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Andrea Frisch, *Forgetting Differences. Tragedy, Historiography and the French Wars of Religion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, « Edinburgh Critical Studies in Renaissance Culture », 2015. X + 174 pp. Notes, and index. ISBN 978-0-7486-9439-6

Review Essay by Kathleen Long, Cornell University

What happens when one makes the memory of horrific events a crime, rather than the events themselves? When one persecutes those who record events, rather than those who have instigated them? This highly original and insightful study takes on the concept of *oubliance*, which, in the context of the Wars of Religion, signals a deliberate act of forgetting, one called for in royal edicts of peace from the Edict of Amboise of 1563 to the Edict of Nantes in 1598. The reach of this concept, which as Frisch demonstrates, became a comprehensive cultural project, is extensive. Before the crucial work of Denis Crouzet on the massacres of Saint Bartholomew's Day, it was not always easy to find significant historical work on these massacres or even on the violence of the Wars of Religion more broadly taken, in spite of the extensive rediscovery and re-edition of the works of Simon Goulart, Jean Crespin, and Théodore Agrippa d'Aubigné in the nineteenth century. Much work has been done since then, but only recently have scholars taken on the links between these wars and the development of French neoclassical theatre in particular. Christian Biet and Michael Meere have done much to introduce the rest of us to the relationship between the wars and the production of remarkably bloody literary works such as *histoires tragiques* and pre-classical French theatre.

What Frisch brings to this table is a carefully analyzed and argued connection between the project of *oubliance*, of erasing these wars from memory, and developments in legislative, historical, and literary productions, rightly presented as inextricably intertwined. Her cautious avoidance of overtly polemical works directs the study mostly towards either Catholic or moderate "Politique" views of the wars, with occasional mentions of the Protestant versions of history, such as that of Henri Lancelot Voisin La Popelinière.

The central question of the book is "how were the politics of *oubliance* to be translated into a royally sanctioned practice of collective memory?" (p. 5). *Oubliance* is not just a question of learning to forget, but of learning what had to be forgotten and what not, of learning how to remember in a way guided by political expediency and by royal authority.

Frisch sets this deliberate royal project carefully within a discussion of the "cultural terrain" that privileged memory over forgetting, which made the vast project of *oubliance* seem quixotic. Nowhere is this more evident than in the performative dimension of forgetting in the edicts: the Edict of Nantes had to be read in public "long after its promulgation" (p. 9). The irony of having to remind the French to forget is not lost on this reader, who wonders what the effect of being constantly reminded to forget might have actually had on the memories of those addressed. As Michel de Montaigne suggested, the desire to forget imprints the memory more

vividly in a person's mind (pp. 10-11). As Frisch makes clear, this paradox necessitates an "ongoing process that required the elaboration of new ways of thinking about the past" (p. 11). She demonstrates how this elaboration is critical to the development of the concept of the French nation; arguably, it is central to our concept of modern France, and the beginning of this process can be seen as the long break between early modern and modern ways of thinking about the relationship between the state and social institutions. But Frisch does not overreach in this way, focusing more precisely on the period of transition itself, and the new ways of thinking about law, history, and literature that the concept of *oubliance* elicits. This concept accompanies a shift from religious approaches to the differences that inform the ongoing wars, to political and legislative ones.

Frisch's elegant insights into the paradox of enforced *oubliance* are seconded by equally elegant analyses of the problematic choices faced by political authorities. Her understanding that the attempt to resolve differences through persuasion would "aim toward the elimination of the Huguenot community as such" (p. 26), just as much as violent repression of that community would do, is an important insight: the existence of a different, one could say unassimilated, religious community within France was only assured by the *place de sûreté* established in certain of the accords that marked the end of one or another religious war. But this state within a state was unacceptable in the long run, and the continued elimination of these safe spaces, not only for Protestant worship but also for their very existence, doomed the cause of religious diversity in France. The establishment of the modern French state is thus dependent both on the shift of power from Church to the monarch, and a concomitant repression of religious diversity, from the Protestant perspective a devil's bargain. The shift from royal pardon to a less divinely inflected amnesty dependent on a sort of willful amnesia is beautifully delineated in Frisch's study.

As Frisch points out, the all-encompassing nature of these laws necessarily render their execution virtually impossible. " 'Everything' simply cannot be subject to legislation" (p. 36), and the vagueness of these laws makes it impossible to enforce them. What happens is not a silencing of history, but careful rewriting, for example in the case of Henri IV, whose past as a Protestant prince must be revised in order to confirm him as a truly Catholic king. Frisch's nuanced analysis of the use of Julius Caesar in this project of rewriting history provides a superb case study.

The discussion of historical responses to this call for *oubliance* frames them in the context of a sustained discussion among historiographers, returning to the question of memory, and taking on that of the relationship between the goals of teaching (*enseigner*) and moving (*esmouvoir*). The latter effect is seen as more likely to lead to action in the world, and thus valued by historians such as Jacques Amyot, but it carries risks that lead other historians to strive for a more neutral manner of representing history. Here, Frisch draws the connection between the critical methods of jurists and the evolution of this more neutral method of historical writing, using the evolution of Henri Lancelot Voisin de la Popelinière's work as the basis for a broader discussion of early modern historiography. She notes also that there is a sustained discussion concerning the historian's project in relation to the past, the present, and to posterity. Since distance is necessary in order to achieve this more neutral form of history, the concept of a posterity that will have this distance becomes an integral part of discussions of history. Also,

theorists such as Jean Bodin call for a self-distancing from the work, allowing “history to speak for itself” (p. 79). History must be pared down “to the bedrock of what could be expected to gain widespread assent” (p. 80). Of course, the most “widespread assent” would be that of the victors, as Agrippa d’Aubigné points out in a letter to Simon Goulart. Frisch notes that it is hard to separate emotional rhetoric from the representation of the horrific violence of these wars. Both in tragic theatre and in official historiography, the work created is never “a mere tool of royal propaganda” (p. 94).

