

# 1. Individual Memory and Collective Memory

## Comparing Testimony

We appeal to witnesses to corroborate or invalidate, as well as supplement what we somehow know already about an event that in many other details remains obscure. One witness we can always call on is ourself. When a person says, I don't believe my own eyes, he feels himself two beings. A sensory being comes to testify like a witness to what it has seen before a self which has not presently seen what is in question, but which may have seen it in the past or formed an opinion from the testimony of others. When we return to a city previously visited, what we perceive helps us to restore a picture, certain portions of which had been forgotten. If what we currently see fits into the framework of our old memories, the converse is also true, for these memories adapt to the mass of present perceptions. It is as if we were comparing the testimony of several witnesses. In spite of discrepancies, they agree on the essentials that permit us to reconstruct a body of remembrances that we recognize.

Our confidence in the accuracy of our impression increases, of course, if it can be supported by others' remembrances also. It is as if the very same experience were relived by several persons instead of only one. When we meet a friend after a long separation, we at

first have difficulty re-establishing contact with him. However, as we recall together various circumstances related to the same events, recollections that may not agree, haven't we managed to think and remember in common and don't past events stand out more sharply? Don't we believe that we relive the past more fully because we no longer represent it alone, because we see it now as we saw it then, but through the eyes of another as well?

Our memories remain collective, however, and are recalled to us through others even though only we were participants in the events or saw the things concerned. In reality, we are never alone. Other men need not be physically present, since we always carry with us and in us a number of distinct persons. I arrive for the first time in London and take walks with different companions. An architect directs my attention to the character and arrangement of city buildings. A historian tells me why a certain street, house, or other spot is historically noteworthy. A painter alerts me to the colors in the parks, the lines of the palaces and churches, and the play of light and shadow on the walls and façades of Westminster and on the Thames. A businessman takes me into the public thoroughfares, to the shops, bookstores, and department stores. Even if I were unaccompanied, I need only have read their varying descriptions of the city, been given advice on what aspects to see, or merely studied a map. Now suppose I went walking alone. Could it be said that I preserve of that tour only individual remembrances, belonging solely to me? Only in appearance did I take a walk alone. Passing before Westminster, I thought about my historian friend's comments (or, what amounts to the same thing, what I have read in history books). Crossing a bridge, I noticed the effects of perspective that were pointed out by my painter friend (or struck me in a picture or engraving). Or I conducted my tour with the aid of a map. Many impressions during my first visit to London—St. Paul's, Mansion House, the Strand, or the Inns of Court—reminded me of Dickens' novels read in childhood, so I took my walk with Dickens. In each of these moments I cannot say that I was alone, that I reflected alone, because I had put myself in thought into this or that group, composed of myself and the architect (or, beyond him, the group for

which he was merely the interpreter), the painter (or his group), the land surveyor who had designed the layout of the city, or the novelist. Other men have had these remembrances in common with me. Moreover, they help me to recall them. I turn to these people, I momentarily adopt their viewpoint, and I re-enter their group in order to better remember. I can still feel the group's influence and recognize in myself many ideas and ways of thinking that could not have originated with me and that keep me in contact with it.

### Forgetting Due to Separation from a Group

Witnesses in the ordinary sense of the word—individuals physically present to the senses—are therefore not necessary to confirm or recall a remembrance. Moreover, they would never be sufficient. By putting together remembrances, several people (or even one) may be able to describe very accurately facts or things that we ourselves viewed also, even to reconstitute the entire sequence of our actions and words in definite circumstances, while we are unable to recall anything of all this. That is, the facts may be indisputable. We are shown beyond any doubt that a certain event occurred, that we were present and actively participated in it. Nevertheless this episode remains foreign to us, just as though someone else played our role.

Let us revert to an example that has been raised in opposition to my views. There have been in our life a certain number of events that had to happen. It is certain that there was a first day that I attended *lycée*, a first day I entered the third or fourth grade. Although this fact can be located in time and space, and even though my parents or friends provide me an accurate account of it, I am in the presence of an abstract datum to which I cannot make any living remembrance correspond—I recall nothing about it. Or I no longer recognize some place that I have assuredly passed by several times or some person whom I certainly met. Nevertheless, the witnesses are present. Therefore, is their role wholly incidental and complementary, doubtlessly useful to me in specifying and supple-

menting my remembrances, but only if these have already reappeared and therefore been preserved in my mind? But there is nothing in this that should surprise anyone. The fact that I have witnessed or participated in an episode at which others were spectators or participants is never sufficient reason that later on, when they evoke that event for me and reconstitute its image bit by bit, this artificial construction suddenly takes life and becomes transformed into a remembrance. Very often, it is true, such images imposed on us by our milieu change the impression that we have kept of some distant fact, or of some person known long ago. It might be that such images reproduce the past inaccurately, while that element or fragment of remembrance already in our mind is a more accurate expression: in this case a solid fund of fictitious remembrances is added to real remembrances. Conversely, it is possible that only the testimony of others is accurate and that they rectify and re-establish our remembrances in the process of being incorporated into it. In both cases these images blend into our remembrances and seemingly lend them their own substance because our memory is not a blank tablet and we feel able to perceive in them, as in a distorted mirror, features and contours (illusory perhaps) providing us an image of the past. Just as we must introduce a small particle into a saturated medium to get crystallization, so must we introduce a "seed" of memory into that body of testimony external to us in order for it to turn into a solid mass of remembrances. If, on the contrary, this episode has apparently left, as is said, "no trace in our memory"—that is, if we feel entirely incapable of reconstructing any portion of it in the absence of this external evidence—then those who describe it to us may paint a living picture that nonetheless will never become a remembrance.

