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**GNOMES AND GNOMES**

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**Abstract:** When Robert Merton died leaving behind his masterly *On the Shoulders of Giants: A Shandean Postscript*, commonly referred to as *OTSOG*, it sounded like the last polymath-polyhistor in Western civilization had left us the mere memory of (his) erudition. He also left his trust in memory as the repository of history. In his recognizable parodic-serious manner he conveyed to those coming after the message of the cultural archaeology that the history of ideas appeared to him. Here was somebody who had during a lifetime been in the service of resuscitating the comprehensive knowledge preceding the separation of the disciplines. Here was the last eclectic orchestrating a commemoration of the human mind’s vast capacity. His was not simply the business of cultivating memory, but that of the culture of memory in which we will hopefully never stop existing. Collective, like individual memory stand proof to the richness of the world encrypted in words, as they do to our mechanisms of retrieving/recalling things past and of projecting those that will potentially or actually occur. The paper pursues these conceptual lines and attaches special attention to the ambiguous concept of gnome (< Gr. γνώμη ‘thought’, ‘intelligence’; < L. gnomus ‘dwarf living underground as guardian of treasures and mines’) in Western culture.

The death, a decade ago, of the American sociologist and Columbia University celebrity Robert K. Merton was met with due regrets and eulogies, yet presumably not enough realization of the kind of loss his disappearance marked. We can now look back to commemorate maybe the last polymath-polyhistor in Western civilization and look forward to our computer-assisted existence from which such living models seem hardly capable of triggering praise. Merton’s eclectic agenda had secured him a place of honour in the world’s academe: he had fathered the “role model” and “self-fulfilling prophecy” concepts and seen several editions of his *On the Shoulders of Giants: A Shandean Postscript* by the mid-1980s. Commonly referred *OTSOG*, the latter carried in a parodic-serious manner the message of the cultural archaeology that the history of ideas appeared to him. Stirred by a letter

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2 Among other things, Merton made a point of tracing as far back as possible, ideally to their very origin ideas-and-phrases like “climate of opinion” wrongly attributed the Eighteenth-Century Studies specialist Carl Becker, while it had been coined by Joseph Glanvill in the seventeenth century, to be brought back into currency in the mid-twentieth by Alfred North Whitehead.
sent by Isaac Newton to the natural philosopher Robert Hooke in 1676, the book had the semblance of a lengthy, loose and rambling correspondence between Prof. Robert Merton and Prof. Bernard Bailyn from Harvard’s Department of History. Letters urging the writing of other letters, scholars in dialogue with scholars, ideas launched onto a symbolic battlefield, there for the taking up and looking in the face.

Merton’s was essentially a resuscitation of comprehensive knowledge from times before the separation of the disciplines, an exercise in recalling eclecticism and its gnostic charm, a commemoration of the human mind’s vast capacity. A hymn to memory in the culture of memory that the Judeo-Christian tradition based on two paradigmatic testaments is. In the last instance, a eulogy to how the Old reads into the New Testament to jointly secure our legacy, assert our cultural identity and save us from oblivion. All this laid down as a sui generis intellectual gossip calling back the Shandy Hall peregrinations or mental acrobatics performed by two brothers in order to recollect the copia memoranda, or memories of individual and collective relevance and to make of them daily entertainment. It was a post-script, a writing in memory of a previous writing, an echo or tactical post hoc rendition meant to entail a propter hoc commitment and invest it with strategic meaning. It did justice to the overwhelming victory of print culture over orally transmitted memory by “transform[ing] words from sounds to be heard into surfaces to be seen” (Hutton, “The Art of Memory” 382). OTSOG beckoned to the endlessly fuelled Shandean-cum-Lockean association of ideas, as it mimicked ghost-writing. It rejoiced in Shandean eccentricity, yet paid due homage to “Lockean commonplacing […] and its capacity to instantiate a model of mental order” (Dacome 615).

