
Editor's Column

If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem

Not could. Will. I want to. So it is the old meat after all, no matter how old. Because if memory exists outside of the flesh it wont be memory because it wont know what it remembers so when she became not then half of memory became not and if I become not then all of remembering will cease to be.—Yes he thought Between grief and nothing I will take grief.

SO CONCLUDES William Faulkner's *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* (715), the novel published as *The Wild Palms*. Wilborne refuses the gift of forgetfulness through suicide and elects a lifetime in prison. Realizing that memory needs the material body as lodging for the material brain, he chooses the only way he knows to keep alive the fact that Charlotte, his dead beloved, ever existed.

According to the implications of Berkeley's famous trope, the past is a vast forest whose reality is in question unless a witness is present at the toppling of one of its trees (in Faulkner's narrative, the wild palms that sway outside the prisoner's window). Memory is the agent that verifies the existence of the past, but also required for memory's crucial work are material evidence and material transmitters for that evidence.

This issue of *PMLA* features three essays that parse past moments caajoled into life by means of the literary and linguistic memories of Toni Morrison, Djuna Barnes, and T. Obinkaram Echewa. In the words of the essay on Echewa, the purpose of memory is to enable something "worthy" to be salvaged from the past and "assured of living on." I shall return to the matter of memory's purpose, but first I offer a series of meditations on the kinds of "old meat" within which history strives, with more or less success, to present and to preserve the data hidden in the faraway forests of the past.

Old Meat

In the realm of print media, journals like *PMLA* are one of the primary material sites for memory work with which academics are most familiar. Within its covers, *PMLA* affords space for storing remembered data, both secondary (the scholar-critic's appraisal of authors and events) and primary (documents extracted from the past: directly, in the Criticism in Translation selections, and indirectly, in quotations incorporated into critical articles). The newest electronic technologies provide venues that rival traditional storage units within which memory struggles to keep circuits open between the past and the present. Never slow to respond to innovations that promise enhanced access to its files, *PMLA* is already moving into the realm of the searchable database, a medium that greatly aids memory to confirm the presentness of the past.

The March issue of *PMLA* expresses its confidence in the continued vitality of print matter as a necessary venue for memory work, while the cover art confirms the journal's alertness to the importance of the electronic media the Modern Language Association is appropriating to serve its institutional purposes. The cover does not evoke Proustian dippings of a madeleine into cups of tea or the mournful wings of Remembrance traditionally carved into cemetery art; instead, it lays out the elegant physical plan of the microprocessor. Consisting of myriads of tiny pathways, this brain of the computer performs the calculations and delivers the instructions that bestir the computer into life. The memory chip depicted on the facing page is something else altogether. As long as the computer—the essential “old meat”—is running, memory chips store information and busily exchange it with the hard drive and the microprocessor, but once the computer shuts down, the chips are wiped clean. Memory is rendered highly vulnerable by the role it performs for the computer's brain. The hard drive provides permanent storage, allowing documents and software programs to lie dormant when not in use, but at a flip of the switch the waters of Lethe rush in on the memory chip. Who among us has not experienced panic when the thoughts we trusted to our computers, as our most powerful means for giving ready access to what we need to recall, suddenly disappear and computer amnesia takes over?

Uncertain memory is not the only threat to data—viruses maliciously introduced into the system can contaminate its contents. Consider other sites for storage that are liable to contaminate evidence, willfully or not. Museums are particularly problematic. Questions are constantly asked whether the information they disseminate is accurate, distorted, or aborted. How well has the American Museum of Natural History “remembered” its exploratory intrusions into Africa over the years? Did the Smithsonian Institution mishandle the memories called up by the Columbian quincentenary, and to what extent did the curators at the National Air and Space Museum allow outside pressure to botch the *Enola Gay* exhibit? How effective is the United States Holocaust Museum in

