

VI. New Power from the Art of Forgetting

1. FORGOTTEN SHADOWS AND A NEW MEMORY (CHAMISSO)

French
Revolution

For France, the French Revolution signified a destruction of historical memory whose effects on public life went far beyond what had up to that point been known in European history as the "condemnation of memory" (*damnatio memoriae*). Everything that reminded people of the ancien régime was now taboo, and forgetting was the first duty of the citizen. At the same time the revolutionaries quickly introduced the markers of a new memory that were supposed to make it easier to forget the old ones.

The first phase in this revolution of memory bore on the more or less ceremonial politeness that had struck particularly deep roots in France, the "center of politeness" (La Bruyère). Not only were monarchical titles and titles of nobility abolished but also the polite forms of address "Monsieur," "Madame," and "Mademoiselle" were replaced by "Citizen" (*citoyen, citoyenne*). In addition the polite distinction between the two forms of the second person, *vous* (formal) and *tu* (familiar), was supposed to be forgotten—along with many other ways of recalling the ancien régime that even the properly brought-up Mme de Staël counted among the forms of politeness that should be forgotten.¹

1. Part

Other areas to which republican forgetting was applied were the dimensions of space and time. So far as topography was concerned, all the "places of memory" (*lieux de mémoire*) of prerevolutionary times were to be condemned to oblivion, and along with them the historical provinces of France, with their rich traditions (Champagne, Burgundy, Provence), which were to be replaced by the newly introduced, geometrically drawn-up *départements*. It is characteristic of the associated strategy of forgetting that up into the twentieth century one of the most established memory exercises in the French republican school system was reciting by heart the names of the departments, in alphabetical order and if possible both forward and backward.²

2.

The revolution of memory in the organization of time was less enduring. In this case the ambitions were at first particularly far-reaching. The republican calendar introduced in 1793, which no longer counted time from the year of Christ's birth but rather from the first year of the republic, was intended to drive the memory of Christian holidays out of people's heads and at the same time implant the new republican holidays in the collective memory. Neither did the revolutionaries spare the mythologically

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and historically rooted names of the days of the weeks and the months. Thus during the Reign of Terror it was not Sunday but rather *décadi* (literally, "ten-day," the tenth day in the revolutionary decimal system of the weekdays) on which there were no executions, and it was not on 28 July but rather on 10 Thermidor that Robespierre himself was executed. In 1805 Napoleon abolished the revolutionary calendar. The attempts made by later dictators (Lenin, Mussolini, Hitler) to set the seal on their intended destruction of memory by instituting a radically or partially new calendar were also short-lived.³

What the French Revolution's destruction of memory might mean for an individual person can be seen by examining a historical and literary "case study." Let us turn, then, to the German writer Adelbert von Chamisso (1781–1838), a scion of an old French aristocratic family who was born in the château Boncourt in Champagne a few years before the revolution and given the name Louis Charles Adélaïde Chamisso de Boncourt.⁴ Although the aristocrats who lived in this castle were not strung up from lampposts by the revolutionaries, in 1792 they had to leave their family home and get out of the country. The twelve-year-old Chamisso went with them to Germany. The Edict of Nantes, which guaranteed French Protestants tolerance, had been revoked in 1685, and since then Germany had welcomed many emigrants from France, particularly Huguenots. Nonetheless, these years as refugees were difficult for members of the noble family, who were not able to return to France until after the end of the persecution of aristocrats.

The family's second-youngest son remained in Germany. After preparing himself by serving as a page (Thomas Mann called him a "noble boy," *Edelknabe*) in the entourage of Queen Friederike Louise, he joined the Prussian army as a young officer. He was no longer going by the name Louis but rather was calling himself by the good German name Ludwig, and he was about to fight against the French revolutionary army commanded by Napoleon. In the meantime he had learned the German language well and used all his free time reading German literature. This unmilitary activity aroused more suspicions among his Prussian comrades than did his French ancestry. However, during the siege of Hameln (1806)—where the commander of the fortress surrendered to the French attackers in a "cowardly" manner, without putting up a fight—he was able to prove his loyalty to Prussia. Adelbert von Chamisso (as he called himself from this point onward) seemed to have completely forgotten his French homeland and the memories associated with it. In fact, when a short time later it became possible for him to return to France, he showed no enduring inclination to do so and settled down to live his life in Germany.