Moreover, when I state that testimony will recall nothing if no trace of the past event in question remains in our mind, I do not mean that the remembrance or some part of it has to continue to exist as such in us. I only mean that, from the moment when we and these other witnesses belong to the same group and think in common about these matters, we maintain contact with this group and remain capable of identifying ourselves with it and merging our

past with its. Putting it another way, we must from this moment on never have lost the habit and capacity to think and remember as a member of the group to which we all belonged, to place ourself in its viewpoint and employ the conceptions shared by its members.

Consider a professor who has taught for fifteen years at a *lycée*. He encounters one of his former pupils and hardly recognizes him. The student speaks of his old classmates, recalling where each had to sit in class. He evokes many incidents that took place in his class during that year, including the achievements of certain students, the peculiarities or inadequacies of others, portions of certain courses, and certain explanations that particularly interested or caught the fancy of the students. Even though the pupil's recollections are accurate, it is quite likely that the professor has kept no remembrance of any of this. Moreover, during that school year, the professor was unquestionably very aware of the character of this class. He could recognize each student and knew about all the events and incidents that altered, accelerated, disturbed, or slowed the rhythm of life of this class, ensuring it a history of its own. How could he have forgotten all that? And how does it happen that, with the exception of a few vague reminiscences, the words of his former pupil raise no echoes of that time in his memory? The group constituting a class is essentially ephemeral, at least if it is considered to include teacher as well as students. It is no longer the same class when the pupils, perhaps the same individuals, pass from one class to another and sit in different seats. At year's end the students scatter, and this distinct and particular class will never come together again. Nevertheless, an important distinction must be made. For the pupils, the class lives on for some time. At least they will have many occasions to think about and remember it. Being nearly the same age, they may belong to the same social circles and will not forget being together under the same teacher. The concepts that he has taught them bear his imprint. Thinking again about this or that concept, they often perceive the teacher who first presented it to them, as well as their classmates who shared its reception. For the teacher, the situation is quite different. In class he carried out his function. The technical aspect of his activity is the same for all such classes. In effect, the

teacher repeats the same course, and each year of teaching is not so clearly contrasted to any other as each year is for the students. His instruction—from his exhortations, reprimands, and expressions of sympathy for each student to his gestures, accent, and even his jokes—is new to his students, but may be for him only a series of habitual actions deriving from his occupation. None of this can be the basis of a body of remembrances relevant to any specific class. There exists no durable group to which the professor continues to belong, about which he might have occasion to think, and within whose viewpoint he could resituate himself to remember with it the past.

But this is the case whenever others reconstruct for us events that we have lived through with them, but about which we can recreate no feeling of *déjà vu*. There is a discontinuity between these events, the others engaged in them, and ourself. It arises not solely from the fact that the group in whose midst we perceived the events no longer physically exists, but also because we no longer think about them or have the means to reconstruct an image of them. In our eyes, each member of that group was defined by his place amid the others and not by his relationships (of which we were ignorant) to other social circles. All the remembrances that might originate within the professor's class had to be supported by one another and not on external remembrances. The duration of such a memory was thus limited by the force of things to the duration of the group. If witnesses nevertheless remain—if, for example, former pupils recall and try to recall to their professor what he does not remember—it is because they formed in class with fellow students or outside class with their relatives various little communities, more intimate and certainly more durable than the class itself. Classroom events interested all these smaller groups, affected them, and left their mark upon them. But the professor was excluded from these groups—or, at least, if the members of these groups included him, he was not aware of it.

It often happens that one member of a group misjudges what the other members think of him. Such variations in viewpoint are the source of many misunderstandings and disappointments. Examples

may be found in all types of groups. Let us consider emotional relationships, in which imagination plays a prominent role. A person who is deeply loved but does not reciprocate in kind often becomes aware too late, if at all, of the importance attached to his smallest acts and his most insignificant words. He who has the greater love will remind the beloved of declarations and promises that the latter made but no longer remembers. Usually the beloved in such cases has not been deceitful, inconsiderate, or capricious but has merely been less caught up than the other in this relationship, which rested on an uneven distribution of sentiments. Thus a very religious man, whose life was so exemplary that he was beatified after his death, might well be astonished were he to return to life and read the legends about himself. Nonetheless, those legends were composed with the help of remembrances preciously preserved and faithfully written down by those among whom he lived that portion of his life recounted in them. Many of these recorded events would not be recognized by the saint himself because they never happened to begin with. But others might always have escaped his notice because he was then absorbed in his inner image of God, and only those about him focused their attention upon him.

A person might be as interested as others (maybe more so) in an event, however, and still preserve no remembrance of it. He fails to recognize that event even after it has been described to him because, soon after its occurrence, he left and never returned to the group in which the event had attracted his notice. It is said of certain persons that they live solely in the present. That is, they are concerned only with those persons and things related to their current activities, interests, or occupation. They forget about associates once a business deal has been closed, or about traveling companions once the trip is over. They are immediately absorbed by other interests and into other groups. A sort of vital impulse drives their thoughts from whatever might interfere with present concerns. By force of circumstances, such persons may go full circle, passing back and forth through the same groups much as in old dances, in which one constantly changes partners only to periodically regain a former partner. Similarly, these people leave a group only to re-enter it later

on. In the process they might be said to recover their remembrances of all these groups because their capacity to forget works alternately to the advantage and then to the detriment of each. But eventually these people who live in the present may follow a path that does not cut across paths traveled earlier but, instead, gradually takes them further away. If, later on, they should encounter members of these now unfamiliar groups, they try in vain to find their way back to and reconstitute the old group. It is much like following a previously traveled route, but doing it in a roundabout way so that the route is now viewed from places from which it had never been seen before. The various details are resituated in a different whole, constituted by our momentary representations. It seems as if a new route has been taken. Indeed details could acquire their old meaning only in relation to a totally different whole that our thought no longer embraces. We could recall all these details in their appropriate order, but we must have this whole as the point of departure. This is no longer possible, however, because we have long been remote from it and would have to backtrack too far.