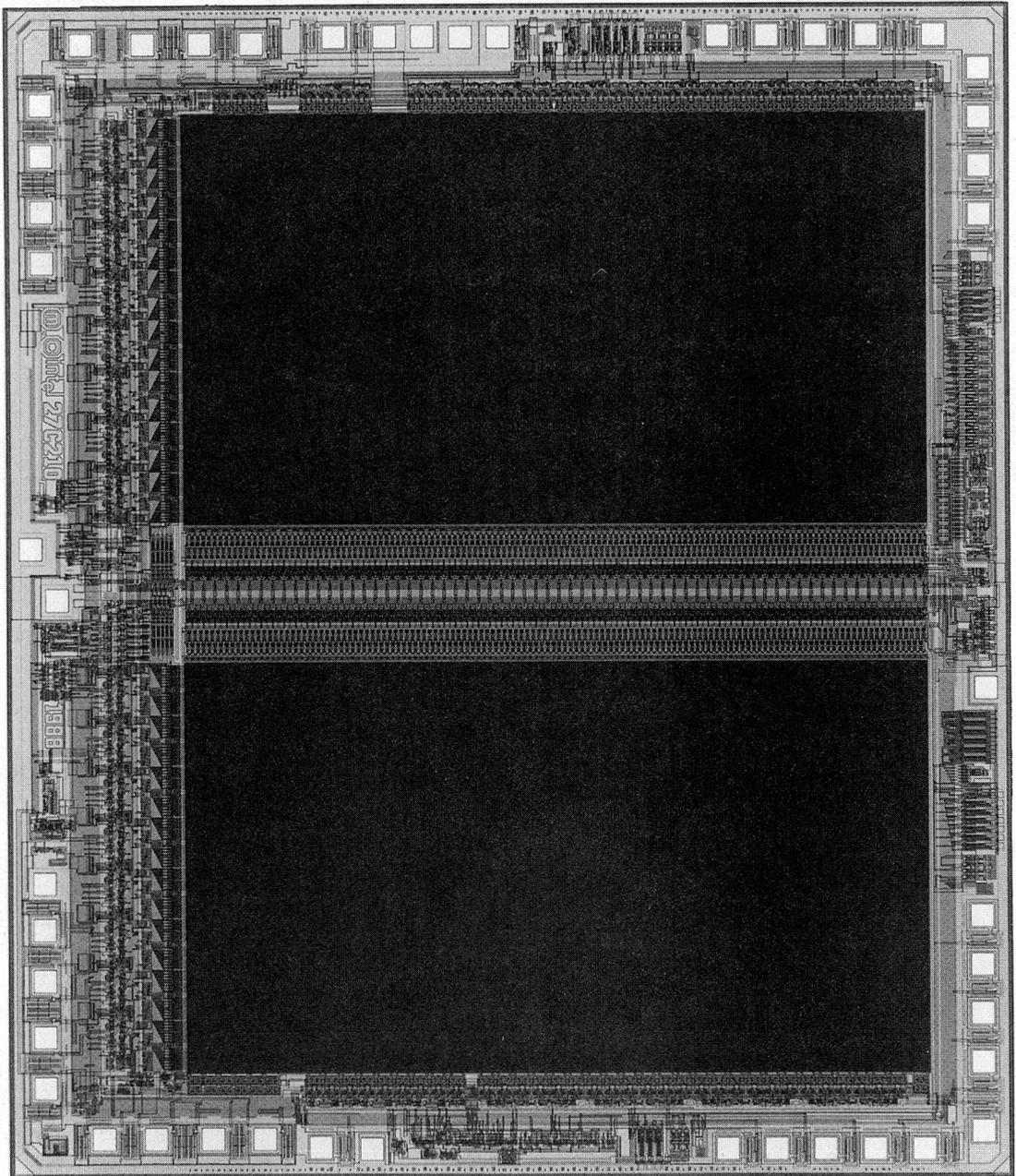


Photo courtesy of Intel Corporation.

documenting the millions of “trees” cut down in the Nazi forest of the past? What exactly of value is being stored permanently on the hard drives of these institutions? What neglected software lies idle, waiting to be aroused from long sleep? What vital evidence has been erased for all time from their memory chips through ineptitude?

I call up a recent experience of one example of how museum installations function, with more or less effectiveness, as sites where memory sets about its work. During the summer of 1998 the Museum of London mounted a special exhibit devoted to rendering tangible the history of the Rothschilds as a family evolved from relatively humble beginnings in Frankfurt to become a major force in the financial history of the Continent and Great Britain. To my mind, the museum’s handling of display space was imaginative. Viewers were meant to pass through a sequence of areas that represented the urban settings where the Rothschilds had lived and nurtured their astonishingly successful business enterprises. The adroit use of various material objects helped to evoke a strong sense of the presence of the past; the explanatory statements placed in each display area were detailed and informative; the overall effect was, for me, completely absorbing. But as I drifted through the rooms of the exhibit encountering only three other persons, I wondered where everyone was.

