Commemoration and Perdurance in the Analects. Books I and II
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The life of the mind consists ... in recognizing oneself in other being.

Gadamer, Truth and Method

I

Any meaningful interpretation of a text must confront its divergence from the presuppositions and proclivities of one’s own interpretive tradition. The text’s horizons of meaning exist in tension with one’s own historical and linguistic horizons. However alien a text may be, the point in interpreting it is not to overcome the tension between such horizons but to respect the tension itself: The hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension by attempting a naive assimilation but consistently bringing it out. This is why it is part of the hermeneutic approach to project an historical horizon that is different from the horizon of the present. Historical consciousness is aware of its own otherness and hence distinguishes the horizon of [another] tradition than its own.¹

Nevertheless, if the horizons at play in interpretation are dimensions of otherness, they are also factors of fusing; they act to encompass as well as to bring together: past and present, text and reader. But before any such fusing can take place, one must identify the immediate horizons of one’s preoccupations in the present.

My own current preoccupations concern the nature of human memory and time-consciousness. In a work in progress I have striven to discern the structures of an individual’s remembering—how the personal past is reanimated in the present of recollection, constituting in this way a mini-tradition for that person’s life, an almost monadologically self-enclosed merging of the diverse and often diasporadic dimensions of one’s existence. The missing horizons, the manifest lacunae, in such a self-centered approach to experiences of memory are found in the collective and the commemorative aspects of remembering. Each of these latter entails a special otherness as well: the otherness of the very other human beings who co-constitute genuinely collective memories and the otherness of the absent other (event or person) that is being commemorated on a given occasion.

It is sobering to realize that the horizons missing so flagrantly from my own research are quite pervasively present in the Analects. They are present, first of all, in the very fact that the composers of this text were acting at once collectively and commemoratively: the wisdom of Confucius is to be remembered through, and celebrated through, this work of diverse hands. Second, its textual surface is saturated by expressly collective and commemorative features. Thus one is told

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to turn to self-cultivation only after being respectful, earnest and truthful toward others and seeking their friendship. (Compare Analects, book I, chapter 6 (1:6).) And what are filial piety and ancestor worship generally, if not acts of the most committed collective commemoration?

II

But let us begin cautiously by citing the following text:

The philosopher Tsang said, “Let there be a careful attention to perform the funeral rites to parents, and let them be followed when long gone with the ceremonies of sacrifice;—then the virtue of the people will resume its proper excellence. (1:9, translated by Legge)

In Indo-European languages, “memory” and “mourn” have the same root, mers, which appears in the Sanskrit smárati, “to reflect,” and the Greek mér-inna, “care” or “sorrow”, and mérmeros, “anxious.” Memóř, whence the Latin memoria, ‘memory’, means “mindful,” while commemoráre originally meant merely an intensified remembering. Mourning is still an intensified remembering, though not necessarily by means of a more explicit or vivid recollection of the departed one. What is at stake in mourning is, on the one hand, a set of appropriate affective responses (“care,” “sorrow,” “anxiety”) and, on the other, a being mindful of the person being mourned, reflecting on him or her. Neither the emotional states nor the reflective mindfulness require remembering in the usual sense of recollective recall, that is, the internal representation of past scenes in which the mourned person figured. In fact, the intensification effected by a genuine commemoration of this person may be diluted or diverted by an overly concerted effort to recall details of such scenes, amounting to a fixation on the particularities of the past rather than on the work of mourning in the present.

This line of consideration helps to clarify at least three otherwise seemingly unrelated phenomena at stake in the Analects:

(1) The prohibition, already long-established by Confucius’ lifetime, against referring to the departed one by his or her proper name during rites of burial, mourning, and sacrifice was not merely a matter, as Waley held, of fear that naming the dead might compel their frightening presence. Nor can it be strictly a question of paying respect to the dead, as in one traditional interpretation of this puzzling practice. Rather, I think that we should view it as a fitting expression of the general principle that commemorative mourning is best effected in the absence or suspension of fixating particularity, of which the proper name in its referential uniqueness is an exemplar. (One is reminded here as well of the intriguing notion that the author of a literary text is precisely most effective in his or her absence from the text—in an a-nonymity which Derrida has argued is tantamount to the author-as-dead.)

