja i hermeneutyka. Rozprawy o metodzie*, ed. Stanisław Cichowicz (Warszawa: Pax, 1985), 185.

6 Charles S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, vol. 1-6, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss; vol. 7-8, ed. Arthur W. Burks, (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931-1958). In all of the quotes from *Collected Papers* by Charles Peirce (CP) first digit stands for the volume, the second digit for the paragraph; CP 5.314.

7 CP 5.313.

8 CP 5.314.

we consider man as a multidimensional sign, interpretation, structurally as it were and necessarily, inscribes itself into his or her being as a mode of existence of every sign, including that of human person. I will return to this question later on.

Regardless of the source we choose, and what we would like to stress, interpretation emerges as a builder of our identity. At the same time, however, as mode of existence, it cannot be an empty process – a pure ontological category; on the contrary, it is always filled with cognitive as well as axiological content – while granting us existence, it simultaneously fills it with sense and meaningful value. The awareness of oneself, of who one is, of what one absorbs from the surrounding world and from others, ethical choices, hierarchies of values – all these result from interpretation constituting an ontological condition for human existence.

Identity and Interpretation

What we have said about interpretation, however – that it is a mode of our existence – can also be said about memory: it is in an equal measure a condition of our identity. Barbara Skarga, referring to Heidegger, affirms that the past cannot be tossed away like any old coat.⁹ Every present moment of our identity is rooted in the matter of memory: “Memory is a mode of my existence, it belongs to its structure;”¹⁰ “My past is myself.”¹¹ Noticeably, the key role of memory as a fundamental component of identity is also used, with remarkable intuition, by popular culture: loss or lack of memory means, in truth, a loss of identity, or even negation of one’s humanity; let it suffice to recall a few movies: *Total Recall* by Paul Verhoeven, *Bourne’s Identity* by Doug Liman, or *Blade Runner* by Ridley Scott.

However, there is a fundamental difference between the ontological role of interpretation and the role played by memory. If, as we have affirmed, ongoing interpretation and self-interpretation are builders of identity, then memory is its building material – both the realm of memory that reaches far back into our childhood, teenage years and the entirety of our life, and those most recent memories from just few days, minutes, or seconds ago. It is so because, seemingly, we interpret every present moment of the surrounding world as well as ourselves in that world, but in fact those moments are merely an illusory present, as Bergson would say, since they become

9 Barbara Skarga, *Tożsamość i różnica. Eseje metafizyczne* (Kraków: Znak, 1997), 222.

10 *Ibid.*, 223.

11 *Ibid.*, 222.

past already at the moment of their instantiation and move into the sphere of memory. It is not the present that is an essence of identity – the present is merely a flash of experience; it is the past and memory that constitute the matter of our “I.” Heidegger, once again, put it aptly when he wrote: “*Dasein*, in existing, can never establish itself as a fact which is present-at-hand [...] it constantly is as having been. The primary existential meaning of facticity lies in the character of having been.”¹²

We should also add – and here things become a little complicated – that this building material of memory is not only a matter of our individual self, not simply a result of our actions. As unique individuals, we are also a part of society, in many ways participating in collective memory: local and national memory as well as the memory of civilization. This heterogeneity, however, is not limited only to memory. Just as memory, as building material, is a result of collective and individual experience, interpretation is our personal activity, conditioned, however, by rules of the interpretative universe in which we function. A discussion concerned with the relations between memory and interpretation, therefore, has to take into account both the individual and the collective.

Let us, however, go back to the main question: the relationship between interpretation and memory, between the builder and the building material, brings to mind at least one obvious conclusion, which I will – for now – pose as a hypothesis, namely, that there is nothing like objective memory, a recollection fossilized into an ideal, objective form. Memory always wears the clothes of interpretation. Regardless of whether we recall something deliberately – bringing up a remembrance on purpose – or if recollections come to our mind by themselves, they always enter our consciousness as already interpreted and – with the passing of time and the gradual growth of the “snowball” of identity – as reinterpreted over and over again. “Each moment of time,” writes Skarga, “brings something new that merges with my existence, causing a change to occur within it,”¹³ reinterpreting in this way old meanings within memory and creating new ones, we should add.