This was, perhaps, deceptive. On his next trip to France, Chamisso visited his family's home at Boncourt. But his father's castle was no longer

there. After the noble family joined the emigration, the new masters put the castle up for sale. Since no buyer was found, the castle was torn down. Even the building stones were carried away, so that nothing remained to remind one of the former aristocratic owners. The aristocratic place of memory had become a symbol of republican forgetting.

Adelbert von Chamisso, standing sadly at this place, did not allow himself any bitter feelings against those who had carried out this work of forgetting, and least of all against the farmer who now cultivated the fields where the proud château Boncourt had once stood. However, in his memory the castle of his childhood appeared anew before his eyes, and he wrote—not immediately but rather many years later—in German and afterward also in French his finest poem, “Das Schloss Boncourt” (“Le Château Boncourt”):

*Ich träum als Kind mich zurücke,
Und schüttle mein greises Haupt;
Wie sucht ihr mich heim, ihr Bilder,
Die lang ich vergessen geglaubt?*

*Hoch ragt aus schattgen Gehegen
Ein schimmerndes Schloß hervor,
Ich kenne die Türme, die Zinnen,
Die steinerne Brücke, das Tor.*

*Es schauen vom Wappenschilde
Die Löwen so traulich mich an,
Ich grüße die alten Bekannten,
Und eile den Burghof hinan.*

*Dort liegt die Sphinx am Brunnen,
Dort grünt der Feigenbaum,
Dort, hinter diesen Fenstern,
Verträumt ich den ersten Traum.*

*Ich tret in die Burgkapelle
Und suche des Ahnherrn Grab,
Dort ists, dort hängt vom Pfeiler
Das alte Gewaffen herab.*

*Noch lesen umflort die Augen
Die Züge der Inschrift nicht,
Wie hell durch die bunten Scheiben
Das Licht darüber auch bricht.*

*So stehst du, o Schloß meiner Väter,
Mir treu und fest im Sinn,*

*Und bist von der Erde verschwinden,
Der Pflug geht über dich hin.*

*Sei fruchtbar, o teurer Boden,
Ich segne dich mild und gerührt,
Und segn ihn zwiefach, wer immer
Den Pflug nun über dich führt.*

*Ich aber will auf mich raffén,
Mein Saitenspiel in der Hand,
Die Weiten der Erde durchschweifén,
Und singen von Land zu Land.*

I dream I am a child again,
And shake my hoary locks;
How do you plague me, you images
I thought forgotten long ago?

From a shadowy preserve
A shimmering castle rises up,
I recognize towers, battlements,
The stone bridges, the heavy door.

The lions on the coat of arms
Regard me with familiar glances,
I greet old acquaintances,
And hasten to the castle court.

There lies the sphinx upon the well,
There the fig springs up anew,
Over there, behind those windows,
I dreamed my first dream.

I walk into the castle's chapel,
Seek my forefather's grave,
There it is, from the pillar
The ancient weapons hang.

The tear-filled eyes can no longer
Read the inscription's letters,
No matter how brightly the light
Falls through the colored panes.

You stand, O castle of my fathers,
True and solid in my mind,
And from the earth you've vanished,
The plow passes over you.

Be fertile, O cherished soil,
 With gentle feeling I bless you,
 And twice bless him who now
 Labors you with the plow.

I want to take possession of myself,
 And my lyre in my hand,
 Roam the wide world over,
 Singing from land to land.

The first stanzas of the poem can surely be read as a reconfirmation of the old prerevolutionary memory that seeks poetic expression, in spite of the republican command to forget it ("you images / I thought forgotten long ago"; *ihr Bilder, / die lang ich vergessen geglaubt*). The castle, with its towers and battlements, its coats of arms and weapons, its chapel and the ancient ancestor's grave, is still standing there as a shimmering but "true and solid" vision of the ancien régime. But a more comprehensive interpretation, more precisely in accord with Chamisso's intention, would see the poem as a poetic dialogue with forgetting. The real castle constructed of stone has disappeared from the earth, and where it once stood the farmer now plows up the soil. However, this farmer, along with the land that now belongs to him, is blessed by the poet "with gentle feeling" (in the French version, "with a serene heart," *d'un coeur serein*), thereby sanctioning his own rejection of the old aristocratic memory associated with land and possession, which he replaces with a new memory for himself.⁵