Such loss of memory resembles that type of amnesia in which a clearly defined and limited body of remembrances is forgotten. It has been confirmed that a person who has received a severe blow to the brain may forget a whole period of his past, usually from just before the blow back to some date beyond which he has normal recall. Alternatively, all the remembrances belonging to a certain category are forgotten, regardless of when they were acquired. Loss of a specific foreign language would be an example of this. These cases seem to be adequately explained from a physiological viewpoint, not as a consequence of remembrances of a given period or category being localized in that part of the brain injured but as a result of damage to the cerebral function of remembering as a whole. The brain ceases to perform only certain operations, just as an organism might be temporarily unable to walk, speak, or digest food without any other function being impaired. But it could equally well be said that what is damaged is the general capacity to enter into relationship with the groups making up society. The individual becomes separated from one or more groups and only from these.

The whole body of remembrances that we share in common with them suddenly disappears. To forget a period of one's life is to lose contact with those who then surrounded us. To forget a foreign language is to no longer have the power to comprehend those who speak to us in that language, living persons or authors whose works we read. When we turned toward them, we adopted a definite attitude, just as we do in the presence of any human grouping. It is no longer within our control to adopt this attitude and to turn toward that group. Suppose we now encounter someone who certifies that we have learned a certain language. Reading our books and notes, he finds evidence on each page that we translated text and that we knew how to apply the proper rules. None of this suffices to re-establish the interrupted contact between ourself and all those who speak or write that language. We no longer possess enough attentive force to sustain contact with both this group and others with which we have more recently and intimately been concerned. Moreover, there is no reason to be surprised that only certain remembrances are suddenly abolished. They form an independent system because they are remembrances of the same group, interconnected and somehow mutually supporting. Since this group is clearly distinct from every other, we can simultaneously be in the others and outside this one. In a less abrupt and brutal fashion perhaps, and in the absence of any pathological disturbances, we gradually grow more remote and isolated from certain milieus not quite forgotten but only very vaguely remembered. We can still define in general terms groups with which we have been connected. But they no longer interest us because the whole character of our present life places them at a distance.

### The Necessity of an Affective Community

Now suppose we took a trip with a group of companions whom we have not seen since. Our thoughts at the time were both very close and very far from them. We conversed with them and shared inter-

est in the details of our route and various incidents during the trip. But, simultaneously, our reflections followed other paths unknown to them. We carried with us, in effect, feelings and ideas originating in other real or imaginary groups; we conversed inwardly with other persons. We peopled the passing landscape with other human beings, and a certain place or circumstance gained a value not present for our companions. Later on, we might encounter one of our traveling companions. He refers to certain particulars of the voyage that he remembers. We too would remember these details had we remained in contact with our companions and shared their subsequent conversations. But we have forgotten everything that he evokes and endeavors in vain to make us remember. By contrast, we recall what we then experienced unknown to the others, as if this type of remembrance had left a much deeper imprint in our memory because it concerned only ourself. Thus, in this example, the testimony of others is powerless to reconstitute a forgotten remembrance and, on the other hand, we remember, apparently without the support of others, impressions that we have communicated to no one.

Does this analysis lead to the conclusion that individual memory, to the extent that it is contrasted to collective memory, is a necessary and sufficient condition for the recall and recognition of remembrances? Not at all. That first remembrance is obliterated and can no longer be retrieved because we have not belonged for some time to the group in whose memory it is conserved. To be aided by others' memory, ours must not merely be provided testimony and evidence but must also remain in harmony with theirs. There must be enough points of contact so that any remembrance they recall to us can be reconstructed on a common foundation. A remembrance is gained not merely by reconstituting the image of a past event a piece at a time. That reconstruction must start from shared data or conceptions. These are present in our mind as well as theirs, because they are continually being passed back and forth. This process occurs only because all have been and still are members of the same group. This is the only way to understand how a remembrance is at once recognized and reconstructed. What does it matter

that our companions are still influenced by a feeling that we once experienced with them but do no longer? We can't evoke it because we have shared nothing with our former companions for so long. There is nothing to fault in our memory or theirs. But a larger collective memory, encompassing both ours and theirs, has disappeared.

Similarly, men who have been brought close together—for example, by a shared task, mutual devotion, common ancestry, or artistic endeavor—may disperse afterwards into various groups. Each new group is too restricted to retain everything that concerned the thoughts of the original party, literary coterie, or religious congregation. So each fastens onto one facet of its thought and remembers only part of its activities. Several pictures of that common past are thus generated, none being really accurate or coinciding with any other. Once they are separated, not one of them can reproduce the total content of the original thought. If two such groups come back into contact, what they lack in order to mutually encompass, understand, and confirm remembrances of that past common life is precisely the capacity to forget the barriers dividing them. A misunderstanding weighs upon them, much as upon two men who meet once again only to find, as is said, that they no longer “speak the same language.”

