Bryce Hickerty T00242104 Reading Log 8

I found Lynn Abrams chapter on memory and oral history to be very informative and relevant to my own research in its exploration of the nature of memory. Abrams discusses the reliability of memory and the tendency for memories to be constructed based on the conclusions found in the wider world1. For instance, Abrams mentions that many women who lived through the 1950s when interviewed about the era will point to the miniskirt as an important marker of change. Abrams argues, however, that this recollection is not merely the result of individual observation, but reflects the public memory of that era which held the miniskirt as an important symbol. That is, the recollections of these women were framed by their understanding of the past and the importance of the miniskirt in this past, and not simply the reflection of their infallible memories2. This understanding of memory I think is applicable to the memoir of A. May. For instance, May throughout her memoir mentions many key events and important dates, such as the date Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated3, the date women gained the vote in Canada4. That is not to say that May did not remember these events, but that May’s memory was informed by her knowledge at the time of writing her memoir in 1984. Thus, May’s knowledge of the importance of these events retroactively may have prompted her to include them in her writing about her own life, rather than these events profoundly affecting her at the time of their happening.

As well, Abrams assertion that memory may reflect the degree of the subjects participation in a particular activity (in the case of Abrams article she uses the example of a workers recollection of her work in a woollen mill)5 I think is also relevant to my own research. That is, as in Abrams example where memory is highly influenced by individual experience in a given task, I believe that there is a strong argument for this finding in the memoir of A. May as well. For instance, Mays vivid and detailed recollections of her early home life on the farm may well reflect this principle. That is, since May did have so many experiences and memories which centered around these childhood homes, this is perhaps contributes to why her memoir focuses so heavily on this time in her life while giving relatively little detail to other periods of her life. As well, perhaps it is a reflection of the unstable and inconsistent daily activities of May during these less vividly described times in her life which are reflected in the lack of description of these periods6.

Ricoeur’s chapter “The Reality of the Past” I think is also a very relevant article to my own topic. I found especially interesting her analysis of historical work as merely a representation of the past. In her view, historical work merely stands for or attempts to represent the truth of the past, and it formed through a complex interaction between the historian and their world. The past, or our perception of it, is merely “an abstraction”6.That is to say, memory merely represents the actual past, while not revealing it in its true form. To Ricoeur then, there is no truly knowable reality of the past, and all work which attempts to make such an assessment merely approximates the past. To Ricoeur, historical work cannot be understood without also considering the distance between the time of writing about history and the time in which the historical writing occurs8. History then is a process whereby the past is understood through the present, reflecting not only the actual truly remembered past, but also the life which frames the analysis of this past as well as the collective conscious of the past. That is, in creating a historical work or memoir such as A. May’s, the historian or memoir writer by design interprets the past through this lens of the present, their thoughts reflecting the wider world and the truth of their experience, as well as the subject’s own personal journey and interpretation of it.

Endnotes

1. Abrams L. “Memory,” in Oral History Theory, London: Routledge: 2010, 78.
2. Ibid, 79.
3. Henry, A.M., This is NOT a Fairy Tale, Owen Sound, 1983, part 2, 41.
4. Ibid, 39.
5. Abrams L. “Memory,” in Oral History Theory, London: Routledge: 2010, 87.
6. Henry, A.M., This is NOT a Fairy Tale, Owen Sound, 1983, parts 1 and 2.
7. Ricoeur, P. “The Reality of the Past,” in Time and Narrative (Volume 3), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988, 156.
8. Ibid, 155.

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