At this point, however, we encounter a significant problem: the way memory is construed or metaphorized in our culture causes difficulties in establishing a relation between memory and interpretation or, to put it in a more radical way: the concept of memory dominant in the Western culture in fact excludes interpretation.

¹² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 376.

¹³ Skarga, *Tożsamość i różnica*, 219.

Archive

The model of memory generally recognized and accepted in the West is based on the metaphor of an archive as a storage space for remembrances. This model takes on two forms: either – more literally – that of an archival space in which past events are placed and stored, or that of an immaculate surface on which our memories are impressed.

If we look at writings concerned with memory – from Plato, through Aristotle and Locke to the present day – we notice that, in its essence, this archival model remains unchanged. In Plato's *Theaetetus*, Socrates speaks of the wax tablet in our soul – a gift from goddess Mnemosyne – onto which our reflections and thoughts are impressed like a seal.¹⁴ Likewise, Aristotle (in *De memoria et reminescentia*),¹⁵ Cicero and Quintilianus write about memory as a wax tablet. In *Institutio oratoria*, the latter claims that the “mind accepts certain impressions, analogous to those made by a seal pressed against wax.”¹⁶ While conversing with the spirit of his father, Shakespeare's Hamlet assures the ghost that he will wipe all the crude notes off of the table of his memory.¹⁷ And if we look into the poem entitled *Memory* by William Butler Yeats, we will find the same metaphor as used by the ancients, with the exception that the impression in wax is replaced by an impression left in grass.

John Locke, on the other hand, pictures memory as an empty cabinet where we store our ideas which, later on, can be taken out and “perceived”:

The senses at first let in particular ideas and furnish the yet empty cabinet; and the mind by degrees growing familiar with some of them, they are lodged in the memory...if there be any ideas, any ideas

14 “Socrates: Assume, for the sake of our debate, that there is a wax tablet in our souls. Some have it bigger, others smaller, some have it clean, while that of others might be thicker, or greasy, and some have it just about right. Theaetetus: I do.”

Platon, *Parmenides. Teajtet*, trans. Władysław Witwicki (Kęty: Antyk, 2002), accessed July 19, 2016, <http://pracownicy.uwm.edu.pl/jstrzelecki/biblio/platon.pdf>

15 “The process of movement (sensory stimulation) involved in the act of perception stamps in, as it were, a sort of impression of the percept, just as persons do who make an impression with a seal.” Aristotle, *On Memory and Reminiscence*, trans. John I. Beare, eBooks@Adelaide 2007, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/memory/>

16 Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, see also Amelia F. Yates, *Sztuka pamięci* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1977), 48.

17 „Yea, from the table of my memory/ I'll wipe away all trivial fond records” William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act I, scene V, 98-99, in *The Tragedies of Shakespeare* (London: 1931), 650.

in the mind which the mind does not actually think on, they must be lodged in the memory and from thence must be brought into view by remembrance.¹⁸

Remembering appears here as a form of perception of something that has been stored in an archive (in the cabinet). Prior to Locke, St. Augustine portrayed memory with a closed-space metaphor – a palace – a storage space for memories: “And I come to the fields and spacious palaces of my memory, where are the treasures of innumerable images, brought into it from things of all sorts perceived by the senses. There is stored up, whatsoever besides we think [...] and whatever else hath been committed and laid up.”¹⁹ St. Augustine completes the image with an important metaphor of reaching to the archive and retrieving memories: “All these doth that great harbour of the memory receive in her numberless secret and inexpressible windings, to be forthcoming, and brought out at need; each entering in by his own gate, and there laid up.”²⁰ Cabinet, or the palace, could be replaced with a library, with an archive containing cimeliums,²¹ or with a filing cabinet,²² but the concept of an archival space remains intact.