(2) Freud’s theory of mourning emphasizes the introjection of and identification with the departed person. The immediate result is a con-fusion of oneself with the other, a compression in an intrapsychic entity which has no proper
name since it is at once myself and the other. Here, not just death itself but death’s aftermath is “no respecter of persons”—as is evidenced subsequently in the berating of the departed person for having abandoned oneself.4 (One cannot help but think of the abstinence and self-denial, not to mention the sacrifice, required in ancient Chinese mourning rites: is this not the ceremonial equivalent of the process which Freud so characteristically located within the individual psyche?)

(3) Indeed, it is ceremony itself that is the third factor in the disparate series of items which are here being knit together into an unexpectedly unified knot. Notice, to begin with, how ceremonies combine the collective and the commemorative by their very nature: thereby giving to ‘commemoration’ its now normally accepted sense of com-memoration, memorializing with others. (It is also Freud who warns us that wholly private ceremonial actions, such as those of the obsessive, are highly suspect.) A funeral, after all, is collective and commemorative at once: commemorative in being a collective expression of grief, as well as bindingly collective precisely in being an occasion of commemoration.5

It needs to be stressed, however, that ceremonial action, even though a commiseration or concelebration of persons (or events) past, is not only not dependent on explicit remembering of that to which tribute is being paid but thrives in its very absence. I would not go so far as to say that ceremonies or rituals always defend against or obviate such remembering (though sometimes they surely do so—to the relief of participants who do not wish to be reminded in detail of the mourned-for object). Instead, they effect another kind of remembering, an unexplicit and often unthematized ‘remembering-through’ the ritualistic action itself. When Fingarette, commenting on the Analects, writes that “the ceremonial act is the primary irreducible event,” 6 he is pointing to the phenomenon at stake here. A ceremony such as that of burying or mourning, even if it concerns someone who from now on is entirely past in relation to oneself and whose essence is thus to have been (Wesen ist was gewesen ist)—such a ceremony, bearing on such a person, is nevertheless “irreducible” to a group of elicited memories. The memories are not masked, much less repressed; they are suspended and superseded by the ceremonial occasion, an occasion of collective remembrance.

Contrast this situation with that which is described at the very beginning of the Analects:

I daily examine myself on three points:—whether, in transacting business for others, I may have been not faithful;—whether, in intercourse with friends, I may have been not sincere;—whether I may not have mastered and practiced the instructions of my teacher. (1: 4)

Here exact recollection is in order: when, at day’s end, one thinks back in detail over the course of events to examine one’s conduct in business, friendship, and instruction. To fail to remember accurately at this time is to fail at the very task of self-scrutiny.
Ceremonies, ritualistic actions, rules of propriety—in short, all that makes up the realm of *li*—are repetitive by their very nature. This means not just that they must in principle be such as to occur more than once (typically in cyclical patterns of periodic recurrence) but also that, precisely as repeated or repeatable, they become overt forms of behavior, subject to observation and confirmation by others. They become conduct:

The Master said, 'See what a man does. Mark his motives. Examine in what things he rests. How can a man conceal his character? How can a man conceal his character? (II: 10; compare also chapter 9)

Character and motive are revealed in conduct, concrete action, and not in its "ingratiating appearance" (I: 3), and they are most tellingly revealed in ceremonial conduct—in its repetitive gestures, in which character, especially human-heartedness or *jen*, comes to expression in the well-cultivated forms of *li*.

Freud, too, insisted on the overtness of repetitive action, calling it technically "acting out" and contrasting it precisely with remembering in an essay of 1914 titled "Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through":

The patient does not *remember* anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but *acts* it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he *repeats* it, without, of course, knowing that he repeats it.7

Freud's object in psychoanalysis, itself a highly ritualistic enterprise, is to get the patient to act *in* through transference, and this consists in replacing blind repeating with emotionally insightful remembering.