While the work of the first three chapters of this study is impressive, the fourth chapter most clearly demonstrates the definitive nature of Frisch’s project, as she delineates the complex relationships between history and tragedy at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth centuries in France, combining analyses of the theories of tragedy that were in play in this period with the wide range of practices. The question of whether tragedy should instruct on matters of virtue and vice, or whether it should move spectators to action, connects discussions of tragedy to those of history. Tragedy can elicit polemical and vengeful responses, or serve as a means of conciliation. Frisch rightly points out that the notion of tragedy exceeds “the confines of any poetic genre or theatrical space” (p. 116); it impacts the nascent genres of the short story as well as the longer tales known as *nouvelles* or as *histoires tragiques* when they take on this more serious aspect, as well as epic poetry. In the case of Robert Garnier’s works, tragic theatre does not resolve the conflicts of the day by means of recourse to tales from ancient history or mythology, but leaves the reader in a state of suspension of judgment; this lack of moral closure draws the reader into the chaotic violence of the wars. The project of *oubliance* is far from the realm of tragedy at the end of the sixteenth century.

But seventeenth century tragedy undertakes the task of containing and controlling this chaos by means of a distancing between the reader/ spectator and the events on the stage, which Frisch presents as a movement from emotion, which would move the audience to action, and affect, which leaves the audience in the domain of pure feeling, mostly pleasure. The goal is to use this affect to “positive moral ends,” and undoubtedly to pacification and to the behavior of an ideal subject. If the theatrical illusion is effective, the spectator forgets himself (something that does not happen in either Garnier’s tragedies or in Agrippa d’Aubigné’s epic poem, *Les Tragiques*, in which the reader is constantly addressed and forced to an uneasy self-consciousness in the moments of greatest violence), and engages in what Frisch calls “depersonalized pleasure” (p. 157). Emotion becomes the “very thing that unifies the French public” as it pities those who are not part of its circuit (this mechanism does seem to resemble René Girard’s concept of the scapegoat and of the purpose of sacrifice). Theater becomes the site where emotions are “circumscribed and contained” (p. 159), and where conflict is redirected to an outside location, either in the past or in geographic distance. As Frisch points out, the culmination of this reworking of tragedy into what we now know as its “classical” form is accompanied by a will not merely to forget the past wars, but also “to deny the very existence of confessional difference in France” (p. 165).

This study is foundational in its interdisciplinary scope, bringing together in a carefully crafted argument the effect of the complex concept of *oubliance* on the evolution of both theories and practice of legislative and judicial functions, the writing of history, and early modern tragedy. Erudite in its scholarship, and woven from a wide range of sources, it nonetheless focuses

clearly on a crucial concept for the early development of institutions that carry us into what we call modernity. It is my fervent hope that this work will lead to more work of its kind, and even a very different kind of work, that looks at the flipside of this concept. It is hard, when reading discussions of these theorizations of forgetting, not to think of the psychoanalytic concepts of repression and trauma, and of what is at stake when deliberate forgetting is thwarted by involuntary memories. It is also hard to ignore the Protestant refusal of this call for *oubliance*, expressed with a clear understanding of what is at stake in silencing accounts of these events. It is easy for those in power to call for a forgetting of past ills, for a dissolution of “places de sûreté” in the wake of the past wars, but Protestants saw silence as the equivalent of death. When Agrippa d’Aubigné states, “There is a great need for posterity to know our stories in our own voices,” he is gesturing towards the fact that the call for silence and *oubliance* in royal edicts is not a neutral, but rather a neutralizing stance, wiping away misdeeds. To my mind, we should also think about the ethical import of evacuating questions of guilt and innocence during and after an era of horrific violence. Is this actually collective justice, or really more selective in its scope? These questions have a huge importance even in present-day debates over responses to mass violence and religious differences. Frisch suggests the problematic nature of this use of forgetting as a tool to achieve stability of state and society; may her rich and suggestive work inspire more such studies. And may we, with Agrippa d’Aubigné, consider the alternative to forgetting:

On dit qu’il faut couler les execrables choses
 Dans les puits de l’oubli et au sepulcre encloses,
 Et que par les escrits le mal resuscité
 Infectera les mœurs de la posterité:
 Mais le vice n’a point pour mere la science,
 Et la vertu n’est pas fille de l’ignorance;
 Elle est le chaud fumier sous qui les ords pechez
 S’engraissent en croissant s’ils ne sont arrachez,
 Et l’acier des vertus mesme intellectuelles
 Tranche et detruit l’erreur, et l’histoire par elles.
 Mieux vaut à descouvert monstrier l’infection
 Avec sa puanteur et sa punition.

(*Les Tragiques*, “Princes,” 1083-1094)

In the long period of repeated and violent civil conflict that was the nineteenth century in France, Charles Baudelaire unearthed this passage, and used the first six lines as the epigraph to his first edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. As Barbara Diefendorf has said, “Injury has a long memory.”[1] Even when it has been forgotten.

NOTE

[1] Barbara Diefendorf, “Waging Peace: Memory, Identity, and the Edict of Nantes,” in *Religious Differences in France, Past and Present*, Kathleen P. Long, ed. (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies, 2006), 19.

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