Whoever lays hands on this treasure now cannot fail to sense the author’s pleasure to get lost in the forest of ideas called memory to then assemble with meticulous care the compass, map and tools that will eventually get him out. Merton’s sympathy goes with Swift in acquiescing that “it is with libraries as with other cemeteries: books, like dead bodies, are subjected to corruption, victimized by worms and destined to turn to dust” (Merton 126). It takes longer with books though, and he prides in resurrecting them by furnishing his own as evidence. OTSOG is a Late Modernity commonplace book raised from the dead, a copia book abounding in cultural material elegantly collected in a storehouse or thesaurus of topics and phrases. Early Modernity had enriched the cultivated Western readership with such encyclopaedic arrangements of topics or places “thought as ‘circles’ of learning or unities of the arts and sciences, […] the practice of keeping a commonplace book encourage[ing]a ‘spatializing of knowledge’” with “various subjects […] located in separate departments of a visualized field” (Yeo 159). Behind them were so many books of memory preserving the past in copie or thesauroi by way of exalting its richness.

In the mid-1960s Robert Merton the sociologist addressed his corresponding colleague, the Harvard historian, from the scientist’s perspective. He nourished the ambition of exhaustive knowledge of the onetime homo universale, the Early Modern vernacular replica of the homo universalis, a prototype extending over a much ampler space of time, so in possession of more copious cultural memory. When he had decided to sit down and write his eclectic conceptual and
terminological treasure, he knew that the *locus* or *topos* of the *Western culture of memory* he was after – “dwarfs on the shoulders of giants” – could be traced in a straight line back to Bernard of Chartres. He knew, too, that this was the pedagogically useful line of bookishly assisted memory, for “in the transmission of ideas each succeeding repetition tends to erase all but one antecedent version, thus producing what may be described as the anatopic or palimpsestic syndrome” (Merton 218). And he did know that Newton himself, in his epistle to Hooke, had recalled at least one preceding name, Descartes, as another “good step… [brought] into philosophical consideration,” for which reason the natural philosopher concluded: “If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants” (Ibidem 1). Searching one layer underneath, Merton had discovered Robert Burton maintaining, with Didacus Stella, that “a dwarf standing on the shoulders of a giant may see farther than a giant himself” (Ibidem viii). And he agreed with Burton, “that squirrel-like collector of innumerable good things to learn” (Ibidem 2), that it is in human nature that “he that comes last is commonly best” (Idem), whether this be literally the case or not. Yet, the human mind digs into its underground rooms of memory often *anatopically*, looking elsewhere or merely approximating the source, often too *palimpsestically*, laying memory on top of memory, scraping them afresh before reiterating the manoeuvre, doing its best to find the straight line, always tempted by the call of some siren. Likewise our erudite’s cultural memory following, alongside the Sterne-Shandy story-teller, a perpetually convoluted, winding, meandering, mazy, tortuous, deviated line of narrative, while trying to get into its work! This had happened to Archimedes before, and it had haunted Cicero, whose horror of plagiarism could not be ignored. Our Sterne-Merton *doxographer* of the twentieth century plunged into a mad excursion into scholarship, as fine a *bon viveur* as Burton-Democritus, or, indeed, Laurence Sterne – the level-headed philosopher in his country backyard, far from the bustle of official life, laughing himself crazy as he observes the folly of the world around.