I will now quote two short fragments which very well grasp the idea of memory as archive: the former tells us that „memory is the firm retention in the mind of the matter, words, and arrangement,”²³ while the latter says that “memory encompasses acquisition, storing and preserving information.”²⁴ Both quotations carry almost exactly the same idea, and there is nothing extraordinary about them, except for the fact that they are separated by two thousand years. The former comes from an anonymous Latin text *Ad*

18 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: Dent, 1976) (1690), 11, 27.

19 St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Edward Bouverie Pusey (Edward Bouverie), accessed March 15, 2016, www.gutenberg.org/files/3296/3296-h/3296-h.htm#link2H_4_0001

20 Ibid.

21 Skarga, *Tożsamość i różnica*, 231.

22 See Steven Rose, *The Making of Memory. From Molecules to Mind* (London: Bantam Books, 1992), 78.

23 [Cicero] *Ad C. Herennium de ratione dicendi (Rhetorica ad Herennium)*, with an English translation by Harry Caplan (London: Heinemann, 1964), 7; „Memoria est firma animi rerum et verborum et dispositionis perceptio.” 6. Cicero appears as a supposed author; currently the author is considered to remain anonymous.

24 Rom Harre and Roger Lamb, *The Dictionary of Ethology and Animal Learning* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1986), 99.

Herennium from the eighties of the 1st century B.C. (86–82 B.C.), and the latter comes from a contemporary *Dictionary of Ethology and Animal Learning*, also published in the eighties, but in the 20th century. It would be difficult to find a better confirmation of the hegemony and persistence of the archival model of memory in our (Western) culture; also, most likely for the majority of readers this model of the archive and of recollection as retrieval from the archive will sound familiar and natural.

As I have already mentioned, however, the concept of memory as an archive creates a problem because it does not leave any room for interpretation as an integral moment of remembering; at best, it pushes interpretation outside itself – outside the archive – thus constituting it as an activity external to memory (first, we retrieve a recollection, and only then perhaps interpret it). Things might fade away a little in the archive, they might get old and somewhat faint, but they will still remain unchanged in their character. The text of memory retrieved from the archive, a text impressed with the seal of an event – even if a little covered in dust – remains the same, petrified text. This unchanging sameness is in fact the reason why the archival model of memory, even though prevalent, is entirely useless for a discussion of the collaboration and interdependence between memory and interpretation.

Bergson/Deleuze

At the opposite end from the archival model stands Henri Bergson's concept of memory presented in *Matière et mémoire* (1896), and developed in an inspiring way by Gilles Deleuze in his little book *Le Bergsonisme* (1966). This conception is worth recalling at this juncture not only because it is fascinating in itself, but also because it overcomes some of the difficulties posed by the idea of archival memory.

Bergson based his theory on a surprising assumption which undermines the concept of memory as an archive, naturalized in the Western consciousness. He believes that – to begin with – the question about where memories are stored is fundamentally ill-posed, since it assumes that memories are stored somewhere at all (for example, in a kind of archive or on a wax tablet). Instead, Bergson proposes an equally surprising thesis: according to him, recollections – as something that belongs to the past – are stored in themselves.²⁵ But how is that possible?