What about the fact that we remember impressions that none of our companions could have known about at the time? This in itself is no more a proof of our memory being self-sufficient and without need of the support of others' memories. Suppose that at the time we begin a trip with a group of friends, we are vitally concerned with some matter they know nothing about. Since we are absorbed in our ideas and feelings, everything seen or heard is related to it. We nourish our secret thought from everything in the field of perception that can be connected with it. It is as if we had never left that distant group of human beings who are the basis for our concern. We incorporate into that group every element assimilable from our new milieu. By contrast, we hold to the new milieu, considered in itself and from the viewpoint of our companions, with the least significant part of ourself. If we think about that trip later on,

we cannot say that we placed ourself within the viewpoint of those who made the trip with us. We recall them only as their persons were included in the framework of our concerns. Similarly, when at dusk we entered a room for the first time, we saw the walls, furniture, and furnishings through a shadow of darkness. These fantastic and mysterious shapes are retained in our memory as a barely real framework for those feelings of uneasiness, surprise, or sadness we experienced at that first view of the room. Seeing the room in daylight is not enough to recall them to us. We must also think about those feelings we then experienced. Was it, therefore, our personal response that so transfigured these objects for us? Yes, if you prefer—but only on condition that we do not forget that our most personal feelings and thoughts originate in definite social milieus and circumstances. The effect of that contrast resulted primarily from the fact that we sought, in these objects, not what was seen by those familiar with them, but what was related to the concerns of those persons through whose thoughts we saw that room the first time.

### On the Possibility of a Strictly Individual Memory

If this analysis is correct, its conclusions may permit a reply to the most serious and, moreover, most natural objection to the theory that a person remembers only by situating himself within the viewpoint of one or several groups and one or several currents of collective thought.

It may be conceded that a great many of our remembrances reappear because other persons recall them to us. Even in those instances when others are not physically present and we evoke an event that had a place in the life of our group, it might be granted that we can speak of collective memory because we once envisaged that event, as we still do now in the moment we recall it, from the viewpoint of this group. We are certainly justified in requesting agreement with this second point, because such a mental attitude is possible only for a person who belongs (or has belonged) to a group

and thus still feels, even at a distance, its influence. The fact that we could think about a certain object only because we act as a member of a group is sufficient reason to state that an obvious condition of that thought is the existence of the group. Hence, a person returning home by himself has undoubtedly spent some time "all alone," as the saying goes. But he has been alone in appearance only, because his thoughts and actions during even this period are explained by his nature as a social being and his not having ceased for one instant to be enclosed within some group. The difficulty does not rest here.

But don't some remembrances reappear that can in no way be connected with a group? The events they reproduce would be perceived by ourself when we were really and not only apparently alone. Such remembrances would not be resituated within the thought of any body of individuals, and we would recall them by placing ourself within a viewpoint that could only be our own. Even were instances of this type very rare or even exceptional, the verification of just a few would establish that the collective memory does not account for all our remembrances and, perhaps, cannot alone explain the evocation of any remembrance. After all, given our analysis, it could be that all these conceptions and images that derive from our social groups and operate in the memory lie like a screen over the individual remembrance, even in those cases when we never become aware of that remembrance. The whole point is to know if such a remembrance could exist, if it is conceivable. The fact that it occurs, even if only once, suffices to prove that nothing opposes its operation in every case. There would then be, at the basis of every remembrance, the recollection of a purely individual conscious state that, in order to distinguish it from perceptions permeated by elements of social thought, could be called a "sensory intuition."

As Charles Blondel has written:

We experience some uneasiness to see totally (or almost totally) eliminated from remembering any glimmer of that *sensory intuition* which, while not the sum total, is very evidently the essential prelude and condition sine qua non of perception. . . . For us to avoid confus-

ing the reconstitution of our own proper past with that which we can fabricate from the past of our fellow men, in order for this empirically, logically, and socially possible past to become indented with our real past, certain parts must be something more than a mere reconstitution of borrowed materials.<sup>1</sup>

Désiré Roustan has written to me:

If you content yourself to say that, when an individual thinks that he evokes the past, it is really ninety-nine percent reconstruction and one percent true evocation, that residue of one percent, which resists your explanation, suffices as a basis for the whole problem of the conservation of remembrances. Now, can you avoid that residual element?

### Childhood Remembrances

Remembrances that take us back to a time when our sensations reflected only external objects, when we hadn't introduced images or thoughts connected with men and groups around us, are difficult to find. Indeed, we recall nothing of early childhood because our impressions could not fasten onto any support so long as we were not yet a social being. According to Stendhal:

The earliest remembrance that I have is biting the cheek or forehead of my cousin Madame Pison du Galland. . . a plump woman of twenty-five, who wore a great deal of rouge. . . I can still see the whole scene, but that's probably because I was roundly chastised on the spot and never heard the end of it.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, he recalls the day that he teased a mule, which then kicked him.

"A little more would have killed him," my grandfather used to say. I can picture the incident, but it is probably not a direct remembrance,

<sup>1</sup> Charles Blondel, "Critical Review" (of Maurice Halbwachs' *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*), *Revue philosophique* 101 (1926), p. 296.

<sup>2</sup> Stendhal, *Vie d'Henri Brulard*, ed. Henri Martineau (Paris: Le Divan I, 1949), p. 36.

only a remembrance of the picture I formed of the matter a very long time ago, when I was first told about it.<sup>3</sup>

The same is true of most so-called childhood remembrances. The earliest that I have long considered myself able to retrieve is our arrival in Paris. I was ten and a half. We climbed the stairs to our fourth-floor apartment in the evening, and we children commented out loud that Paris meant living in a silo. Now perhaps one of us did make that remark. But our parents, who were amused, remembered the incident and recounted it to us later on. I can still picture our lighted staircase, but then I saw it many times after that first time.