The Mertonian excursus has coordinates we can sense, at times discreetly, at other times overtly, and yet at other times so vaguely that we give him full credit on the spot: this is an exercise in *cryptomnesia*, memory causing experiences to appear as new, without conscious recognition of their source. It is a wild-goose chase for some, or at least one source of our *cultural memory*, an otsogian (read counterfactual) history of ideas. “What does it mean to remember?” (Barash 707), he seems to voice a rhetorical question in a comprehensive mnemonic chorus. It is reminiscence as *ανάμνησις*, reaching back and deep down for truth as *αλήθεια*. The object of his chase, in the moving sands of *learned memory* is an aphorism, etymologically a marking off of territory by boundaries separating one identity from another. This is the estate of *dwarfs on the shoulders of giants* which he can certify as acknowledged by Bernard of Chartres. Yet scarcely has he filled a few pages when he plainly admits Bernard himself as most likely having emulated Thales. A long series of *anticipations* confirm his view of ideas wandering out in the world of *the race’s memory*, wondering at the richness of the world encrypted in words. The anatopic and palimpsestic syndrome is now described as *adumbrationism*, which reminds us of St. Augustine’s *figuram implere* vision, as we shall see further on. Merton also speaks of “honest cryptomnesia” or else “submerged or subliminal
“Memory needs a place, a context. Its place, if it finds one that lives beyond a single generation, is to be found in the stories that we tell. We wish to know about the nature of the relation between memory, historical narrative, and self-formation” (Kenny 421). Its symbolic expanse suggests a landed property exceeding the power of our imagination to fathom its fertility. So luxuriant are the roots of what it grows on top of, that it is little wonder they spread out anatopically, out of their own estate. With Merton’s tacit agreement, we can dig deeper for more roots. Here is Wordsworth in his Victorian years, anachronically Romantic, anatopically Bernardian. In “Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood”, he teaches us that our real life precedes our worldly existence, that God is our home, so we are here out of place. Our saving grace though is that our birth, “but a sleep and a forgetting” (l. 59), is literally in-spired, the soul in us coming “Not in entire forgetfulness” (l. 63), but “trailing clouds of glory” (l. 65). This symbolic retrieval of the past secures our future in eternity and the paradox falling on common ears is then revealed in its subtle meaning. “My Heart leaps up” makes it clear: “The Child is father of the Man” (l. 7). His younger, much shorter-lived and certainly less successful Percy Bysshe Shelley made of this meaningful return in time a lifelong philosophy with Vicoian antecedents. A Defence of Poetry carries the obvious message: “In the infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry,” which is why poets are legislators of mankind – at once seeing back and forward in time, analeptic and proleptic law-givers. Further back in time, closer that is to its roots, the message resounds in Francis Bacon’s conviction: “Antiquitas saeculi, juventus mundi,” with the past decisively fresher than the present. If the Ancients are the youth of the human race, the Moderns are the true ancients.

Like any memory of culture in our Western culture of memory the religious precedes and breeds the secular wisdom of the tribe. Fumbling for truth in its everyday guise as petty truths will often result in serendipitous consequences. As in detective fiction, we put some hermeneutic-heuristic method to the test of successive attempts. Suffice it to always remember, or, better still, never forget, that minimifidianism is not the right solution. We may fall prey to disbelief, to doubt, ignorance or knowledge-gaps. Empty-headedness, simplicity, vacuousness and know-nothingism can gnaw at our mnemonic force. Yet nescience is out of the question.
Let us take a symbolic trip to Chartres, the seat of Bernardus Carnotensis, the twelfth-century Neo-Platonist philosopher whose vision is of a piece with St. Augustine’s figuralism. In the cathedral south transept, under the rose representing the Apocalypse, all stained glass themselves, the lancet windows display five paradigmatic scenes: the four Evangelists (Luke, Matthew, John and Mark) on the shoulders of the four great Jewish Prophets (Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezechiel and Daniel) with, in the middle, the Holy Virgin holding the Christ Child.

A quick analytical look may be of help. In each and every lancet window a New Testament appears seated on an Old Testament figure of colossal importance endowed with the amazing capacity of looking beyond time. They do not know
oblivion, nor do they need to memorize anything. They are coextensive with eternity, *achronic* and *atopic*. Luke borne by Jeremiah, Matthew by Isaiah, John by Ezechiel and Mark by Daniel hold tight to their precursors’ heads and shoulders. The Evangelist John, who, according to oral memory, is the only one of the twelve Apostles who was not killed for his faith, lived to be an old man and was buried, holds his prophet’s head with both hands, as if more keen on storing *sapientia*. All the twelve Apostles are illustrated standing on the shoulders of twelve *Old Testament* Prophets on the Bamberg Cathedral Prince’s portal. Against the medieval backdrop of the world being profusely and meaningfully symbolic as consistent evidence of the divine plane underlying it, St. Augustine posits that the Old Covenant is fulfilled in the New Covenant. John of Salisbury quoting St. Bernard of Chartres points to the dynamics of the two in terms of the dwarf-giant relation, or correlation. Its allegorical nature is his main concern, as allegory is, for the medieval neo-Platonist, one of the spiritual senses of *Holy Scripture*, “the typological or figurative Christianization of the ancient allegorical method of interpreting myth [making] possible a synthesis of cosmic-anthropological symbolism with biblical history” (Ladner 232): seeing more and further as Christians is not a matter of keen eyesight, nor one of physical height, but rather one of consolidation secured by the giant mass on which this vision into the future rises.

