

Dylan Trigg

The Memory of Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny.

Athens, OH: Ohio University Press 2012.

347 pages

\$32.95 (paperback ISBN 978-0-82142-039-3);

\$69.95 (hardcover ISBN 978-0-82141-975-5)

When one seeks to explore memory two main points need to be considered: the relationship between memory and imagination, and the constitution of the past as something that continues somehow, that lives on. Dylan Trigg's book stands in the tradition of phenomenology, in which memory plays an important role in the genesis of our consciousness of time. For Trigg's study, however, this is true only in part. What he focuses on is the connection between memory and world, more precisely the intersection of time and place, for Trigg conceives place as compressing time, and so place "becomes the very ground of how time is given form and definition" (119). Trigg's interest lies "in understanding the role the material environment plays in shaping, defining, and constituting our sense of self and world" (XVI). When he speaks of "memory of places," he means the places that human beings inhabit and pass through. Those places leave an impact on us, for we are bodily subjects and as such we have a relationship with the places that surround us. At any time we are situated, located in a place. Thus being under the influence of place over time defines and structures our sense of self. Being acquainted with a place means that it becomes part of who we are. Usually we don't notice this fact, but once we are displaced it becomes apparent, e.g. in cases of homesickness.

Two aspects have to be kept in mind when combining the notions of memory and place:

(1) The *memory of place* can be identified as a particular mode of remembering. As such it is conceived as a part of lived experience (2). The *place of memory* on the other hand can be taken as a particular mode of materiality. The focus lies not on lived experience but on "the formation of memory within a social context, afforded by the power of place and manifest in such entities as monuments and sites of trauma" (XVII). These aspects indicate that memory is always already spatial and "spatiality is inherently temporal, occupying a place in the present but stretching back into the past" (ibid.). The combination of lived experience and materiality places the body in focus. The body has touched place long before we realize it. We orient ourselves through our bodies before we form a representation of our surroundings. Due to the body we find ourselves with a kinesthetic consciousness, i.e. a conscious perception through movement. It exceeds the view of visual perception. Thanks to the "cohesive intelligence" of the body, it gives unity to all sensual data and with it orientation. It is true that all memories have a temporal and spatial dimension but, as Trigg points out, that doesn't mean that spatiality becomes a defining factor for memory (53). Only because of embodiment space as an objective reality can become existentially and intentionally meaningful. That means that only because of the body, space can turn into place. We develop a place memory via the kinesthetic sensibility of the body (103).

The central theme of the book, one could say, is the *facticity of memory* and its meaning for (personal) identity, and Trigg explores this theme thoroughly in the three parts of the book. The notion of "the uncanny" plays a significant role in his approach. Although Trigg starts with preliminary considerations concerning individual memory, for which he refers to the history of philosophical contemplation of memory (45-52), he focuses on certain kinds of mnemonic phenomena besides everyday memory, which serves us well in most cases. These phenomena show

not the deficiency of memory but its inherently disturbing quality, insofar as it is embedded in place and thus shows a materiality, to which we are highly sensitive. Trigg understands our embodied selves as “the sites of a spatial history that is visible and invisible, present and absent” (ibid.). The concept of the uncanny functions an indication of something we are familiar with but which at the same time stays hidden. Trigg elaborates three distinct features of the uncanny, through which the difference between the familiar and the eerie unfamiliar becomes apparent:

(i) Because the origins of memory lie according to Trigg in the body, the materialization of memory seems to be an automatic appearance. The memory is “hidden” but not in the sense of habit as a particular form of unconscious memory. “[T]he body’s recollection of experience explicitly manifests itself to the subject as a ‘thing’ in the world, rather than an interwoven aspect of that subject’s history” (34). The body as the unconscious site of memory gains a certain sovereignty over the conscious subject. This becomes clear for example when we visit an unfamiliar place that evokes something from the past in the lived body. Trigg argues for a concept of human experience that is not (completely) defined by rationality and cognition (ii). Once we have that experience, we become aware of the body as something “having its own independent history and experiences” (35). It becomes an “automaton,” which comprises the danger of developing a relationship of estrangement to our bodies. The body becomes a being distinctly “other” to the “I”. The identification of myself with my body is at stake (iii). The last aspect points to the tension “between the body’s lived retention of a place and the prepersonal, anonymous existence of that place” (ibid.). When we return to a place once familiar from our past the effect is often alienation rather than reassurance. The reason for this is difficult to grasp, as Trigg admits, because opaque forces are always involved in the formation of our memories of places (36). The second and third part of the book are dedicated to the analysis of these forces. In order to effect this analysis, Trigg pursues a refinement of the experience of the uncanny. And here lies the strength of the book, in the richness of the individual analyses, in which we can observe Trigg’s practice of phenomenological disclosing. These analyses are used to support his genuine approach. The objects of his examinations are monuments—where the memory of place meets the collective memory of history—but also nostalgia, homesickness and trauma.

As mentioned above, the phenomenological tradition recognizes at least two main aspects in examination of memory: the relationship between imagination and memory, and the upholding of the past. Trigg’s book contributes to both aspects. The past can only be understood as entangled with place because Trigg understands place as “compressing time”. Time is given shape by place. Through this “act,” time gains materiality, and inasmuch as the places we have experienced are kept in our bodies, so is time, and we carry along our lived past (302). Throughout the book Trigg argues that memory has a life of its own. “The ‘thing’ that interbreeds with the recollection of an event is the anonymous life of memory, its animate and vital spark” (280). Here also lies Trigg’s answer to the question of how imagination relates to memory. Imagination is usually conceived as the origin of the images we use to make memories concrete, to shape our recollection. This is especially the case in voluntary attempts to remember. In this understanding, imagination has the role of an active retriever (66). Trigg, on the other hand, emphasizes “involuntary memory,” which becomes manifest in the body (177-8). This involuntary memory is the sedimented experience of the body itself (106-7). This sedimentation is possible because of a conflation of memory, place and imagination. Imagination becomes the living force of memory. Memory of place means being acquainted with certain places. Memory is our ability to dwell in the present; it plays the fundamental role of uniting the embodied self and the world. To remain acquainted with a place that changes, it is necessary for memory to adapt, to uphold this familiarity; otherwise “our memories remain alien to our experiences” (172). This adaption is due to imagination. But—and

this is the crucial point—this “modification” is an “unconscious force;” there can be “side effects” when memory and place are not aligned. This misalignment reveals itself in the alluded to affective phenomena. They are disruptions in dwelling.

A point at which Trigg's work might be criticized concerns his reinterpretation of imagination. Although he recognizes the epistemological dimension of imagination (67-70), he puts it aside; he widely neglects this dimension in the following chapters. There is, however, an inherent reason for this. In concentrating on the facticity of memory a focal shift of the epistemological problem occurs. The occurrence of the uncanny is a sign for the “partial wilderness of the world” (130-5), a sign for an “anonymous materiality” (XV, 218). Trigg uses Merleau-Ponty's notion of the “wild” or “brute being” and Husserl's concept of “morphological essences” to unfold that to which memory brings us in contact—a “prehuman world” (126-35). The “truth” about memory consists no longer in the question of whether our memories represent the past accurately, but in revealing memory's life—more precisely in revealing a materiality of the world that is untouched by cognition. That memory aligns the self with the world means that it helps to transfer the touch of the anonymous primordial materiality into the realm of consciousness.

Stefan W. Schmidt

Bergische Universität Wuppertal