²⁵ Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946), 87. See also Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlison, Barbara Haberliam (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 54: "Recollection is preserved in itself," as belonging to the past, the essence of which is to last in itself. Deleuze explains the ontological char-

Without going into all the complex details of Bergson's theory, but following his path, we have to reformulate the generally accepted ideas about the relationship between the present and the past. According to Bergson, what really exists (and what is equal to being) is the past, while what in fact does not exist is the present: "Nothing is less than the present moment, if you understand by it that indivisible limit which divides the past from the future. When we think this present as going to be, it exists not yet; and when we think it as existing, it is already past."²⁶ That relation of the past to the present – or what Deleuze calls "the most profound paradox of memory" – is based on the fact that "the past is 'contemporaneous' with the present that it has been."²⁷ Unlike in common understanding, the past does not follow the present – it is not a relationship of succession – but, on the contrary, the past coexists with every moment of the present, and is temporally parallel with it. More specifically, all the moments of the present pass through a continuously existing past:

The past and the present do not denote two successive moments, but two elements which coexist. One is the present, which does not cease to pass, and the other is the past, which does not cease to be but through which all presents pass... The past does not follow the present, but on the contrary, is presupposed by it as the pure condition without which it would not pass.²⁸

This all-embracing past, "the past in general," as Bergson calls it, is precisely the virtual space of memory – eternal and ontological Memory, where

acter of the past in the following way: "We have great difficulty in understanding a survival of the past in itself because we believe that the past is no longer, that it has ceased to be. We have thus confused Being with being-present. Nevertheless, the present is not; rather, it is pure becoming, always outside itself. It is not, but it acts. Its proper element is not being but the active or the useful. The past, on the other hand, has ceased to act or to be useful. But it has not ceased to be. Useless and inactive, impassive, it IS, in the full sense of the word: It is identical with being in itself. [...] of the present we must say at every instant that it 'was,' and of the past, that it 'is,' that it is eternally, for all time." *Ibid.*, 55.

26 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy M. Paul, W. Scott Palmer (London: G. Allen & Co., 1929), 193. Further Bergson continues: "[...] every perception is already memory. Practically we perceive only the past, the pure present being the invisible progress of the past gnawing into the future." (194).

27 Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 58.

28 *Ibid.*, 59.

all the moments of the passed present, and all the “recollections” virtually co-exist; it is “a past that is eternal and for all time, the condition of the ‘passage’ of every particular present. It is the past in general that makes possible all pasts.”²⁹ It is a truly virtual space, having nothing in common with psychology or individual consciousness – it exists outside of any singular mind. It is only our immersion into that virtual space that is an act of our psyche – Bergson calls it a “leap into ontology,” a leap into being itself – and only then does the recollection pass “from the virtual state [...] into the actual.”³⁰ Our personal remembrance, a specific individual recollection, is an actualization of that omnipresent virtuality.

Even that brilliant and fascinating model of memory proposed by Bergson, however, does not leave room for interpretation. Even though there is an interpretative moment within that model, it pertains only to the density of virtual memory that we actualize. To be precise, Bergson presents virtual memory in the shape of a cone, in which all the moments of the past coexist.³¹ Whenever we enter that virtuality, we always enter into its totality, into the past as an existing, passive globality. At the same time, however, we always enter it on some specific level of particularity: depending on whether we “leap into ontology,” or “enter” the cone closer to its broader or sharper end, we can actualize that same moment of virtual memory in an extensive, detailed way, or even expand the time of remembering with respect to the time of the event (as does the protagonist in Marcel Proust’s novel), or we can condense a long-lasting event into a single, compact fact.³² As I have mentioned before, however, this kind of actualization relates to the density of a recollection, and not to its semantic interpretation.

Still, the Bergsonian model has one vital advantage over the archival model. While the concept of memory as an archive, or imprint, concerns individual memory only, the concept of memory as a virtual space makes it possible to theoretically justify the existence of collective memory: we reach into the common, virtual space and only after being granted access – to use the contemporary jargon – we actualize a recollection as an individual experience. But here too, when we remember (or actualize a virtual entity), we arrive at something that is already there, in its unchangeable virtual state.

29 *Ibid.*, 56–57.

30 Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 171.

31 *Ibid.*, 211; See Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 60.