This new memory initially has a few characteristics typical of the scientific conceptions of his time. For Adelbert von Chamisso became a scientist, or to put it more precisely, a natural scientist. After studying medicine and various natural sciences at the University of Berlin, from 1815 to 1818 he participated, as an "independent scholar," in a natural science expedition that involved sailing around the world on the Russian ship *Rurik*. He later wrote a scientific report on this expedition and numerous scientific articles that were warmly received by scholars in the field. He had the honor of being invited to serve as the curator of the Royal Gardens in Berlin, and this suggests the prestige acquired among scientists by this "justly distinguished naturalist" (Charles Darwin). It is understandable that in the report on his trip around the world this man could write: "I shall not be so vain as to recall our past history, in which a nobility developed to which my father belonged. . . . I am a man of the future. . . . Let the past go its way, since it is past."⁶

Is this an acknowledgment that forgetfulness is the motive force behind scientific innovation? Chamisso's conception of science is not nearly so unequivocal. He tries hard to give memory a respected place in scientific

knowledge, not objecting, for example, when one colleague named a species of California lupine (*Lupinus chamissonis*) in his honor and another named a Brazilian species of butterfly (*Papilio chamissonis*) after him. Chamisso was no less proud of the fact that during the *Rurik* expedition an island near the Bering Strait as well as a group of islands in the Caroline archipelago were named after him. We are therefore justified in taking Chamisso literally when in his first report on the expedition he writes that he sees this publication as his scientific masterwork and hopes that it will make a name for him that will prevent him from being forgotten by posterity.⁷ Finally, we should mention the scientific achievement that won the greatest recognition for Chamisso as a scientist: the discovery of generational changes in salps. Salps—as a modern encyclopedia informs us, with a respectful reference to Chamisso—belong to a species of small marine animals known as tunicates that reproduce both sexually and asexually. Because of this and other contributions to the memory storehouse of the natural sciences, and especially to Linnaean nomenclature, there is a not-insignificant Chamisso-memory, which can well withstand comparison with the social-standing memory of an aristocratic family. In every individual case it is clear that with a relevant discovery or other original achievement a new memory series is initiated, so that just as Chamisso said of his own paper on salps: "It creates something new."⁸

At this point we should surely let this innovative memory of Chamisso remain a simple episode in history of scientific terminology, were it not that Adelbert von Chamisso, as every lover of literature knows, also wrote *Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte* (*Peter Schlemihl's Strange Story*) in 1813 and published it in 1814 (that is, *before* his great expedition).⁹ In this "fable" (as Chamisso calls it), which could also be called a "fairy tale" (*Märchen*, as his friend Hitzig called it) or a modern myth (Denis de Rougemont), the problem of remembering and forgetting is taken up once again, and this time in relation to an archetypal figure. The unfortunate hero of this story is a man whose shadow has been bought by the devil and who must henceforth live without it. This hero's name is Schlemihl, one that signifies, in the Jewish-Yiddish narrative tradition that goes back to the Talmud, a kind of person who—forgotten by every kind of luck and perhaps by God—attracts trouble like a magnet, and this is his downfall.

At the beginning of Chamisso's remarkable story as Peter Schlemihl arrives, destitute except for a letter of recommendation to a certain Mr. Thomas John, in a north German harbor city, perhaps Hamburg, he is a nobody but not yet a schlemihl. Peter Schlemihl moves uncomprehendingly through the elegant society that has assembled in the garden around

Story
of
man
who trades
his
shadow
to the
devil
in exchange
for money

the rich Mr. John and his beloved Fanny. Schlemihl receives an explanation of the kind of society he encounters here for the first time; in the cynical words of Mr. John: "Anyone who hasn't at least a million . . . is, if I may say so, a scoundrel!"

In this situation the devil appears in the form of an inconspicuous man in a gray coat and offers to make a deal: a constantly full purse (*Fortunati Glückssäckel*) and everything that money can buy, in exchange for a shadow that amounts to nothing and that is, after all—the devil concedes this much—"a very, very beautiful shadow." For a time Peter Schlemihl becomes the devil's unofficial collaborator.

