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Nicolas Russell, *Transformations of Memory and Forgetting in Sixteenth-Century France: Marguerite de Navarre, Pierre de Ronsard, Michel de Montaigne*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011. xxii + 183 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$60.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 978-1-61149-054-1.

Review by Robert J. Hudson, Brigham Young University.

Given the subject matter of memory and forgetting in early modern France introduced in the title of his book, I admit to being intrigued to see what new insights Nicolas Russell could contribute to this well-trodden field. With the monumental works of Frances Yates, Peter Burke, Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora on the subject at large, Nathalie Dauvois' book-length treatment of the theme within the work of Ronsard [1] and the "more than twenty articles...written on Montaigne and memory" over the past thirty years acknowledged by the author (p. 95), his is a daunting task indeed. However, with the idea of *transformation*, "the reworking of traditional ideas, attitudes, and discourses related to memory and forgetting in sixteenth-century France," (pp. xi-xii) along with his shrewd synthesis realized between the works of the authors analyzed, Russell carves out a significant niche for himself in the domain of memory studies and the criticism of Marguerite de Navarre, Pierre de Ronsard and Michel de Montaigne. In fact, Russell owes the success of this volume to the multiple original and meaningful close readings of primary texts that he performs in each of his five chapters. Multifaceted and flexible in its approach to the idea of memory, *Transformations of Memory and Forgetting in Sixteenth-Century France* is a text that remains faithful to the humanistic conceptions of the theme espoused by the authors it treats and, as it draws on historical and cultural context, merits the academic attention of those interested in the interplay between key literary figures and the dynamic evolution of a most prevalent concern in Renaissance France.

One of the treasures of the book, which should even draw the attention of those without a patent interest in French Renaissance literature, is Russell's historical overview of the concept of memory as laid out in the volume's introduction. As he discusses "traditional discourses on the human faculty of memory" (p. xi), citing important theorists from classical Antiquity to the Middle Ages to Renaissance Humanism to contemporary cognitive science, Russell crafts an impressively concise and readable diachronic survey of speculation on memory. This results, quite naturally, in a sound bibliography featuring key works from nearly every era of Western thought that will prove a convenient reference resource for future scholars working in the field of memory. All the same, much more than offering a mere sketch of approaches to memory, Russell does not fail to ground his explanations in his overarching interest, early modern France. In a particularly savvy moment in the text, he draws distinctions between the modern concepts of collective memory, as theorized in the twentieth century by Halbwachs and Ricœur, explaining his preference for the concreteness of the latter as opposed to the psychological/sociological aspect of the former while also teasing out the necessary precautions to be taken to avoid anachronism in the application of such theories (pp. xviii-xix). Albeit useful to anyone researching the history of memory, Russell's introduction is clearly intended to offer his reader the essential tools to join him for a series of textual analyses aimed to examine how memory "acts independently to shape self, society, and reality" (p. xxii) in sixteenth-century France.

For a word or two about sources, Russell seems to manifest throughout the volume, in each chapter and throughout the notes, an unbalanced preference for Mary Carruthers' *The Book of Memory*. Granted, the medieval focus of this key text most likely best suits it to his concerns in the transitional period that is the Renaissance. Still, while present, monolithic studies such as those by Yates (who treats the early modern period) and Nora figure decidedly less prominently. While delighted to see that this text did not take on the Freudian or Bergsonian bent adopted by so many twentieth-century texts on memory, I feel that, while recognizing Carruthers' importance, it may have been prudent to temper her voice with other key sources. Then again, this is hardly a harsh criticism--do we not all have our favorite theorists?

In the same vein of thought, as far as the individual analyses are concerned, Russell is very well-read, consistently citing and entering into dialogue with the most important and most recent research on Marguerite, Ronsard and Montaigne. For instance, Gary Ferguson, author of *Mirroring Belief*, is a chief interlocutor when examining Marguerite's devotional poetry. In the chapter on Ronsard, Russell regularly references Nathalie Dauvois, without forgetting classic studies on the Pléiade poet by Thomas Greene, Grahame Castor and Isidore Silver. And, quite appropriately, Richard Regosin, François Rigolot and Donald Frame are frequent sources when discussing Montaigne's memory. As a matter of personal preference, I was pleased with the inclusion of Malcolm Quainton's excellent--although sadly underappreciated--masterpiece of Ronsard criticism (even if I do feel that Russell could have possibly done even more with it).<sup>[2]</sup> One notable bibliographical lacuna, however, especially given Russell's focus on monumental memory and Ronsard's belief in poetic preservation through print, is William Kennedy's *The Site of Petrarchism*, in which the Petrarchan sonnet represents a *lieu de mémoire* and source of nationalistic pride in early modern Europe, as is demonstrated in Kennedy's chapter on Ronsard's eventual adoption, despite initial reluctance, of the verse form in part to ensure cultural memory.<sup>[3]</sup> Nevertheless, this absence is largely overshadowed by Russell's thoughtful and meaningful engagement with those most essential critics he does cite.