Here is an event from the childhood of Benevenuto Cellini related at the beginning of his *Autobiography*. He is not certain that it is a remembrance. Nonetheless, we offer it as an aid to better understanding the example that follows, which we will thoroughly analyze.

I was about three years old. My grandfather, Andréa Cellini, was still living and more than a hundred years old. One day while the pipe for the sink was being changed, a giant scorpion crept out of it. Unseen by the others, he got to the ground and hid under a bench. I saw it, ran to it, and picked it up. It was so big that its tail stuck out from one side of my hand while its claws stuck out at the other. I ran joyfully, so I am told, to my grandfather saying "Look, grandfather, at my beautiful little crayfish." He immediately recognized it as a scorpion and in his love for me, he almost died from fright. He begged me for it, with many caresses, but I held onto it all the more tightly, crying that I would not give it up to anyone. My father, who was in the house, came running at the outcry. Thunderstruck, he did not know how to take that venomous animal from me without its first killing me, when suddenly his eyes fell on a pair of scissors. Armed with them and coaxing me at the same time, he cut off the tail and the claws of the scorpion. Once the danger was over, he considered the episode a good omen.

This exciting and dramatic episode unfolded completely within the family. In picking up the scorpion, the child did not realize that

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

it was a dangerous animal. It was for him a small crayfish, like those his parents had shown him and let him touch, a kind of toy. In reality, a foreign element had penetrated into the home, and both grandfather and father reacted characteristically. The child's crying and the parents' comforting, caressing, anxiety, terror, and subsequent burst of joy constitute so many familial responses defining the meaning of the event. Even if we grant that the child recalls this episode, the image is still situated within the framework of the family, because it was initially enacted there and has never left it.

Let us now listen to Charles Blondel.

I remember once, as a child, exploring an abandoned house and, in the middle of a dark room, suddenly falling up to my waist into a hole which had water at the bottom. I quite easily recognize when and where the thing occurred, but my knowing is totally subordinated in this case to my remembering.<sup>4</sup>

We are to understand that the remembrance occurs as an unlocalized image. He doesn't recall it, therefore, by thinking first about the house—that is, by placing himself in the viewpoint of the family living there. This is all the more true because, as Blondel says, he never told his parents about the incident nor has he thought about it since then. And he adds:

In this instance, while I needed to reconstitute the environment of my remembrance, I by no means needed to reconstitute the remembrance itself. In memories of this kind, it seems correct to say that we have a direct contact with the past which precedes and conditions the historical reconstruction.<sup>5</sup>

This narrative is clearly different from the preceding. First of all, Cellini indicates the time and place of the episode he recalls, something Blondel is completely unaware of when he evokes his fall into a hole half full of water. Indeed Blondel stresses this very omission. Nonetheless, this may not be the essential difference between the two cases. The group to which the child at this age most intimately belongs, which constantly surrounds him, is the family. Now, in

<sup>4</sup> "Critical Review," p. 296.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 296–297.



this instance, the child has left the family. Not only does he no longer see his parents, but he may not even have them in mind. At any rate, they do not intervene in this bit of history, either because they were not even informed about it or because they did not consider it important enough to retain and relate later on to him who had been its hero. But are these facts sufficient to state that he was truly alone? Is it true that the novelty and intensity of this impression—the distress of being abandoned and the strangeness and surprise in the face of the unexpected, of the unseen and unexperienced—explain his thought being diverted from his parents? On the contrary, did he not suddenly find himself in danger just because he was a child and so very dependent on adults in a network of domestic feelings and thoughts? But then he did think about his family and was alone in appearance only. It matters little that he doesn't recall the specific time and place of the incident and that it is not supported by a spatial and temporal framework. The thought of the absent family provides a framework, and the child need not, as Blondel says, "reconstitute the environment of my remembrance" because the remembrance arises within that environment. We should not be surprised that the child is unaware of it, that his attention did not focus at that moment on this aspect of his thought, or that he no longer notices it when he recalls as an adult that childhood remembrance. A "current of social thought" is ordinarily as invisible as the atmosphere we breathe. In normal life its existence is recognized only when it is resisted, but a child calling for and needing the help of his family is not resisting it.

Blondel might rightly object that the event he recalls is a set of particulars without any relationship to any aspect of his family. Exploring a dark room, he falls into a hole half full of water. Let us grant that he was frightened by being so far from his family. The essence of the fact, in comparison with which everything else seemingly fades to nothing, is this image that in itself occurs as totally detached from the domestic milieu. Now it is this image, and the preservation of this image, that must be explained. As such, this image is indeed distinguished from every other circumstance of my situation, either when I realized that I was far away from my family

or when I turned to that group for help and toward that very "environment." In other words, it is not clear how a framework as general as the family could reproduce so particular a fact. As Blondel says, "There has to be a matter for these forms which are the collective frameworks imposed by society."<sup>6</sup>

Why not simply grant that this matter indeed exists and is nothing more than precisely what in the remembrances is without relation to the framework—that is, the sensations and sensory intuitions that are relived in that episode? When little Poucet was abandoned in the forest by his parents, he certainly thought about them; but he was also aware of many other things. He followed several paths, climbed a tree, saw a light, approached an isolated house, and so forth. How can all this be summarized in the simple comment that he was lost and couldn't find his parents? Had he taken other paths or had other encounters, his feeling of abandonment might have been the same, yet he would have kept totally different remembrances.