Before we ask what this shadow and its loss mean for Peter Schlemihl we must first have a closer look at the devil with whom he has made this pact. He is, as all the descriptions of him clearly show, a rather unprepossessing devil, a devil almost completely without qualities since even the few characteristics that distinguish him—"a quiet, thin, gaunt, tallish, elderly man" in a "coat of the old Franconian style, in gray taffeta" with "unassuming, even humble demeanor"—are only signs of his lack of qualities. What is, however, particularly striking if we compare him with the great, named devils in world history and literary history—Lucifer, Beelzebub, Leviathan, Asmodeus, Mephistopheles—is that he does not have a name. He is named only "the gray one" (*der Graue*), and even this identification can be read as a mere symbol of his namelessness. A nameless devil, then, an anonymous officer in hell's secret service, takes control of Peter Schlemihl's shadow, but in all this he retains an infallible memory, in which no inscription of guilt is forgotten. It is in this way that the memory potential of this name first develops even in his debtor, so that the man called Peter Schlemihl becomes a schlemihl in the "true sense of the word."

In the context Chamisso sketches out we can call Schlemihl's lost shadow his "collective memory," to use a relatively unspecific and moreover anachronistic expression. This expression was coined in the 1920s by Maurice Halbwachs, and since then it has become central to contemporary research on memory.¹⁰ It is based on the obvious fact that an individual memory is in no way completely unique to the individual in question but rather is shaped by many other social memories in accord with the habits of each family, landscape, professional group, class, religion, and other social groups. At its core it therefore conceals what Chamisso himself, asked by Schlemihl's shadow, calls its "solid" element and what Thomas Mann was later to explain, in his fine essay on Chamisso, as his "bourgeois solidity."¹¹ However, Chamisso tells us almost nothing concrete about Peter Schlemihl's earlier life; it is as if a veil of oblivion had been laid over it. But all the characters in the story immediately notice that this man—who, because he is rich, does not remain unnoticed—lacks a shadow, and they take spontaneous offense at this stigma. The ones who

take the most offense are the young and beautiful Mina and her conservative family, who cannot imagine having a son-in-law without a shadow, no matter how rich he is. He is not granted the favor of a collective forgetfulness.

That Schlemihl's shadow must have something to do with memory and forgetting is clear from the history of this literary theme. Chamisso writes in an anecdotal way that once when he was on a trip his hat, saddlebag, gloves, snuff-cloth, and all the other things he had with him were mislaid. When his friend the writer Friedrich de La Motte Fouqué—who was of French Huguenot descent—heard of this, he asked Chamisso in a teasing way whether he had also lost his shadow. Both men laughed, and together they imagined such a misfortune. This peculiar event was the seed from which the novella grew.¹²

Now this is no doubt an amusing anecdote that can even be taken as a true story, though it does not diminish its cleverness to see in it something more than a rather amusing expression of momentary forgetfulness. This anecdote can be connected with a dream or nightmare that descended on Chamisso a few years later, after he had written *Schlemihl*, and that apparently tormented him.¹³ The nightmare carried Chamisso back to the period when he was serving in the Prussian army. In the dream he is a young officer who has to take part in a parade; to his dismay he notices that he has forgotten his sword. According to the ideas of the time this is a far more serious kind of forgetting than the one mentioned in the earlier anecdote; the latter is probably forgivable since it concerned only the belongings a "civilian" happened to have with him. However, for an officer, which Chamisso once was, forgetting his sword is an unforgivable kind of forgetfulness that affects his honor and makes forgetting a source of guilt.

Translated into civilian terms, this is how things stand with Peter Schlemihl, who has not simply "lost" his shadow. He has given it to the devil in exchange for money, and this is seen by those around him as a stigma, that is, as a visible sign of his exclusion. However, we should not overlook the fact that Schlemihl's loss of his shadow does not mean that his soul is lost as well. In contradistinction to Faust's pact with the devil, Schlemihl has sold "only" his shadow and not his immortal soul, and it speaks well for him that he does not buy his way out of this first guilt by contracting a second, still greater one. Although he remains a schlemihl he does not become the devil's schlemihl, in contrast to Mr. John, who had not only become one of the devil's victims before Peter Schlemihl did but had—apparently also by way of the transfer of his shadow—also ultimately handed over his soul. Now Mr. John is paying the price of his terrible transaction in the beyond, and at the end of the story we hear his lament as a distant echo of the *lex talionis* in Dante's *Inferno*: "Justly am I judged by God's judgment" (*Iusto iudicio Dei iudicatus sum*).

Dracula's
Mina?

