

HOW MODERNITY FORGETS by Paul Connerton, *Cambridge University Press*, 2009, pp. viii + 149, £45 hbk, £15.99 pbk

The strange times of modernity have had their prophets and one of these was Prospero. In Act IV of *The Tempest* he spoke: 'these our actors, as I foretold you, were all spirits and are melted into air, into thin air', and added, 'the solemn temples, the great globe itself, yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve'. Connerton's work operates on this terrain. Like Berman's famous work *All that is solid melts into air: the experience of modernity*, Connerton skilfully builds a notion of cultural amnesia out of Marxism to produce a decidedly original work. While there is little on religion directly, this admirably concise study has uses for theologians in providing insights into the slippery, forgetful, basis of modernity. This work complements his earlier, celebrated, and equally brief work, *How Societies Remember* (1989).

Given how much of the past holds sway over contemporary culture, as indicated by its heritage industries, its fetish for commemoration, and its fascination with nostalgia and epics of times other than those of the dreary present, an account of how modernity forgets might seem perverse. The dangers of forgetting have been recognised of late in the acts of remembrance for the dead returning from Afghanistan and most pertinently in regard to the Holocaust. Connerton is concerned less with the procedures societies establish to remember lest they fall into the hubris of forgetting than with the structures, topography and places of memory whose shifting basis generates a cultural amnesia. In a sense, this is more a study of obliviousness, the ethos of transience modernity generates, where identifiable marks are rubbed out in the rush of life of the city.

The three substantial chapters (framed with a good introduction and conclusion) deal with 'two types of place memory', the temporalities and topographies of forgetting. They exhibit judicious reading and some wonderfully captivating examples. In essence, this is a study of the cultural amnesia wrought by disconnection from place, property, commodity, and home, where the transience of urban life is given no topographical amelioration, no fixity. Connerton's reach goes wider, to the price of speed and the discipline of time. Simmel on fashion and Marx on relentless commodification underpin the study that builds on Baudelaire, but with an original focus on cultural amnesia. To secure his thesis and its prime concerns with the structuring properties of modernity that yield a cultural amnesia, agency and individual revolt against this engulfing ethos that realises forgetfulness are downplayed. The outcome is that cultural amnesia seems fated, all encompassing, and devoid of redress.

For Connerton, the locus for memory lies in place names, the house, and the street. When these are demolished, or renamed, a part of history disappears (pp. 10–13). This phenomenon of dislocation is by no means confined to the urban. Oddly, Friel's *Translations* is not used, where the re-mapping of rural hinterlands left the natives strangers in their own territory (see pp. 50–53 where reference to the play would have been useful). Yet Connerton makes his own contrasts well, juxtaposing pilgrimage, as providing an exemplary sense of place named and marked, with forces of modernity that give rise to its distinctive cultural amnesia (pp. 13–18). He is especially good on the partial history of the street and on memorials, which 'conceal the past as much as they cause us to remember it' (p. 29). It is this sense of *not* completing memory, of forgetting, but also of the need to remember, that gives the study a compelling power. Modernity exasperates this ambiguity but also disguises the need to attend to it.

The sense of the topography shifting is well drawn in relation to the cathedral, which dominated the European city (pp. 30–31), but then becomes obscured as it expands. Before the twentieth century, the city could be seen from one place but with modernisation it becomes formless. As Connerton suggests, the city

frontier is effaced. The cathedral spire, which pointed alone to God, finds itself in competition with skyscrapers whose elevations signify witnesses to the gods of commerce (pp. 101–103). Although not his concern, one can see how secularisation is an inadequate term that conceals the structuring effects of modernity, where the cathedral loses its monopoly, its singular grandeur, to more greedy competitors.

It is in little details that the study is convincing. In chapter 3, Connerton is clever at linking cultural amnesia to alienation in terms of the temporalities of products in the age of modernity. He draws a telling contrast between the personal signature of the artist, the stamp of the creator, and the anonymity of those in manufacture who leave no traces on the products they make (pp. 41–42). Tracing back seems futile and cultural amnesia in regard to the gestation of desirable objects emerges as an understandable condition. Ingeniously, he links the rise of the detective story, where clues are sought to the original act, to the rise of capitalist social formations (pp. 44–45). It is a telling metaphor, one that illuminates section 2 of the chapter where he suggests that ‘culturally induced forgetting is reinforced by the temporality of consumption’ (p. 53). Again, a useful contrast is drawn between the gift relationship, the ‘memory chain of obligations’ it generates, and the eradication of these with the expansion of impersonal forms of consumption. Strangely the rise of exhibitions and spectacles that render commodities more memorable by the nature of their display facilitates the cultural amnesia Connerton deplors. The section on work and trust wanders a bit. Section 4 that deals with the expansion of information is more persuasive.

The sense of visual engulfment that gives a licence to cultural amnesia is well covered in chapter 4 on the topographies of forgetting. He is especially good on the way the expansion of the city generates a labyrinth difficult to navigate and thereby induces a sense of cultural amnesia which Connerton attributes to what he terms ‘the scale of human settlement’, the production of speed, and ‘the repeated intentional destruction of the built environment’ (p. 99). These fetishes are well known, but what is convincing in Connerton’s account is the way they eradicate resources of memory. For him, ‘cultural memory is eroded in this process because the *building blocks* of the city have been broken down’ (p. 120).

He finishes on a telling point, that the heritage industry represents an effort to counteract the movements described in chapter 4 (p. 138). He now confronts an issue evaded in the study: what is forgotten? Agency returns as he recognises the matter of personal memory. While the concern of the study is with ‘spatial memorability’ (this linking back to the issue of topography: p. 140), he hits a striking insight for the study: what has been effaced and haunts is the loss of traces, of engravings for the memory, that could yield lasting impressions (p. 145). He ends on an irresolvable paradox which the study discloses with some originality, that as cultural memory expands exponentially the issue of what needs to be forgotten, or is forgotten, needs to be remembered. In a sense the study overreaches itself. Yet, this failure marks it out as one of real originality as Connerton stumbles into unknown terrains and raises the spectre of cultural amnesia in ways few have even thought about, let alone conjectured. In regard to religion, Connerton suggests that the loss of memory is something endemic in modernity and is not peculiar to secularisation. From the study, it might be inferred that the need to re-invent religion by reference to memory is not something desirable but rather is necessary if it is to survive, which might suggest that traditionalists have a sociological point.

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