This is my answer. At the time a child becomes lost in a forest or a house, he is immersed only in the current of thoughts and feelings attaching him to family. As events proceed, it is as if he gets caught up in another current that removes him from it. Poucet could be said to remain within the family because he is in the company of his brothers. But he appoints himself leader, takes charge of them, and directs their activities. That is, he passes from the position of child to that of father, and he enters the group of adults while still a child. But something similar also applies to Blondel's remembrance. That memory belongs to both child and adult because the child was for the first time in an adult situation. When he was a child, all his thoughts were at a child's level. He was used to judging events by the standards his parents had taught him, and his surprise and fear were caused by his inability to relocate these new experiences in his little world. His own family no longer within reach, he became an adult in the sense that he found himself in the presence of novel and disturbing things (things that would certainly not have been so to the same extent for an adult). He may have stayed only moments in

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 298.

that dark hole. But he made contact with a world that he would re-discover later, as he was allowed more freedom. Moreover, there are many instances throughout childhood when a child must confront what is nonfamilial. For example, he may collide with or be injured by certain objects and thus learn to adjust to the various properties of things. He inevitably experiences a whole series of small tests, which are so many preparations for adulthood. This is the shadow that adult society projects over childhood. Sometimes it becomes far more than a shadow, as the child is called on to share the concerns and responsibilities that ordinarily fall on shoulders stronger than his own. Then he is temporarily and partially included in the group of adults. Hence it is said of certain people that they never had a childhood. Since they had to earn their livelihood too early in life, they entered the social struggle for existence at an age when most children are unaware that such places exist. Or they have known that type of suffering reserved for adults and have had to confront it on the same level as adults—e.g., after the death and burial of someone close.

The original content of such remembrances, which separates them from all others, is thus explained by the fact that they are found at the intersection of two or more series of thoughts, connecting them in turn to as many different groups. It is simply insufficient to assert that what intersects with these series of thoughts linking us to a group (the family, in this case) is a series of sensations deriving from things. Everything would then become problematic once again, since this image of things would exist only for us and thus a portion of our remembrances would rest on no collective memory. But a child is afraid in the dark or when lost in a deserted place because he populates that place with imaginary enemies, because at night he fears bumping into all sorts of dangerous creatures. Rousseau tells how M. Lamercier gave him the key to the church one very dark autumn evening so that he could go look in the pulpit for a Bible that had been left there.

On opening the door, I heard the echoes of what I thought were voices in the dome. My Roman resoluteness began to crumble. The door opened, I wanted to enter, but I had barely stepped in when I

stopped. Seeing the heavy darkness which pervaded that vast place, I was so terrified that my hair stood on end. I sat down confused on a bench. I no longer knew where I was. Unable to locate either the pulpit or the door, I was inexpressibly upset.

Had the church been lighted, he would have seen that no one was there and would not have been afraid. For the child the world is never empty of human beings, of good and evil influences. Perhaps more distinct images in our picture of the past correspond to these points where influences intersect because something we illuminate from two directions reveals more details and draws more of our attention.

### Adult Remembrances

We have said enough about childhood remembrances. Adults can just as easily evoke many remembrances so original and so unified as to seemingly resist analysis. But we can always expose the same delusion in such examples. A given member of a group happens to also belong to another group. The thoughts from each suddenly come together in his mind. Presumably he alone perceives this contrast between them. Is it not obvious, therefore, that he has an impression unlike anything experienced by other members of these groups, whose only point of contact with each other is this individual? This remembrance is included at once in two frameworks. But each framework precludes the other's being seen. Concentrating his attention on their point of intersection, he is too preoccupied to perceive either of them distinctly. When we look in the sky for two stars belonging to different constellations, we readily imagine that by merely tracing an imaginary line between them we confer on them some sort of unity. Nevertheless, each is only an element in a group and we were able to recognize them because neither constellation was then hidden behind a cloud. Similarly, since two thoughts contrast and apparently reinforce one another when brought together, we think they form a self-existing whole, independent of their parent wholes. We fail to perceive that in reality

we are considering the two groups simultaneously, but each from the viewpoint of the other.

Let us now revert to the hypothetical example examined previously. I made a trip with some people I had just met and whom I was not destined to see again for some time. It was a pleasure trip. I neither spoke nor listened very much. My mind was full of thoughts and images my companions were neither aware of nor interested in. People whom I loved and who shared my concerns were introduced unawares into this milieu. A whole community with which I was intimately linked was mingled with incidents and landscapes totally foreign or irrelevant to it. Let us consider my impression. It is undoubtedly explained by what dominated my intellectual and emotional life. But it still unfolded within a temporal and spatial framework. And it unfolded amid circumstances over which my concerns cast their shadow even as they were subtly altered in turn, much as an ancient monument and the dwellings of a later time built at its base reciprocally alter the appearance of one another. Of course, as I recall that journey, I do not place myself within the same viewpoints that my companions do, for it is summarized in a series of impressions known only to myself. Nor can it be said that through memory I place myself only in the viewpoint of my relatives, friends, and favorite authors. I traveled that mountainous route with companions of given character and looks, and I inattentively participated in their conversations while my thoughts ranged in a former milieu. All the while, the impressions flowing within me were like so many novel and particular ways of considering persons dear to me and the bonds uniting us. However, in their novelty, in the many elements not found in my previous thinking of my more intimate thoughts at the time, these impressions were in another sense alien to these groups as well. They express in this manner those groups closest to us only if the latter are not physically present. Probably everything I saw and everyone I listened to attracted my attention only to the extent they made me feel the absence of these groups. Don't we distinguish this viewpoint—which is neither that of our present companions nor purely and completely that of our friends of yesterday and tomorrow—in order to attribute it to

ourselves? Isn't the attractiveness of this impression in what is not explained by our relationships with either group, what contrasts sharply to their thought and experience? I know that it cannot be shared or even surmised by my companions. I also know that it could not have been suggested to me in its present form and framework by my relatives and friends, about whom I was thinking at the time and to whom I now return through memory. Therefore, is there not some residue of that impression that escapes both groups and exists only for me?