It is instructive to contrast Freud with Eliade—and both with Confucius—on the issue of repetition. For Eliade, repetition need not be blind; indeed, performed in the right way it is itself a source of insight—not into pathogenesis but cosmogenesis, not into the origins of individuals but into the origins of whole worlds. The ritualistic reenactment of myths results in the regeneration of the celebrants. In such a conception of repetition, we have moved once more to the level of the collective and the commemorative and thus beyond the Freudian model of the unregenerative and unrememorative character of individuals acting out in isolation from each other. But, by the same token, we have also moved beyond the Analects, which displays as much indifference toward cosmic origins (and thus the renewal that is achieved by the repetition of these origins in ceremonial actions) as it does toward the origin of individuals. In the Analects the scale of ritualistic activity lies between individual and cosmos in such intermediate entities as the family, the state, or groups of friends and scholars. Where Freud and Eliade present us with a diremptive choice between the alienated pathogenic person and the entirety of a people or race—between "the terror of history" (in Eliade's words) and "the future of an illusion" (in Freud's words)—the Confucian paradigm circumvents any such choice by refusing to
regard the individual and cosmos as mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive alternatives. What Tu Wei-ming has written of the relation between self and society holds true at this vaster level as well:

... the dangers of self-isolation and social coercion can be conquered if a fundamental change [can] be made in the dichotomous way of perceiving the relationship between the self and society. . . . The source of such a change is located neither in the self nor in society exclusively. It has to be sought in both, and indeed in the 'between' .

By the same token, the Analects rejects a forced choice between repeating and remembering by combining both in its vision of li. This is accomplished by situating ritualistic action between the empty formality of blind repetition (hence “natural ease” per se in performing ceremonies is not sufficient but requires in addition a knowledge of the “rules of propriety” ) and the fixity of explicit recollection: it is a matter, as I have said, not of remembering simpliciter but of remembering-through. Thus, one remembers one’s fathers’ fathers through remembering one’s own father, achieving an intergenerational continuity not possible when remembering is confined to actual experiences within the limits of the rememberer’s lifetime. (Notice, again, how far we are from Freud, who restricts significant remembering to the particular past of one’s actual, albeit repressed, childhood; and from Eliade, who allows commemorative repetition to reach back into the pre-individual, pre-historical era of a time before time.)

What emerges most forcefully is just how much the Confucian conception of ritualistic action represents a middle way between the cosmic ambitiousness of an “archaic ontology”10 and the finitistic pessimism of psychoanalysis. It does so by thinking of the repetition effected by ceremony as collective and commemorative in a manner that is at once manifestly modest and subtly self-expansive.

IV

The very notion of repetition brings us into the domain of time, and it is quite tempting to proceed (as does Eliade) by distinguishing between a “sacred time” (that reenacted in the ritual) and a “profane time” (all nonritualized experience). To do so is to continue in the Platonic tradition of discriminating between “eternity” (aion: a wholly intelligible, wholly fulfilled order of being) and “time” (chronos as the moving and mostly empty eikon of eternity). Beginning with such a dichotomy as this, one inevitably spends a lot of philosophical time trying to figure out how the temporal and the eternal are to relate to each other more meaningfully than by way of one merely serving as the external image of the other. Either eternity is made more timelike (as in Aquinas’ view of it as a “nunc stans”) or time is allowed to rise to the level of eternity as on those rare “moments of vision” (Augenblicken) on which both Kierkegaard and Heidegger repose so much hope.

Comparatively little attention has been paid in the West to a third temporal
mode: what I shall call “perdurance.” This notion is something less than what the ancient Greeks (thinking of the regular circuits of the heavenly bodies) called the “everlasting” or the medievals (thinking of angels) the “sempiternal.” But it is also something more than Locke’s definition of duration as “the distance . . . between the appearance of any two ideas in our minds,” which commits us to a mentalism from which Bergson’s idea of durée attempted to extricate us. Nor does mere continuance in time—such as we find in Dilthey’s idea of “the connectedness of life [in human history]”—do justice to the notion either. For sheer continuation in time means only to be stretched between two datable now-points, and thus willy-nilly constitutes that time-line by which durational time is so often represented (and precisely by Locke): “duration is but as it were the length of one straight line, extended in infinitum.”