On leaving the exhibit, I reentered the main body of the museum, where I had to wend my way, sometimes with difficulty, through the press of visitors intent on everything else the museum had to offer. By chance I overheard a comment made by one of the curators as he escorted a VIP to the Rothschild exhibit; he told her that no one really had come to see the exhibit but that this lack of interest from the public was all right since the “family” was helping to pay for the expense of putting it on. How interesting, I thought, when past history brought back into the present through institutional memory is viewed as sufficiently well served as long as the costs of arousing that memory are met—and by the very family whose memory has been retrieved.

One can hardly avoid running into the many kinds of “old meat” created to store and release memory. For example, I have had recent opportunities to tap into the sophisticated technologies supplied by the Ellis Island Museum and by the Family History Library of the Church of Latter-Day Saints in Salt Lake City, each of which invites visitors to go in quest of their families’ pasts. (The latter’s genealogical data bank—however comprehensive and ready to supply information even for “Gentiles”—“misremembered” the middle names of my father and my maternal grandfather; for the sake of accuracy, I had to fall back on the nontechnological process of my own memory.) No, there is no lack of material containers or sites that offer institutionalized access to the past, with varying dependability. I will return to the tangible venue represented by *PMLA*, that institutionally sanctioned space where scholars can present and preserve the conclusions resulting from their probings into the ways literary works and linguistic practices are impelled by the past. But first

a detour into yet another venue familiar to academics: the professional conference and scholars' gathering. I call up the record preserved within *PMLA* of a special program sponsored by the Modern Language Association in December 1934 at which the kind of memory conveyed by the oral folk tradition was suddenly dropped into the midst of a group of scholars assembled to honor the artifacts of print culture.¹

With good reason, the words and rhythms handed down in folk music are claimed to be about as close as we can ever get to purity; its champions like to think that the access the oral tradition gives to "history from below" offers as strong a link to authentic memories of the past as it is possible for modern societies undergoing rapid contamination to acquire. It would seem that purity and authenticity were what Huddie Ledbetter had to offer under the name of Leadbelly. The Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola was one of the few institutions with which he had been in contact—a place that contained his material presence but failed to curb his soul. Thanks in part to the efforts of John Lomax, an ethnomusicologist who recorded the convict's songs at Angola, Leadbelly was released from prison in 1934, to be taken up by Lomax, who saw Leadbelly as an effective means to advance his own memory work. Lomax's cause was a valid one. He wished to retrieve songs from the American past expressive of emotions and events largely overlooked by print culture because the songs' source (the racial and class-oriented cast of Southern oral culture) fell outside the "software programs" of most academics.

Out on the road, the odd relationship between the two men meant that Leadbelly served as "memory chip" and Lomax as the "brain" regulating the "hard drive" storage of American folk culture. Described in other terms, Leadbelly was the performer and Lomax the entrepreneur who was responsible for promoting the right sort of occasions for Leadbelly's performances. Responding to an invitation from the Modern Language Association, Lomax brought Leadbelly to the Crystal Ballroom of the Benjamin Franklin Hotel in Philadelphia on 28 December 1934 to participate in the entertainment for a smoker following the Local Committee's subscription dinner. *PMLA* provides a record of the program, presided over by Frank Aydelotte, president of Swarthmore College:

1. Elizabethan Ayres to the Virginals, sung by Mary Peabody Hotson.
2. Informal addresses by Henry Seidel Canby, Editor of *The Saturday Review of Literature* [and] Marjorie Nicolson, Dean of Smith College.
3. Negro Folksongs and Ballads, presented by John and Alan Lomax with the assistance of a Negro minstrel from Louisiana.
4. Songs and Chantees by the diners, with Leslie Hotson as Master of Singing.² ("Proceedings" 1323–24)

A depiction of the ensuing scene in a novelized biography of Huddie Ledbetter by Richard M. Garvin and Edmond G. Addeo contains details not in the *PMLA* data bank: "At the smoker, Leadbelly sat on the top of a

table and sang many of his bawdy songs. The prim and proper audience applauded wildly and threw money at his feet. By the time he was finished he had thirty-two dollars" (223).³