Peter Schlemihl's path does not lead to hell. Nevertheless he does not succeed in canceling the "halfway" deal with the devil. Thus he must live the rest of his life without a shadow and see to it that this lack remains as inconspicuous as possible. It is extremely interesting to observe the way in which this happens—in narratological terms, how under these conditions the author tells the rest of his story. Chamisso comes up with a denouement that no open-minded reader would anticipate. He has the henceforth permanently shadowless Peter Schlemihl become what he himself is: a natural scientist. As an "independent scholar" (*privatisierender Gelehrter*), as Schlemihl styles himself, he enters on a "new way of life" (*neue Lebensweise*). However, the transition to this new way of life is obscured by some strange, fairy-tale elements—in particular by the seven-league boots Schlemihl finds by accident and with which he strides through the world with breathtaking speed, and by their counterpart, the braking shoes he can use when he needs to slow down his movement. In response to those who object to these strange but practical kinds of footwear, one must point out that they constitute a simple but fantastically effective time-and-space machine that anticipates many of the temporal utopias of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Schlemihl uses these two aids to the highly realistic goal (now long since an everyday event) of rapidly moving back and forth between continual field research on every continent and peaceful desk work in a secluded place. In short, as a researcher he pursues his goals quite rationally, in approximately the way that modern scientific practice requires.

The most surprising thing about this turn of events in the story is that as a natural scientist Schlemihl's lack of a shadow, which has previously marked him for discrimination, is no longer noticed and simply forgotten by society. Peter Schlemihl's remarkable story can therefore end, again in an unforeseeable way, with the soberly objective report that the independent scholar Schlemihl gives the author, the independent scholar Chamisso, on the last page:

Ich habe, soweit meine Stiefel gereicht, die Erde, ihre Gestaltung, ihre Höhen, ihre Temperatur, ihre Atmosphäre in ihrem Wechsel, die Erscheinungen ihrer magnetischen Kraft, das Leben auf ihr, besonders im Pflanzenreich, gründlicher kennengelernt, also vor mir irgendein Mensch. Ich habe die Tatsachen mit möglichster Genauigkeit in klarer Ordnung aufgestellt in mehreren Werken, mein Folgerungen und Ansichten flüchtig in einigen Abhandlungen niedergelegt. Ich habe . . .

So far as my boots have been able to take me, I have come to know the earth, its form, its heights, its temperature, its changing atmosphere, the phenomena of its magnetic power, the life that teems upon it, especially in the realm of plants, more fundamentally than any other man before me. In

a series of works, I have set forth the facts in clear order, as precisely as possible, and cursorily noted down my conclusions and opinions in a few articles. I have . . .

Happy, peaceful science, in which a man can exist just as well with or without a shadow, recalling the past or forgetting it, and move through the world! One need have no fear of the devil if this fairy tale becomes reality.

2. A MEPHISTOPHELIAN ART: FAUST'S FORGETTING (GOETHE)

Now we move to the workroom of another scientist, Heinrich Faust, Goethe's Faust.¹ The learned professor is at the apex of his career; he is a "great man." Nevertheless he is fundamentally unsatisfied with himself and with his intellectual efforts. His scientific knowledge seems to him "learning's fetid fume" (*Wissensqualm*), his efforts to discover things mere "verbiage-mongering" (*und tu' nicht mehr in Worten kramen*), his laboratory a "dank frowsty cabinet" (*verflüchtetes dumpfes Mauerloch*):

*Vor mir verschließt sich die Natur.
Des Denkens Faden ist zerrissen,
Mir ekelt lange vor allem Wissen.*

... I pry
At Nature's bolted doors in vain.
The web of thought is all in slashes,
All knowledge long turned dust and ashes.

This is clearly the kind of serious crisis of meaning and creative work we encounter in the biographies of many scientists and scholars, but in Faust's case it reaches into the deepest strata of his existence.

Faust is on the point of committing suicide, but it is Easter morning, and the ringing of the bells and a chorus of angels announcing the Resurrection prevent him from doing so. More precisely, since for him no faith is associated with these Easter tidings he is saved by the memory of his care-free childhood and youth that these sounds awaken in him:

*Und doch, an diesen Klang von Jugend auf gewöhnt,
Ruft er auch jetzt zurück mich in das Leben.*

.....
*Erinnerung hält mich nun, mit kindlichem Gefühle,
Vom letzten, ersten Schritt zurück.*