Heidegger, who already in Being and Time had attempted to reinterpret duration by reference to Dasein’s actively “stretching itself along” in history, later introduced the factor of “lasting,” which I take to be more essential to perdurance than is sheer continuation. I cite from the late essay “Time and Being”:

To presence (Wesen) means to last (Währen). But we are too quickly content to conceive lasting as mere duration, and to conceive duration in terms of the customary representation of time as a span of time from one now to a subsequent now. To talk of presencing (An-wesen), however, requires that we perceive biding and abiding in lasting as lasting in present being (Anwähren). What is present concerns us, the present, that is: what, lasting, comes toward us, us human beings.

What lasts has permanence: at least insofar as it “comes toward us.” A tradition is a case in point: it lasts, has an ongoing effective-history (Wirkungsgeschichte), just insofar as it comes toward us (and we toward it) in that activity of mutual engagement called ‘interpretation’. Perdurance is enduring-through such an encounter, and it is the most characteristic temporal mode of a text transmitting a tradition: in this respect the Analects, still coming toward us as this text does, is itself a perduring cultural object.

Other perduring objects include natural language and currency systems, various habits and tendencies, world-historical or metaphysical “epochs” as well as strictly local customs and mores, and so on. The list could continue almost indefinitely. What all such concrete cases of perdurance share is a combination of sameness or permanence over time with a capacity to modify or evolve (but this latter only gradually: for “withstanding wear or decay” [O.E.D.] is indispensable to perdurance). Between the fixity, the sheer ever-the-sameness of eternity, and the ceaseless flux of transient temporality (wherein all is ever-the-other) stands perdurance, providing sameness and difference, motion and rest, at the same time and not just in succession (as in linear duration). Thus we come upon yet another middle term, one which likewise mediates between extremities.
Hence it is hardly surprising to realize that ritual—itself such a decisive tertium quid in human affairs—exhibits perdurance as its own main temporal mode. This is evident, for example, in Confucius’ summation of the ancient Odes as telling us “not to swerve from the right path” (II:2, trans. Lau). Where Lucretius made swerving or clinamen the very principle of creativity in the otherwise unproductive universe of atoms moving in straight lines, swerving from the straight lines of li—from the human universe of ritual—is unproductive precisely because it undermines the perduringness of ceremonies enacted and reenacted over generations. Not swerving from the rites is what allows them to last—not just to come down to the present but, as Heidegger suggests, to come toward it actively.

Nevertheless, just as perduring does not require simple continuance of the same (which would amount to the stasis of eternity—or of death), so ceremonial nonswerving is compatible with modification and innovation within its formal structures. Here, as elsewhere, it is a matter of what Confucius calls “the spirit of the rites”:

Unless a man has the spirit of the rites, in being respectful he will wear himself out, in being careful he will become timid ... (VIII:2, trans. Lau)

What matters is once more conduct, how you act (“while a man’s father is alive, look at the bent of his will; when his father is dead, look at his conduct” (I:11)), or expression, that is, how you appear as you enact a rite (“Tzu-hsia asked about being filial. The Master said, ‘what is difficult to manage is the expression on one’s face’” (II:8)). Conduct and expression make manifest the spirit of ritualized activity which, without them, is susceptible to the emptiness of sheer repetition. They also help to make this activity genuinely perduring, and therewith both more readily rememberable and more lastingly memorable.

It is important to realize that perdurance extends to more even than to ritualized action as such. In order to show this, I want to indicate briefly how it is apposite in three other areas at stake in the first two Books of the Analects.

(a) governance. There is no difficulty in discovering in this text instances of how perdurance from without (in the person and place of the central ruler) is important in government: for example, in the comparison of the ruler to the North Star (II:1). But the Analects is equally concerned with perdurance from within in good governance, and this in two forms: first, in the noncentralized and widely diffused filial piety that is itself essential to public service; second, in the internalization of rules of propriety so that people are motivated not by fear of punishment but by their own abiding “sense of shame” (compare II:3). In this latter case we rejoin the theme of identification via interiorization—identification now with presently perceived virtuous action rather than with the departed other. Freud would call it a matter of forming an ego ideal rather than
instilling this other inside as occurs in mourning; either way, we have to do with assuring perdurance within the psyche.