(Fig. 3) *Diptychs: Moses standing on Mount Sinai, Christ standing on His Church*

Diptychs depicting this exemplary shift show Moses on Mount Sinai by the side of Christ standing on his Church – left and right as halves of a symbolic whole. The one stands under the pointed temple arch, the other under the round church niche. At the time when the Christian faith was settling as the official religion of the Roman Empire such diptychs supplanting the old pagan figures and pagan names were used in gift-giving protocols meant to secure political favours. Their underlying palimpsest rhetoric functioned at the same time as *commemoration* in liturgical culture. Christian identity replacing non-Christian identity, whether preceding or contemporaneous, served as emblematic acknowledgement of a new
reality silencing the previous one, of the official present holding a complex relation of *remembrance-oblivion* with the onetime present. Diptychs of the 6th century exhibit worldly Roman officialdom under pointed arches, while the Archangel stands under the round niche, the cross on the orb in his right hand, like the one over his head instantiating him as another-worldly authority.

(Fig. 4) Anastasis: Roman soldiers resigned under the Resurrection

The same arch-niche dialogue holds on decorations covering early Christian sarcophagi, with the central image *Anastasis*, in which Roman soldiers feature resigned under the Resurrection: the memory of bellicose times is the hypotext of an exemplary present in which doves on the cross support the Christogram of the hypertext. Placed sideways or underneath, the superseded text can also occupy the left side (*sinistra pars*) of the commemorative case, as in the *Jonah Sarcophagus*, while the right side (*dextera pars*) is rightly allotted to the good tidings meant for perpetual commemoration. The Reichenau Gospel only confirms the pointed arch-round niche parallel, in which type and antitype concur to convey a full message. A combination of analogy and contradiction, *typology* as we have inherited it from St. Augustine works according to the temporal logic of *first* and *later*, whose memory-based mechanism makes for meaningful current use. Typology is also based on qualitative logic, of the *same* and *more of the same* kind, according to which the *type* is accomplished in the *antitype*, the prophetic power of the *Old Testament* fulfilled in the apocalyptic vision of the *New Testament*. A self-commenting system, this consistent dialogue of past, present and future in the *memory of the race* offers a key to the variety of the world. In *De Civitate Dei* we read that God decorated the world order with antithesis, as if it were a poem, bestowing upon it the most beautiful figure of speech, the one that brings together counterpoint and opposition, the one *recalling* the other.

Knowledge to be remembered can be disorderly like antiquarianism. Augustinian figuralism helps us out of its unpredictability by applying the key concept of *adumbration*, the foreshadowing of events concurring to make sense of the otherwise meaningless course of nature. The fulfillment of figure(s) is all,
inasmuch as it makes of analeptic recourse proleptic attainment. In light of this Burton-Democritus, for instance, is neither a plagiarist, nor a compiler. Rather, he is a bridge-maker between the Antiquity and the seventeenth century, an erudite engaged in ghost-writing in reverse. No few illustrations of the dwarf-giant metaphor prove it. Here is the said superposing carved in stone on the Church of Payerne façade and on the cover of Merton’s OTSOG back in 1965. A sixteenth-century engraving by Bernardo Daddi modelled on a fresco by Raphael shows Aeneas fleeing burning Troy as he gives his father Anchises a piggy-back ride. The allegorical relationship between father and son is complicated by the presence of the toddler Ascanius clinging to Aeneas’s toga, as well as by the Palladium carried by the old father from the old to the new Troy. And here is Raphael’s own vision of the layers of memory that history in the making, or myth, for that matter, is.

(Fig. 5) Gianlorenzo Bernini, Enea, Anchis e Ascanio in fuga da Troia (1618)

Bernini’s sculpture transforms the technically necessary oneness of the four figures into an orchestration of fulfillment: the boy upholding his father upholding his father holding the statue of the founding protectress, the goddess Athena, make up a chain of authorities carrying in their own persons the memory of the tribe as natural or/and cultural repository.