32 Bergson calls it expansion and contraction.

Peirce

Neither of these models of memory – whether the archival model or Bergsonian virtual space – allow for a theoretical explanation of the close relation between memory and interpretation. I would like to propose another model, related to Bergson's, but referring back to the pan-semiotic vision of Charles Sanders Peirce, the father of pragmatism and American semiotics. Peirce himself wrote very little about memory and did not have any developed conception of it, but his idea of semiosis – a process that incessantly occurs between signs and among signs – provides a foundation for a productive reconsideration of the relationship between memory and interpretation.

Let us begin with the prerequisite theoretical background by recapitulating the essence of Peirce's semiotic vision. From our perspective, the most important element of that vision is the very way in which the sign exists. A sign does not necessarily have to exist in a material way, since it can be an idea, a thought, a fiction, a quality or a feeling; so it is not the properties of the vehicle of meaning that are decisive of the mode of sign's existence – on the whole, they are irrelevant. To clarify this and make it more accessible, it will be useful to recall the basic structure of Peirce's sign: it is composed of three codependent and necessarily connected correlates: the representamen (the sign vehicle), the object (called the immediate object) which is a representation within the sign of the external reality which the sign represents (the so-called dynamical object), and the interpretant which is the meaning of the sign – the element most crucial to our discussion. The interpretant not only explains the sign, it is not only the meaning of the sign, but it is also a sign in its own right, and as such it has its own interpretant which, being a sign, has its own interpretant, "the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on *ad infinitum*."³³

The sign, therefore, exists not because someone is actually using or decoding it, but because it is interpreted by other signs; and it is in that interpretation that the sign's existence is rooted: "No sign can function as such except so far as it is interpreted in another sign... What I mean is that when there is a sign there will be an interpretation in another sign."³⁴ "A sign is not a sign unless it translates itself into another sign."³⁵ The ontological domain of the sign, therefore, is thought construed in a non-mentalistic way through the category of *Thirdness*, and the fundamental mode of existence of the sign is its interpretation in and through other signs, with the important

33 CP 2.303.

34 CP 8.225, footnote.

35 CP 5.594.

reservation again that interpretation is not understood here as an activity of a subject performed on signs, but as an activity of the signs themselves.³⁶ In other words, signs are not separate entities, but on the contrary, they are anchored in one another precisely because one interprets the other, and so on into infinity. Interpretation – which will be important for our subsequent discussion of memory and identity – appears here as a category which is both ontological and epistemological: it simultaneously warrants cognition and existence: “cognition (in its widest sense) and being are not merely metaphysically the same, but are synonymous terms.”³⁷

What is important – and here we find a certain analogy with Bergsonian eternal memory – is that the process of mutual interpretation among signs does not occur in any individual mind, or any particular act of thought; it takes place among signs themselves, in the entire universe of signs, the universe of a “potential Mind.”³⁸ We might imagine that universe – even though it is a simplifying analogy – as a vast, spatial and all-encompassing dictionary, in which every word is interpreted (i. e., explained) by words from that same dictionary, and these in turn are explained by yet different words from the same dictionary, and so on without end.

Of course, we too participate in that process of sign interpretation whenever we think, read, speak, observe reality or, more generally, whenever our consciousness is active. This, however, is only secondary and incidental with respect to the virtual interpretation occurring amongst signs outside our minds.³⁹ Our specific interpretative activity is merely a realization of virtual possibilities, a choice and subsequent following of one among many possible virtual interpretative paths (although, when I use the word “choice,” I do not necessarily mean a conscious choice, but rather an intuitive activity of our consciousness). To pursue the analogy with the dictionary further: such a confluence of endless interpretations of signs by other signs continues

36 See Hanna Buczyńska-Garewicz, “Sign and continuity,” in *Ars Semeiotica* 2 (1978): 3-15.

37 CP 2.57.

38 A sign “determines some actual or potential mind, the determination whereof I term the Interpretant created by the Sign.” (CP 8.177)