(b) knowledge. Book One of the Analects opens dramatically with a set of claims, all of which bear on the perduring nature of knowledge:

The Master said, “Is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application?”

“Is it not delightful to have friends coming from distant quarters?” [that is, that others, who keep their learning in mind, come to the same perduring place so as to share this learning].

“Is he not a man of complete virtue, who feels no discomposure though men may take no note of him?” [for having gained a lasting grasp of what he has learned, he does not require an express recognition of such an abiding possession]. (I: 1)

Further, the celebrated sequence of stages in Confucius’ autobiographical sketch in Book Two can be viewed under the aspect of cognitive perdurance, that is, a gaining and increasing of certainty in knowledge:

At fifteen, I had my mind bent on learning.
At thirty, I stood firm.
At forty, I had no doubts.
At fifty, I knew the decrees of Heaven. (II: 4)

Each of these stages bears on the perduring in the realm of knowledge, as does the following claim still more explicitly:

If a man keeps cherishing his old knowledge, so as continually to be acquiring new, he may be a teacher of others. (II: 1)

We are again reminded of how perduring implies enduring through: here the enduring of already acquired knowledge through the occasion of its being imparted to others in ever varied forms of expression and of acquiring new knowledge in this very process. Further, consider the statement that “when you know a thing, hold that you know it; when you do not know a thing, allow that you do not know it—this is knowledge” (II: 17). This is to acknowledge the decisive difference between the perdurance of really knowing something and the non-perdurance of the not-known.

(c) character. “Character” is one of the most constitutive features of the human self, and is the primary perduring element of this self in its relation with others. If it is not always true that “one’s character is one’s fate,” character is there to be counted on. It is what remains (hence Freud’s temptation to define it as, quite literally, a remnant of human relationships: “a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes . . . that contains the history of those object-choices”).

Speaking more prospectively, we could say that character is the basis of reliability, and even of much predictability, in human experience. Both aspects of character, backward- and forward-looking, contribute to its perdurability; and it is of considerable significance that both of them are incorporated into the second chapter of Book One of the Analects:
It is rare for a man whose character is such that he is good as a son and obedient as a young man to have the inclination to transgress against his superiors; it is unheard of for one who has no such inclination to be inclined to start a rebellion. [Here is the prospective outlook]... Being good as a son and obedient as a young man is, perhaps, the root of a man's character. [Here is the backward look to origins.] (I:2)

The particular manifestation of character most at stake early in the Analects is “trustworthiness.” In chapters four through eight of its first book trustworthiness is constantly on the agenda; for example:

In my dealings with my friends have I failed to be trustworthy in what I say? (I: 4)
In guiding a state of a thousand chariots approach your duties with reverence and be trustworthy in what you say ... (I:5)
Make it your guiding principle to do your best for others and to be trustworthy in what you say ... (I:8)

Being “trustworthy in what you say” is mentioned no less than five times in Book One alone. Why this stress on the relationship between trustworthiness and language, especially when (as occurs in Book Two) language is made subordinate to action (so that the gentleman “puts his words into action before allowing his words to follow his action” (II:13))? The answer is suggested in a remarkable passage in Book One: “‘to be trustworthy in word is close to being moral in that it enables one’s words to be repeated’” (I:13, my italics). Words, once uttered or written, take on a lasting life of their own which allows them to be repeated and thus counted on. Quotability, like character itself, is something to be relied on, for both perdure in and through time. Of both we can say (quoting the Odes as they are themselves quoted at I:15):

Like bone cut, like horn polished,
Like jade carved, like stone ground.

Every beginning reader of the Analects finds himself or herself bewildered before this seemingly scattered text. Such a response is even sanctioned by D. C. Lau in commenting on his recent translation of this work:

The casual reader of the Lun yü [Analects] may come away with the impression that the chapters in the individual books are in a haphazard order. This is because it happens to be so with Books I and II ... [which] lack any obvious principle of organization.