The next day Ledbetter appeared once again as Leadbelly before "a group of students at a popular literature seminar" (223). Then Lomax bore him off to Bryn Mawr, where (against Ledbetter's remonstrances) Lomax insisted that his performer wear convict stripes. He explained to Ledbetter that he understood what it took to present strange new evidence derived from an unknown folk culture to audience members who mostly "have never heard songs like you sing, Huddie. We have to approach a new audience with care, particularly if they've been shielded from the realities of prisons and jails" (224). The Bryn Mawr performance was at least as successful as the one at the MLA smoker. "Before a jammed auditorium filled with students, debutantes, and matrons, [Ledbetter] sang his alien music that evening. Hushed comments floated back and forth. What was that man singing? [. . .] Near the end of his performance the normally staid audience began applauding wildly, and calls of 'Just one more!' and 'Play it again, Leadbelly!' filled the small hall" (225).

You can determine whether the occasions that released the memory songs of Huddie Ledbetter on the academic consciousness were all bad or all good. Let us hope you think a bit of both and that you are free of the notion that pure recollections can be purely conveyed from a past incessantly susceptible to decay or alteration.⁴ The three essays included in this issue labor under no such delusion. Nothing is entirely innocent that participates in the negotiations among scholar, audience, and the memory data called on to enact assigned performances. After all, old meat turns rancid quickly, but still we need it, because "if memory exists outside of the flesh it won't be memory."

Between Grief and Nothing I Will Take Grief

"'Circles and Circles of Sorrow': In the Wake of Morrison's *Sula*," by Phillip Novak, and "A Story beside(s) Itself: The Language of Loss in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*," by Victoria L. Smith, see remembrance functioning currently as the commemoration of loss and sorrow. Back in 1846 Edgar Allan Poe articulated the necessary artifices by which the poet creates narratives in which, recurrently, the hovering bird of memory is pled with to "[t]ake thy beak from out my *heart*, and take thy form off my door!"—with the bird endlessly reiterating its haunting answer, "Nevermore." In being "emblematical of *Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance*," Poe's raven carries out the theoretical purpose that vitalizes literary composition (208). Novak and Smith find in narratives by Morrison and Barnes the same obligation to portray mournful and never-ending remembrance.

In Novak's view, Morrison's desire "to make meaning of melancholia" has "an ethical dimension." In refusing to forget grief, African American

literature recognizes that “getting done with grieving might well constitute a surrender to the forces that produced the losses in the first place.” Morrison celebrates the cultivation of mourning in order “to attend to history and at the same time to resist the historical trajectory leading toward the extinction of African American cultural identity.” Smith sees that through parsing the past in *Nightwood*, Barnes insists on the reclamation of the position of loss for marginalized groups (particularly women, Jews, and homosexuals) whose histories have been effaced. In these essays, memories that are painfully about loss are revealed to be quite other than negative estrangements and gestures of defeat.

Bella Brodzki approaches Echewa's *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* through considerations of those acts of translation by which “the value of memory or ‘remembrance’ as an instrument of historical consciousness is inscribed in a culture” as those “conditions and modes of transmission are—inevitably—altered.” Alterations of the past entail some loss, but Brodzki recognizes that Echewa strives to trace the links between the changes introduced by translation and the opportunity those changes offer for the survival of translated texts.

All three essays are deeply invested in examining the ways narratives venture into the forests of the past to bear often angry witness to its reality; they attend to the manner by which the written word attempts to establish a special site for acts of remembrance that resist being fully contained or contaminated; they reverse conventional notions concerning the pleasures of forgetfulness by demonstrating that the memory of the continuity of pain is convertible into present privileges.⁵

Impell'd by the Past

That these three essays focus on narratives by and about people shunted to the margins of memory is obvious. This issue of *PMLA* continues ongoing arguments that insist that attention must be paid to all the world's discarded Willy Lomans—whether named Sula, Felix, Nora, Robin, or Nne-nne. You will read the essays and judge their success in this venture. I wish only to conclude by reverting to the still-vexed question of how best, and where best, to locate our analyses of memory's power to keep alive the power of the past.