Left and right of the Roman point zero on our imaginary axis of time – the axis of collective memory – the old and the new Greek moments find their might in the same filiation rapport. Here is the giant Orion carrying his servant Cedalion on his shoulder. The mythical narrative relates how Hephaestus, the god blacksmith, ordered Cedalion to take Orion, blinded by the ruler of Chios, to the easternmost end of the world. There Helios restored his sight, an episode for which Poussin’s illustration serves as a modern re-enactment. And here is the new Greek epochē, with St. Christopher carrying the Christ carrying the orb with the cross on top. Christ’s legs rest on the saint’s neck where the saint’s halo sheds perpetual light. The Christ-Bearer wades through the waves with the ichthys symbolizing Christ on the sea bottom. To the right, for which the mythical son and father head, is the spiritual world, with the legendary hermit holding up a lantern outside his improvised chapel; to the left lies the world down here, with a man and a woman trudging up from the local mill to their cottage, carrying physical weight for earthly
survival. Of the profusion of visualizations of this episode in German culture here is the statue inside the famous Cologne Cathedral, and here is Hieronymus Bosch’s vision of St. Christopher bending under the incredible weight carried on his shoulders and which he will soon learn is the whole world and its maker.

Our symbolic trip to Chartres has taken us all around the aphoristic territory bringing together St. Bernard and Sir Isaac Newton, the mystic and the scientist. Blake, we will remember, repudiated the latter for his “single vision,” which he considered downright “sleep,” the sleep of imagination. The Blakean painting is a Romantic critique of the Scientific Revolution: the author of the Principia Mathematica is steeped in geometric order and precision, programmatically indifferent to the natural beauty of the world. This is the hypertext to Scottish artist Eduardo Paolozzi’s Newton, the steel embodiment of steel-like rigour standing in front of the new British Library, an intimidating presence to humanists like us looking for knowledge in the library’s archives of memory.

We have wandered with intent along the borders of Merton’s favourite aphorism: dwarfs on the shoulders of giants. About one quarter into the book he calls it “a mnemonic gnome about gnomes on the shoulders of giants,” (Merton 74) reason enough for him to call himself “a gnomologist – twice over” (idem). And what does he mean by this? Not once in the book has he warned us that preserving an author’s intellectual property intact is a matter, in the last instance, of morality. The horos or locus coextensive with that property is not to be encroached upon. The Latin translation of aphorism as definition does indicated the fine of the land demarcated. Supplementary care is needed, given the anticipatory nature of figural accomplishment in the process of cultural memory. Merton refers to it as the “tu quoque: but you have also been anticipated!” (Ibidem 95) syndrome. With unconcealed irony he recalls the “heroic theory of creativity through parthenogenesis” (Ibidem 101), vehemently attacked by Sir Isaiah Berlin: “Ideas are not born in a vacuum, nor by a process of parthenogenesis” (Berlin 7). And he adduces further examples to prove it: the Pygmaean empire vs. the land of the Giants in the Memoirs of Scriblerus as first hints for Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels, or the art of congealing wit in writing usually circulating under the name of speaking with the dead, with echoes all the way from Greenblatt back to Machiavelli and Cicero, or, indeed, St. Bernard, the one exemplary preserver of our collective memory who “originally captured the idea of the cumulative though not steady advance of knowledge” (Merton 178).

The mnemonic gnome about gnomes on the shoulders of giants faces us with gnomes and gnomes. Merton’s favourite aphorism is basically γνώµη ‘means of knowing’, ‘mark’, ‘thought’, ‘judgment’, ‘intelligence’, ‘opinion’, a bunch of semes eventually collected in L. sapientia. Those endowed with this capacity could be appointed guardians of the sacred olive trees in ancient Greece. Late Latin placed on our memory orbit the term gnomus designating a fantastic being. Gnostic philosophers and further on poets saw in gnomes small creatures living underground and mastering the elements according to a well-conducted plan: Sylphs reigning over air, Salamanders over fire and so on and so forth. We encounter them in Pope’s Rape of the Lock, their power undiminished by the mock-heroic ethos of the poem. Gnomes and gnomes is what we encounter in Merton’s On the Shoulders of Giants,
or else a eulogy to the memory of humanity for which he extends profuse thanks to the Muse. Nine Muses, let us recall, daughters of Mnemosyne, each and every one responsible for the retrieval of cosmic memory via an art. The art of memory, “a technique to be learned and mastered” (Whitehead 37), served by the arts. And the memory of onetime Greek culture on whose shoulders the enterprising and hedonistic Romans ordered their existence. We are the offspring of the latter. We can only hope that we see them looking into our time(s) owing to their forefathers’ shoulders.

Works Cited