It is natural to be so bewildered; but I no longer think that the arrangement of Books I and II is haphazard; and I believe that an organizing principle can be found—not, of course, for every chapter of these books, yet one that is illuminating for many chapters nonetheless.

It is ironically appropriate that this principle has turned out to be precisely perdurance, one of whose very properties is to hold together what is disparate in time and space. Here it helps to hold an otherwise inchoate text together; such is
what I have tried to suggest, however sketchily. I realize that my efforts may strike some as imposing the foreign on the already alien, or as attempting to explain the obscure by the still more obscure. If this is so, then I have indeed failed to fuse horizons in Gadamer's sense—which is tantamount to failure to understand a text or a tradition. In defense of my line of interpretation, it will not do to make the imperious (and false!) claim that "nothing human is alien to man": it is precisely the alien from which we always begin in coming to understand something. It is a matter, rather, of asserting the fittingness of an interpretation: and thus I point to the fact that perdurance is, of all modes of temporality, the one most suited to explicate human existence taken on its own nontransfinite terms—taken at the level of experience or action regulated and refined by ritual.

There are, of course, other temporal modes descriptive of the finitely human—the retentions and protentions of time-consciousness (Husserl), or Dasein's ecstatico-futural temporality (Heidegger)—but these seem much less fully reflective of the human world at issue in the Analects. And that it is a human, a deeply humanized, world in the first place recommends perdurance over the extremities of endless eternity and the punctiform instant, which are more adequately descriptive of the suprahuman and infrahuman domains, respectively.

VII

Let me attempt, in a few closing words, to come full cycle. My present preoccupation, I said at the outset, is above all with human memory, and the Analects offers precious suggestions regarding that form of remembering which is usually called commemorating. We have learned that this latter is not only an intensified remembering achieved with others (this would only account for its collective aspect) but that it is, more particularly, a remembering-through. Through what then? Primarily through two sorts of things: through ritual actions and through texts, each being a critical place of access to the traditions they incorporate and disseminate.

What must be emphasized is that ritual and text are not in this perspective mere means of commemoration, simple points of support for a re-membering that transcends them to rejoin a distant tradition (as on the Eliadean model of rejuvenating an origin by repeating it). Instead, a ritual or text is itself a commemoration of the tradition it celebrates. Moreover, a tradition perdures in a rite or a word which effects its active remembrance. What Fung Yu-lan has said of texts is true of rites as well:

The I Ching, deprived of its Appendices, is no more than a book of divination; the Chi'un Chi'u, without such commentaries as those of Kung-yang, is only a collection of dry-as-dust brief court records; and the I Li, separated from the Li Chi, is only a book of etiquette. In themselves these works could not possibly have possessed the influence which they have exercised during the last two thousand years. It is not the books themselves, but the writings based on them, that have been of outstanding influence in Chinese history . . .

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Freud would have invoked just here the power of “deferred action” (Nachträglichkeit), and he would have attributed this power to unconscious memories possessed by individuals. We can agree provided only that we extend the bounds of ‘memory’ to include commemorating carried out collectively in the reading of texts and in the enacting of rites set forth in these same texts.

NOTES

5. Two extremely painful reminders of this are found in (a) being barred from going to a funeral of a loved one, when one is apt to feel not only insulted or outraged but deprived of a form of grieving which one cannot hope to achieve by oneself, and (b) “anniversary reactions” to loss or death, especially as these occur in conjunction with public holidays: then one’s reemerging grief is poignantly out of step with collection manifestations, now not by virtue of exclusion but by mismatch of attitude and mood.
12. Ibid., chap. 15, par. 11.
15. “‘How is it possible to take [a] middle way?’ The Master said: ‘by means of the li, the li. Yes, it is by the li that one may hold to the mean’” (*Li Chi*, chap. 28).
17. Indeed, the *Li Chi* maintains the position that “the fundamental principles of the li remain unchanged, but their outward concrete manifestations in ‘the number of things and observances’ ever change with the time” (Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, trans. Derk Bodde (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1952), vol. 1, p. 340).
18. “In answering the question as to why he was not directly engaged in government, Confucius said: [One is] filial, [one] discharges [his] brotherly duties . . . This then also constitutes the exercise of government” (II: 21).