Unlike the Rothschild exhibit at the Museum of London, the displays mounted by the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art are in no danger of failing to draw attentive viewers. *The Ceaseless Century: Three Hundred Years of Eighteenth-Century Costume*, which I visited in October 1998, was devoted to proving that the world of fashion—notwithstanding its reputation as the most ephemeral (and perhaps the most trivial) of human activities—is impelled to draw into the present moment (and market) long-ago cuts of apparel, manipulations of fabric, and articulations of style, whereby social moments from the past insist on the durability of their own strong history.⁶ I was especially

struck by the language used in “Twentieth-Century Historicism,” one of the explanatory wall mounts. The opening statement (“The twentieth century possesses more of history in images—in print, retrievable, and now digitized—than any preceding culture”) was wrapped around a declaration that ought to strike terror into the hearts of the fashion industry, whose fortunes are ostensibly tied to faith in an eternal present: “We are possessed by history.” A striking image followed—“Modernity is a one-eyed Cyclops”—then the conclusion: “The eighteenth century still, after nearly three hundred years, gives us a retrospective option, another eye, and a rich, irresistible, munificent world we can never forget.”

All the fleshly venues we constantly use (museums, folk festivals, computers, journals, genealogical databases, product displays, academic conferences) are deeply problematic to some extent, however much they try to keep circuits open between the present and the past. I suspect that we would not really have it any other way, in our rapt interest in detecting the traces of corruption that lurk in every nook and cranny of our society. Nonetheless, *PMLA* is a good place (a very good place) to go when one believes as did Walt Whitman when responding to the rhetorical question he posed in “Passage to India”:⁷

For what is the present after all but a growth out of the past?
 (As a projectile form'd, impell'd, passing a certain line, still keeps on,
 So the present, utterly form'd, impell'd by the past.) (412)

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Notes

¹Articles in the early days of *PMLA*, as well as convention sessions, once testified to the organization's interest in the preservation of folk ballads that crossed the ocean from the British Isles to Appalachia, but songs of the Southern black tradition like Huddie Ledbetter's were not common fare for members in the 1930s.

²It is hardly necessary to spell out the ironies of a performance by “a Negro minstrel” to the group gathered at the MLA “smoker.” It would be interesting to have information about the evening of a kind not supplied by the *PMLA* listing. What etiquette ruled at an academic smoker, ostensibly for men only, and were Mary Peabody Hotson and Marjorie Nicolson still in attendance when Ledbetter performed?

³The “author's note” appended to Garvin and Addeo's book speaks of the work as a “novel, based on the life of one of our greatest folk-musicians[, that] contains imagined scenes and reconstructed events in order to illuminate obscure periods.” However, the note concludes with almost two pages of closely listed names of informants and other sources on which Garvin and Addeo drew as they “pursued this truth long and far” (3, 5). That Ledbetter performed at the MLA smoker and at Bryn Mawr the next day is not in question; Garvin and Addeo's account of how the audiences to these performances responded is what cannot be verified with absolute assurance.

⁴The Smithsonian Institution's *Anthology of American Folk Music*, first brought out by Harry Smith in 1952 under the imprint of Folkways records, and Robert Cantwell's *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* are reviewed by Geoffrey O'Brien in a lengthy piece about "how people sounded before they knew how they sounded." The story of the placement of folk songs on wax phonograph records is "the history of disembodiment, the history of recording: the birth of the voice as unhinged object, linked to no particular point in space or time" (51). When we in the present listen to these recordings, we "are drawn to the beginnings of our world—understood as somehow synonymous with the core of feeling—only to find a past that changed forever in being captured. The technology that lets us hear the songs also rapidly undermines the conditions in which they were created in the first place. Go back as far as possible and you find already only an echo of some unknowable music, wilder and richer" (51).

⁵Henry James's preface to his story "The Altar of the Dead" declares that memory acts as "an invoked, a restorative reaction against certain general brutalities. Brutal, more and more, to wondering eyes, the great fact that the poor dead, all about one, were nowhere so dead as there [London, representative of any great modern urban center]; where to be caught in any rueful glance at them was to be branded as 'morbid.' 'Mourir, à Londres, c'est être bien mort!'" (ix).

⁶Keep in mind that the mannequins on display at *The Ceaseless Century* were arrayed in court costumes and couturier appropriations, once again ensuring that the institutionalized memory banks of the Metropolitan's Costume Institute continue to shore up "history from above."

⁷Nor does Whitman's "Passage to India" escape our critical scrutiny. The entire poem is open to postcolonialist interrogation, while the quoted lines throw back into Whitman's face the problematic determinism of the poem's sentiment that the present is "utterly form'd, impell'd by the past," once one recognizes that the inevitability Whitman writes into these phrases bears the weight of his faith in Manifest Destiny.

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