What stand in the foreground of group memory are remembrances of events and experiences of concern to the greatest number of members. These arise either out of group life itself or from relationships with the nearest and most frequently contacted groups. Remembrances concerning very few members (perhaps only one) merge into the background, even though they are included in the group memory, because they have at least partially occurred within group boundaries. Two people can feel very close and share all their thoughts. If they should later come to live in different milieus, they could, through letters when apart or conversation when together, make one another acquainted with the circumstances of their new lives. But they would still need to identify with one another if everything in their experiences foreign to the other were to be assimilated into their common thought. Mlle. de Lespinasse's letters could make the Comte de Guibert understand her feelings from afar. But she was active in the higher social circles and fashionable milieus with which membership made him also familiar. He could look at his lover, as she herself could, by putting himself within the viewpoint of these men and women who were completely unaware of their romance. He could also picture her, as she herself could, from the viewpoint of that closed and secret group that the two comprise. Unknown to him who is far away, however, many changes could occur in that society that her letters might not adequately document. He might never become aware of her changing attitude toward her social world. The fact that he loves her as he does would not suffice to divine these changes in her.

Ordinarily, a group has relationships with other groups. Many

events derive from such contacts, and many conceptions have no other source. These contacts and relationships may be permanent, or at least repeated often enough to endure for a long period. For example, when a family lives for a long time in the same town or near the same friends, family and town or family and friends compose a sort of complex group. Remembrances arise that are included in the framework of thought of each group. An individual must belong to both groups to recognize a remembrance of this type. This condition is fulfilled by only a part of the membership of either group over any length of time, and even then in an incomplete way by family members whose main interest is their family. Moreover, family members who move, and are now influenced almost exclusively by family, lose their capacity to remember what they retained only because they were under the influence of two converging currents of collective thought. Furthermore, since only some members of each group are included in the other, both of these collective influences are weaker than if they acted alone. For example, only a portion of the family and not the whole group can help a member recall this particular set of memories. An individual will recall and recognize such remembrances only if placed in a situation permitting these two influences to best combine their action upon him. Consequently, the remembrance seems less familiar, easily hides the collective factors determining it, and gives the illusion of being less under voluntary control.

### **The Individual Remembrance as the Intersection of Collective Influences**

Often we deem ourselves the originators of thoughts and ideas, feelings and passions, actually inspired by some group. Our agreement with those about us is so complete that we vibrate in unison, ignorant of the real source of the vibrations. How often do we present, as deeply held convictions, thoughts borrowed from a newspaper, book, or conversation? They respond so well to our way of seeing things that we are surprised to discover that their author is someone

other than ourself. "That's just what I think about that!" We are unaware that we are but an echo. The whole art of the orator probably consists in his giving listeners the illusion that the convictions and feelings he arouses within them have come not from him but from themselves, that he has only divined and lent his voice to what has been worked out in their innermost consciousness. In one way or another, each social group endeavors to maintain a similar persuasion over its members. How many people are critical enough to discern what they owe to others in their thinking and so acknowledge to themselves how small their own contribution usually is? Occasionally an individual increases the range of his acquaintances and readings, making a virtue of an eclecticism that permits him to view and reconcile divergent aspects of things. Even in such instances the particular dosage of opinions, the complexity of feelings and desires, may only express his accidental relationships with groups divergent or opposed on some issue. The relative value attributed to each way of looking at things is really a function of the respective intensity of influences that each group has separately exerted upon him. In any case, insofar as we yield without struggle to an external suggestion, we believe we are free in our thought and feelings. Therefore most social influences we obey usually remain unperceived.

But this is probably even more true for these complex states that occur at the intersection of several currents of collective thought, states we are wont to see as unique events existing only for ourself. A traveler suddenly caught up by influences from a milieu foreign to his companions, a child exposed to adult feelings and concerns by unexpected circumstances, someone who has experienced a change of location, occupation, or family that hasn't totally ruptured his bonds with previous groups—all are instances of this phenomenon. Often the social influences concerned are much more complex, being more numerous and interwoven. Hence they are more difficult and more confusing to unravel. We see each milieu by the light of the other (or others) as well as its own and so gain an impression of resisting it. Certainly each of these influences ought to emerge more sharply from their comparison and contrast. Instead, the confronta-

tion of these milieus gives us a feeling of no longer being involved in any of them. What becomes paramount is the "strangeness" of our situation, absorbing individual thought enough to screen off the social thoughts whose conjunction has elaborated it. This strangeness cannot be fully understood by any other member of these milieus, only myself. In this sense it belongs to me and, at the moment of its occurrence, I am tempted to explain it by reference to myself and myself alone. At the most, I might concede that circumstances (that is, the conjunction of these milieus) have served as the occasion permitting the production of an event long ago incorporated in my individual destiny, the appearance of a feeling latent in my innermost person. I have no other means of explaining its subsequent return to memory, because others were unaware of it and have had no role in its production (as we mistakenly imagine). Therefore, in one way or another, it must have been preserved in its original form in my mind. But that is not the case at all. These remembrances that seem purely personal, since we alone are aware of and capable of retrieving them, are distinguished by the greater complexity of the conditions necessary for their recall. But this is a difference in degree only.

