

H-France Forum

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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 by Ullrich Langer, University of Wisconsin-Madison

We are all familiar with the opening sentence of the Edict of Nantes, the culmination of a series of similar attempts at pacification, exhorting subjects of the king to forget all things that happened on either side of the conflict, as if they had never happened at all. It is entirely counter to our modern drive to remember conflicts, to not let the memory of atrocities die, to give the victims a voice that transcends their lives, to base reconciliation of opposing parties not on silence and amnesia, but on truth-telling, on trials, on memorials, on documentation and museums. Sixteenth-century and early seventeenth-century French royal policy was, on the contrary, one of *oubliance*, a *devoir d'oubli*, not a *devoir de mémoire*. In her study Andrea Frisch takes this policy of forgetting outside of the strictly juridical domain, and looks first at how the role of the pacifying king evolved from one who pardons to one who imposes *oubliance*. Then she examines several versions of historiography of the period which deal in different ways with the conflicts and attempt to respond to if not actually apply the practice of forgetting. Finally, she posits--and here I willfully exaggerate her claims--seventeenth-century classicism, incarnated in tragedy, as the ultimate response to *oubliance*, since it distances itself from the local, from recent history and its explicit, physical violence. Classicism's ambition of universality is a way of washing out the gore of real massacres and wars waiting to be revived. I exaggerate because Frisch's book itself generally remains close to the details and many broader claims, especially as regarding historiography, are subject to much careful hesitation.

This book is not about actual historical causality, that is, it does not record the ways in which any kind of "amnesia" was really enforced, on the models of book censorship, removal of documentation from local archives, explicit prohibition of cases to be brought forward, and so forth. It might have been useful to give some sense of the mechanisms of such enforcement. I suspect that those mechanisms, once one leaves the strictly juridical sphere, were spotty at best, and might not have been a powerful incentive for writers of drama and history, especially if they considered their public, thanks to printing, to be not only the present but future generations less likely to be riled up by memories of the civil conflicts. Of course, some of them were dependent on patronage, royal or otherwise. But what does it mean to have a royal policy--Frisch calls it a "régime"--of *oubliance* and for it to be truly effective?

Frisch opens her historical discussion with a long analysis of an address by André de Nesmond given in Nérac in 1600, published as "L'Amnestie, ou l'assoupissement des injures passées..." in a collection of remonstrances and opening speeches in 1617. The importance given to this address might have merited its reproduction in an appendix, as Frisch is obliged to summarize points made by Nesmond and the reader sometimes would have wished to see the original

language. Among these points is the clear distinction between *oubliance* and pardon: pardon or clemency require an acknowledgment by the perpetrator of his malfeasance, and, one might add, pardon often follows an actual trial. Forgetting, on the other hand, forgoes the judicial procedure, which in the case of the religious wars would likely be interminable and certainly make the violence more memorable. Nesmond also characterizes the civil conflicts as “tragic” and links them to ancient tragedy.

The following section begins with an intriguing argument: since the Calvinists rejected the notion that divine grace was given in exchange for human good works, and held that grace could only be given gratuitously, they similarly would reject any exchange of good behavior for royal grace. In other words, royal pardon that assumes an acknowledgment of guilt and amended behavior on the part of the guilty protestants would be seen by the Calvinists as an exchange similar to the reviled Catholic notion of human merit obtaining grace. Hence, according to Frisch, the “discourse of royal pardon” experienced an “erosion” and the “discourse of amnesty is used with more and more frequency in royal policy on religious conflicts” (p. 35). While I follow the logic of this argument, since royal and divine favor or grace frequently were seen analogously, it assumes that Catholic royal policy modeled itself on what the Protestants wrote about pardon and grace. Is it not more likely to posit, as Frisch seems to indicate elsewhere, that the extent of the conflicts was such that the discourse of pardon became useless, and that a wide-spread policy of *oubliance* came to be thought as more effective and as able to maintain the sense that the kingdom was still united and “concord” was still achievable?

Frisch traces the language of forgetting the St Bartholomew’s massacre in royal edicts, and focuses then on the panegyric of Henri IV that consisted in comparing him with Julius Caesar, noted for his victory in a civil war and for his strategic use of clemency to consolidate his reign. Both Caesar and Henri IV come off better, understandably, in these circumstances.

The following chapter follows the complexities of historiography: recent history as a humanist school of prudence, with examples chosen to increase the possibility of vicarious experience and mastery of contingency, was one alternative (Jacques Amyot). Conciliatory history can be conceived of as addressing posterity, not a contemporary audience, creating a distance even from recent events. History as the workings of fortuitous vicissitudes and tragic reversals becomes increasingly attractive (Pierre Matthieu). The spectator can be represented as the one who witnesses the shipwreck at sea and remains touched but serene, à la Lucretius. Historiography thus conceived induces emotion but not action; while this is not forgetting as such, at least it is not a call to recommence the conflicts.

The final two sections of Frisch’s book concern more literary topics. The first concerns both discourse about tragedy (Jean de la Taille, Pierre de Laudun d’Aigaliers), which insists on the truth of tragic action, polemical literature using the motif of tragedy to draw the reader into the action and revenge (Jean le Masle, Jean le Frere de Laval), and tragedy designed to do the same (Pierre Matthieu’s *Guisiade*, and Richard-Jean de Nérée’s *Le triomphe de la Ligue*, about which I would have liked to see more, and for whom no bibliographical reference is given in the book). Frisch gives a fresh take on the most famous of the period’s tragedians, Robert Garnier, by emphasizing the inconclusiveness and lack of justice in his plays, which end up being a

collective lament; a similar sense of complete contingency is found in Jean de Serres's *Histoire des choses memorables*. The final chapter argues that tragedy and its conceptualization (La Taille, Vauquelin de la Fresnaye) move from the drama as producing emotion, aiming to *émouvoir* (and provoking action) to tragedy as producing mere affect, consuming itself in the audience and not propelling to action. This can certainly be argued for most of classical seventeenth-century tragedy.

I should emphasize the complexity of this book, both in terms of the type of texts studied and the types of arguments deployed. Frisch has looked at a very wide range of material, only some of which I was able to mention. Each of the chapters could have been developed into a separate book; the condensed presentation leaves me wishing for more time spent on the individual texts. At the same time, Frisch's honest attentiveness to the particularities of and contrasts between the texts makes it more difficult to say that *oubliance* inspired a systematic response and also, perhaps, more difficult to say that *oubliance* was a "régime." This book has given us all many new avenues of reflection on conflict resolution in history, and on the role of what we call "literature" in such resolution.

A final note. Edinburgh University Press has done an attractive job; I do have a plea, however, for the editors. The policy of putting (in this case, very lengthy) endnotes directly at the end of each chapter, instead of at the end of the book or at the bottom of each page, makes for uncomfortable reading. There is no bibliography; its usual substitute, a comprehensive index, is extremely short and incomplete, limiting the value of this book as a reference guide. This is all the more disappointing in that Andrea Frisch has done the sort of admirable interdisciplinary study that mobilizes often little-known sources from many different areas of early modern culture.

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