39 In terms of technical categories of Peirce’s semiotics, I have explained that difference before, in *Mgławice dyskursu [Nebulae of Discourse]*: “The relation between actuality and possibility (or more broadly speaking, potentiality) could be compared to the relation between Peirce’s *dynamic interpretant* and *immediate interpretant*: the former occurs in a particular cognitive act in the mind of a particular person, while the latter is a bundle of meaningful relations (a sign) in the so-called *quasi-mind*, or in other words, in the semiotic universe not related directly to any particular mind or brain, in the semiotic cosmos.” (Kraków: Universitas, 2001) 225-226, footnote 47.

independently of whether we actually browse through the dictionary or not. And when we do, we actualize only a fraction of the options offered by the dictionary. We should note a Nietzschean moment at this juncture, even though derived from semiotics: because the sign always represents and interprets reality from a certain perspective, exposing some of its qualities and omitting others, our perception of the world through signs is by necessity perspectival – there is no such thing as an objective interpretation of reality.

Let us now refer this pan-semiotic image of the universe to the question of memory, both individual and collective. Like in Bergson's theory, we are presented with a virtual space of "general memory" but now already filled with signs and an infinitely dense network of interpretive relations or "interpretive paths." Each event, having had its present occurrence – whether a personal experience or a socially experienced fact – enters the virtual space as a sign of the past, links up with a network of signs already present within it, subjects itself to their interpretation, while simultaneously, to a certain degree, modifying the network itself.

Niches and Portals: Memory and Interpretation

This general, *pan-universum* of memory is not, of course, accessible to everyone in its entirety: it encompasses local universes, i.e., niches characteristic of specific communities and cultures in which tradition has shaped hierarchies and corresponding interpretations in their collective memory. And likewise, in the case of individual, personal memory, the accessibility of past experiences is limited to the experiencing subject. Just like any local community, every one of us has carved out in that general space his or her own niche of virtual memories. Individual memory, therefore, is in an obvious way heterogeneous: every one of us participates in that fragment of the *pan-universum* which constitutes a collective memory of his or her community, as well as in one which is limited to our private realm, inaccessible to others.

So how does one reach those niches of virtual memory? One could simply answer: through signs or, more poetically, through "traces of memory."⁴⁰ Personally, however, I would prefer to use the metaphor of a portal, which grants access to the virtual space, and which instigates its actualization. In other words, a portal is a threshold between the virtuality of memory and the actuality of our recollections.⁴¹ Any object can become

⁴⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *O sobie samym jako innym*, trans. Bogdan Chelstowski (Warszawa: PWN, 2003), 221.

⁴¹ Let us add as a side note that from the ontological perspective, a portal is an extremely interesting object, since it combines materiality with virtuality.

such a sign-portal: a cookie, as in Proust's work, a photograph, a monument, a tombstone, a dried flower, an old toy, but also a scent, a piece of melody, and often a single thought that opens gates to the past. All of us surely experience sometimes a condition, when an unexpected sign, which we stumble upon – a portal that tells us to go down memory lane – recalls something seemingly forgotten. Let us note, however, that the same sign-portal can open different interpretive paths at different moments in our lives as it reappears in constantly reinterpreted contexts of new events and experiences.

In the model of memory as a virtual space perfused with signs, which I propose here, remembering is no longer a simple act of reaching into the archive and retrieving from it a piece of permanent and unchangeable text. It is not a “leap into ontology,” or immersing into the uninterpreted space of Bergsonian eternal memory. Here, the act of remembering is simultaneously an act of interpretation – a choice of this rather than another interpretative path, this rather than another perspective – while simultaneously it is also a form of forgetting, of omitting other perspectives and other potential interpretations. Of course, we should not assume that following interpretive paths is of the nature of a logical inference. On the contrary, as logicians would say, it is enthymematic, i.e., fragmentary, containing gaps, fissures, and omissions. However, this fragmentary nature of reading signs of memory does not in any way change its interpretive character.