Turning our attention to the body of the text, the first two of Russell's chapters treat Marguerite de Navarre, doing so in different ways for both. In chapter one, "Remembering the Fall," he deals with the importance of forgetting as perceived by Marguerite in her own spiritual formation. Citing at length textual instances of memory and forgetting from her correspondence with early reformer and spiritual advisor Guillaume Briçonnet, in this chapter, Russell also analyzes Marguerite's devotional verse in *Miroir de l'âme pécheresse* and *La Navire*, involving discussions of Cicero, Augustine and Christian scripture in his explanation of Marguerite's preference of sensibility over intellect. His second chapter, "The Ethics of Forgetting," involves Calvinistic thought and reads against theories espoused by medieval Scholasticism in its exploration of the place reserved for memory by the more mature Marguerite in the *Heptaméron*. Examining the prologue and various nouvelles from the collection, with mention of the paradoxical dependence on human memory for a text that outwardly values fidelity and truth, Russell likewise elucidates the role of memory in ethical choice, moral character and emotional stability as developed by Marguerite. Once again, Russell bolsters his argument with superb, recent secondary material--in this case, Carol Thysell's book on Marguerite's theological views.<sup>[4]</sup>

The one chapter devoted to Ronsard, "Mnemosyne and Lethe" (chapter three), required an entirely different perspective and skill set, as Russell moved deftly from theological and sociological concerns to mythology and rhetorical posturing as related to memory. Drawing on a key contradiction between human and poetic memory, Russell appeals to classical sources, Dante, neoplatonism and Ronsardian verse to demonstrate the place of memory in poetic immortality (ensured by printing and preservation in books)--very interestingly and originally differentiating it from the fluctuating and fickle nature of its human counterpart. As he does in each chapter, Russell closes with a synthesis of his present conclusions and those from previous chapters--for one example (that will also showcase Russell's tight,

fluent prose), consider the following comparison of Ronsard and Marguerite: “Human memory plays no role in creating...poetic memory and is not a useful tool for the poet. Rather, like Marguerite de Navarre, Ronsard describes human memory as an uncontrollable, unreliable mental faculty, symbolizing the uncertain, transitory nature of human existence.... For Marguerite, divine grace allows the individual to forget the human world and experience a divine presence.... Ronsard also suggests a way to transcend the transitory nature of human existence and the troubling nature of personal memory...a special kind of paper memory created by poetry and preserved in books” (p. 91).

Chapters four and five, with which the book concludes, both deal with Montaigne. Borrowing from Regosin’s theories of Montaigne’s consubstantiality with his literary creation, “Paper Memory” nonetheless achieves a fresh perspective on the topos of Montaigne’s memory (or his self-asserted lack thereof) as it involves the language of cognitive science—discussing procedural, semantic and episodic memory—as stages of sophistication in memory. Russell draws on his earlier ideas of Ronsardian paper memory as he presents the *Essais* as the reaction to the anxiety of an aging and forgetful man who seeks to preserve and reconstitute episodic memory on the printed page. However, memory in the “*Essais* is personal rather than collective...(and) the episodic paper memory does not last for generations” (p. 112). “Remnants of the Past,” chapter five, continues along the same lines to define what collective memory *is* in the *Essais*, offering various definitions and much explanation as to the understanding of this term in the Renaissance. Looking primarily at Montaigne’s relationship with Etienne de La Boétie and the former’s attempts at preservation of the latter’s *La servitude volontaire*, however interspersed with others of the essays, Russell concludes this chapter and effectively his book with an attempt at a correlation between personal and collective memory. As is the essence of Montaigne’s project in the *Essais*, “learning is not creating a comprehensive store of information, the memorization of a corpus, but rather a matter of processing information” (p. 133), quite possibly the most obvious choice for a book on memory in sixteenth-century France, Montaigne still presents Russell with the opportunity to put new wine into old skins and produce original and thought-provoking analysis of a ubiquitous theme.

Slightly abrupt in its parting remarks, another few pages of epilogue or conclusion would have been welcome. A brief discussion of the text with which the French sixteenth century ends, The Edict of Nantes, and Henri IV’s focus on forgetting the past may have provided a more gracious taking of leave. One could even imagine a treatment of memory in the horrifically apocalyptic scenes of Agrippa d’Aubigné’s *Les Tragiques*, for whom forgetting was impossible. On the other hand, perhaps I am guilty here of diluting what already stands as a concentrated analysis of three of the most significant writers in sixteenth-century France. Like his bibliography, Russell’s additional twenty-two pages of notes are thorough and demonstrate deep reflection on the subject, as seen throughout the text. All things considered, Russell’s text is a solid achievement. I can certainly imagine myself assigning chapters from it to graduate students and advanced undergraduates. It admirably offers an introduction to memory studies and each of the authors treated to the uninitiated, while also presenting new readings of key texts to seasoned scholars in the field, with whom I look forward to discussing it at conferences for many years to come.

## NOTES

[1] Nathalie Dauvois, *Mnémosyne: Ronsard, une poétique de la memoire* ( Paris: Honoré Champion, 1992).

[2] Malcolm Quainton, *Ronsard’s Ordered Chaos: Visions of Flux and Stability in the Poetry of Pierre de Ronsard* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980).

[3] William J. Kennedy, *The Site of Petrarchism: Early Modern National Sentiment in Italy, France, and England* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

[3] Carol Thysell, *The Pleasure of Discernment: Marguerite de Navarre as Theologian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

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