

Preface

“Being that can be understood is language”: this succinct statement contains Hans-Georg Gadamer’s formula for the “ontological turn in hermeneutics.”¹ The theory of cultural memory, which amounts to a kind of “ontological turn in tradition,” could be summarized with the words “Being that can be remembered is text.” Language is dialogue, exchange of views, communication. Text, on the other hand, is constituted on the basis of prior communication. It always involves the past. Memory bridges the gap between then and now. The messenger memorizes the message that he is supposed to convey to the recipient; the old man remembers what he was taught by his grandfather and passes it on to his own grandson, enriched by his own experience. In this way “texts” come into being. Linguistic communication takes place in the course of conversation; texts, however, arise in the “extended context” of tradition.² The need to record events is so great that from a very early stage mankind has had recourse to all sorts of mnemonics and systems of notation with which to facilitate subsequent access. This need has given rise to writing, and writing has extended the fund of memory in leaps and bounds to the point where the gigantic archives of the “fields of memory” can no longer be surveyed.³ Hermeneutics concentrates on the role of understanding by accessing the text of memorable events; the theory of cultural memory, in contrast, investigates the conditions that enable that text to be established and handed down. It draws our attention to the role of the past in constituting our world through dialogue and intercommunication, and it investigates the forms in which the past presents itself to us as well as the motives that prompt our recourse to it. The theory of cultural memory explores the textuality of the past within the linguistic framework of our experience of the world that hermeneutics has decoded for us. If hermeneutics defines man as a being that understands, the exploration of cultural memory defines

this understanding being as one who remembers. Gadamer himself has repeatedly argued that all understanding is nurtured by a pre-understanding that comes from memory.

The ten studies brought together in this book are based on essays and lectures from the past seven years. They attempt to shed light on the concept of cultural memory and the questions associated with it from a variety of different angles. Religion turns out to be a focal point underlying the individual studies, whether in a narrower or broader sense. All the older contributions have been revised, and in places extensively reworked, so as to avoid repetitions, to bring out common themes, and to emphasize new insights. I wish to thank Ernst-Peter Wieckenberg for encouraging me to assemble these essays, Ulrich Nolte for his meticulous reading of the whole volume, and Silke Möller for her careful and intelligent production of the index.

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