One doctrine is satisfied to note that our past comprises two kinds of elements. Certain elements we can evoke whenever we want. By contrast, others cannot simply be summoned and we seem to encounter various obstacles in searching for them in our past. In reality, the first type might be said to belong to a common domain, in the sense that they are familiar or easily accessible to others as well as ourselves. The idea we most easily picture to ourselves, no matter how personal and specific its elements, is the idea others have of us. The events of our life most immediate to ourselves are also engraved in the memory of those groups closest to us. Hence, facts and conceptions we possess with least effort are recalled to us from a common domain (common at least to one or several milieus). These remembrances are "everybody's" to this extent. We can recall them whenever we want just because we can base ourselves on the memory of others. The second type, which cannot be recalled at will, are readily acknowledged to be available only to ourselves because only we

could have known about them. So we apparently end up in this strange paradox. The remembrances we evoke with most difficulty are our concern alone and constitute our most exclusive possession. They seem to escape the purview of others only at the expense of escaping ourselves also. It is as if a person locked his treasure in a safe with a lock so complicated that he could not open it; he does not remember the combination and must rely on chance to remind him of it.

But there is an explanation at once simpler and more natural. The difference between remembrances we evoke at will and remembrances we seem to command no longer is merely a matter of degree of complexity. The former are always at hand because they are preserved in groups that we enter at will and collective thoughts to which we remain closely related. The elements of these remembrances and their relationships are all familiar to us. The latter are less accessible because the groups that carry them are more remote and intermittent in contact with us. Groups that associate frequently enable us to be in them simultaneously, whereas others have so little contact that we have neither intention nor occasion to trace their faded paths of communication. Now it is along such routes, along such sheltered pathways, that we retrieve those remembrances that are uniquely our own. In the same way, a traveler might consider as his own a spring, an outcropping of rock, or a landscape reached only by leaving the main thoroughfare and rejoining another via a rough and infrequently used trail. The starting points of such a short cut lie on the main routes and are common knowledge. But close scrutiny and maybe a bit of luck are required to find them again. A person might frequently pass by either without bothering to look for them, especially if he couldn't count upon passers-by to point them out, passers-by who travel one of these thoroughfares but have no concern to go where the other might lead.

Let us not hesitate to return to the examples we have discussed. We will clearly see that the "starting points," or the elements of these personal remembrances that seem to be uniquely our own, can easily be found preserved in definite social milieus. The members of

these groups (we ourselves have not ceased to belong) know how to find and show them to us, if we only interrogate them in the appropriate manner. Our traveling companions did not know the relatives and friends we left behind. But they did observe that we never fully joined them. They sensed moments when we seemed more like a stranger. Were we to meet them later, they could recall our distracted manner or reflections and comments indicating that our thoughts were elsewhere. The child who was lost in the woods, or who confronted some dangerous situation that aroused in him feelings of an adult, told nothing of this to his parents. But they observed that afterward he was not so careless as he used to be (as if a shadow had been cast over him), and that on seeing them he displayed a joy no longer so childlike. The inhabitants of the town to which I moved did not know where I came from, but before I had become used to my new surroundings, my astonishment, curiosity, and ignorance had undoubtedly been noticed by some of the townspeople. These scarcely noticeable traces of events having little import for this new milieu probably attracted attention only for a short while. Nevertheless, were I to relate the events responsible for these traces, some would still remember those traces or at least know where to look.

While the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as group members who remember. While these remembrances are mutually supportive of each other and common to all, individual members still vary in the intensity with which they experience them. I would readily acknowledge that each memory is a viewpoint on the collective memory, that this viewpoint changes as my position changes, that this position itself changes as my relationships to other milieus change. Therefore, it is not surprising that everyone does not draw on the same part of this common instrument. In accounting for that diversity, however, it is always necessary to revert to a combination of influences that are social in nature.

Certain of these combinations are extremely complex. Hence their appearance is not under our control. In a sense, we must trust to chance. We must wait for the various systems of waves (in those

social milieus where we move mentally or physically) to intersect again and cause that registering apparatus which is our individual consciousness to vibrate the same way it did in the past. But the type of causality is the same and could not be different from what it was then. The succession of our remembrances, of even our most personal ones, is always explained by changes occurring in our relationships to various collective milieus—in short, by the transformations these milieus undergo separately and as a whole.

Some may say how strange it is that our most personal remembrances, offering such a striking character of absolute unity, actually derive from a fusion of diverse and separate elements. First of all, reflection shows this unity to dissolve rapidly into a multiplicity. It has been claimed that one recovers, when plumbing the depths of a truly personal conscious state, the whole content of mind as seen from a certain viewpoint. But "content of mind" must be understood as all the elements that mark its relationships to various milieus. A personal state thus reveals the complexity of the combination that was its source. Its apparent unity is explained by a quite natural type of illusion. Philosophers have shown that the feeling of liberty may be explained by the multiplicity of causal series that combine to produce an action. We conceive each influence as being opposed by some other and thus believe we act independently of each influence since we do not act under the exclusive power of any one. We do not perceive that our act really results from their action in concert, that our act is always governed by the law of causality. Similarly, since the remembrance reappears, owing to the interweaving of several series of collective thoughts, and since we cannot attribute it to any single one, we imagine it independent and contrast its unity to their multiplicity. We might as well assume that a heavy object, suspended in air by means of a number of very thin and interlaced wires, actually rests in the void where it holds itself up.