Remembering and interpreting, therefore, are in fact two inseparable aspects of the same activity. There is no memory without interpretation, and, likewise, there is no history without interpretation, which Hayden White expounded several decades ago. Here, however, an ethical reflection imposes itself: while history could be deceitful, it would appear that memory escapes an ethical judgment. At this point, however, we have to differentiate between individual and collective memory.

In the case of individual memory, following paths of memory is not, in fact, a “choice,” although I did employ this word for convenience; it is not a choice made consciously between interpretations, but rather a process affected by multiple factors independent of our decisions: personality, experience, cultural conditioning, psychological state, physiology. After all, we do not say: I will remember this, but I will forget that (even a wish like “I want to forget all about it” proves to be an unsuccessful interpretation of memory). Because of this involuntary character of individual memory, it does not in principle fall under ethical qualifications. In the case of collective memory, the situation looks different, since it can be an easy realm of interpretative manipulation. It is easy to foreground and impose interpretive paths here, it is also easy to forget. Collective forgetting is oftentimes a conscious effort to wipe out or to push into oblivion those interpretations which, within the local universe,

should constitute an important element of identity, but which may turn out to be painful or destructive to that very identity. In his famous essay, Ernest Renan observes that forgetting is a condition for the identity of a nation,⁴² and we can add: of a nation, of a local community, or a group. Such forgetting is nothing but an interpretation subject to moral judgment, the kind of interpretation whose main mechanism is silencing.

Identity

Let us finally return to the question with which we started, i. e., to the relationship between memory, interpretation and identity. Collaboration between memory and interpretation resolves, in my opinion, the contradiction between remaining the same while at the same time being subject to change. If we were to treat identity in the way Hume did – as something unchangeable, or as an ongoing “being the same” – then, as Paul Ricoeur observes, we would fall into an *aporia*, or a conviction that a person’s identity is an illusion. It is this kind of identity that is implied in the archival model of memory,⁴³ a model which does not comprise interpretation. One could risk a thesis, which however I will not develop here, that this model has its deeper underpinning in the distinction between the cognized object and the cognizing subject, which is deeply rooted in the Western thought.

Only by establishing an indissoluble connection between memory and interpretation in terms of Peirce’s theory of signs (which overcomes, by the way, the above mentioned split) can we elaborate a consistent, theoretically grounded explanation of identity based on the dialectic of the same and of the changing. One could formulate that dialectic as a paradox: “what’s identical is changeable,” which, however, would merely be a seeming paradox. Identity is contained within a network of interrelated, unbreakable connections and traces of the signs of memory, inherently containing interpretations, reinterpretations and reinterpretations of those reinterpretations. Rather than perceiving identity as the Bergsonian “snowball,” one should see it as an ongoing process of semiosis, or an extremely complex sign, subject to permanent changes. Hence, if we were to treat memory as a text – as it is done

42 “Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation.” Ernest Renan, “What is a nation?,” trans. Martin Thom, in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 11.

43 This needs a certain clarification: this kind of identity is changeable to the degree in which it grows with new experiences-memories. However, whatever is already in the “memory container” – that building material of identity – remains unchangeable since it is no longer subject to interpretation.

sometimes⁴⁴ – then it would have to be a text immersed in incessant activity, an unstable text, accessible only through interpretation and devoid of any essence that would be independent from interpretation.

Let us finally return to our original metaphor: if memory is the building substance of identity and interpretation is the builder, then they do not appear as, on the one hand, prearranged material – memory – and, on the other hand, the subject which shapes it (our interpretation), but as indissoluble and simultaneous molding of that material in the always already interpreted form. The outcome of that process of building – and here is where the concept of the subject construed as a result of collaboration of memory and interpretation emerges – is not a stable edifice, but a constantly shifting labyrinth, a labyrinth where some paths switch places, others disappear, and still others make room for the new ones.

Translation: Jan Pytalski

44 For example Barbara Skarga, *Tożsamość i różnica*, 229.