



## Hiscock, Andrew. Reading Memory in Early Modern Literature

Grant Williams

Volume 35, numéro 2, printemps 2012

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1105843ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v35i2.19381>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Williams, G. (2012). Compte rendu de [Hiscock, Andrew. Reading Memory in Early Modern Literature]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 35(2), 160–162. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v35i2.19381>

réunis dans les deux volumes font apparaître le travail érudit, minutieux, patient et passionné d'une universitaire, chercheuse et enseignante, dont la lecture enrichit le lecteur. Fragonard parvient à l'enthousiasmer, car au savoir du spécialiste, elle mêle un ton varié qui passe du sérieux au léger et vice versa, et qui souvent laisse transparaître le lien intime et affectif qu'elle entretient avec ses auteurs. Ces deux volumes qui réunissent des articles auparavant dispersés sont une contribution importante aux études de la période d'Henri IV et sont destinés aux spécialistes des XVI<sup>e</sup> et XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles, mais aussi à tous ceux qui veulent mieux comprendre le lien entre littérature, vie et parole.

AGNES CONACHER, *Queen's University*

**Hiscock, Andrew.**

***Reading Memory in Early Modern Literature.***

Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. xi, 320. ISBN 978-0-521-76121-5 (hardcover) \$87.

What is admirable about this study is its comprehensive coverage of the traditions and operations of memory in Tudor and early Stuart English literature. Its ambitious breadth can be discerned not only in the wonderfully eclectic passages on remembering the past that Hiscock has gathered from unexpectedly germane corners of early modern textuality, but more significantly in its coverage of a wide selection of notable English authors whose writings revolve closely around questions of all things memorial. Rather than concentrate on a few playwrights or poets within a narrow generic band, Hiscock's study investigates a range of genres and literary discourses, all eight chapters but one focusing on a single seminal author with a distinctive generic or multi-generic outlook.

The first chapter deals with the ways in which Surrey's courtly and erotic poetry deploys acts of memory for critiquing the culture of the Tudor court. Chapter 2 examines how Katherine Parr's prayers and meditations constitute memory as a political act during Henry's later years when reformed attitudes coexisted uneasily, even dangerously, with established Catholic doctrines. The third chapter explores the multiple roles that commemoration play in

generating the Protestant hagiography of Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*. Chapter 4 argues that the Elizabethan fiction of Nashe, Deloney, and Gascoigne questions the prevailing "cultural reflex" to build a stable self out of historical narratives of origination. In chapter 5 the Countess of Pembroke's devotional work, various translations, and courtly verse betray her underlying commitment to a vocation of memory, particularly in mourning and commemorating her brother Philip. In chapter 6, Donne's sermons and secular and religious verse, exhibiting a profound knowledge of the classical and Christian traditions of memory, bear witness to the full early modern experience of memory, its divine debts, its redemptive potential, and its "morally corrosive promptings" (p. 167). In chapter 7, Ben Jonson's epigrams, lyrics, and odes portray memory as the poet's obligation to the *civitas* to stave off "the remorseless onslaught of cultural amnesia" (p. 34) threatened by the deterioration of society's morals. Finally, chapter 8 tackles Bacon's philosophical writings, in which he wages an attack on the traditional scholastic memory that, according to him, has unproductively mired men's minds in textual detritus to the expense of empirical observation; and yet, as Hiscock notes, Bacon's great advancement of science still relies heavily on preserving the past and remembering intellectual antecedents.

The vision of memory that emerges from Hiscock's comprehensive perspective is that of a trans-generic and trans-discursive activity that spans the period's major cultural categories: the public and the private, the religious and the secular, knowledge and ethics, and the body and the soul, as well as class and gender divisions. Yet for all of memory's ubiquity, its dynamism and variety in the period require Hiscock to consider how a writer's placement within a historical moment explains the significance of his or her textual mediations of the past.

Because of his insistence on the cultural and literary centrality of memory, readers may be inclined to take Hiscock's monograph as a thematic study grounded in relevant biographical historicization. But I think that would be a serious understatement of what he is trying to achieve. Less polemically explicit than historically detailed, his chapters taken together make a case for memory as not so much an idea or motif in early modern literature as a cluster of existential activities of remembering, recalling, and recollecting by which subjects formed their identities. How an early modern engaged or intervened in the past determined how he or she viewed themselves in their world. Hiscock's attention to literary authors also implies a further twist to the general argument

that, culturally speaking, memory contributed to the identity formation of subjects who lived during the long sixteenth century. The subject position of authorship was even more significantly contingent upon acts of remembering, since to be an author within a particular genre necessitated textual techniques of recreating the past, whether ritualistically mourning the loss or absence of loved ones, recalling biblical injunctions through citation or typology, translating a devotional treatise into English, praising exemplary public figures from a bygone era, or following the humanist principle of *imitatio*. In the period, an author remembers because a rememberer authors.

Despite avoiding the terminology of a distinct theoretical methodology, Hiscock's study promotes a subtle approach to memory that refuses to ossify the past for early modern subjects. He accomplishes this by periodically drawing insightful parallels between conceptualizations of early modern memory and those of twentieth-century thinkers on the topic, such as Freud, Ricoeur, and Derrida. Clearly in his attempts to find continuities between modernity and the Renaissance, he is not troubled by new historicist or constructivist handwringing over failing to create an artificial vacuum of cultural alterity. His subtle approach also arises from acknowledging the contested issues in early modern debates on memory, which he covers well in his introduction and draws upon in his subsequent chapters. For example, he finds both Aquinas's and Augustine's views on remembering operating in Donne's writings and identifies Catholic memorial practices in the Reformist writings of Parr and Foxe. Consequently, early modern writers bear witness to the "competition for cultural narrativization" (p. 2) that considers history to possess the potential of multiple pasts and thereby sheds light on the possible selves that such writers and readers might have been.

As a site of conflicting narratives, memory in Hiscock's account is profoundly temporal rather than inertly spatial. It is no wonder then that his study minimizes the cultural importance of images and places in the *ars memorativa*, examined at length by the scholarship of Frances Yates, Mary Carruthers, and Lina Bolzoni. Overall, the scope of *Reading Memory* supplements the scholarship of William Engel and Garret A. Sullivan, both of whom concentrate on drama rather than lyric forms in early modern literature and, in the case of Engel, on emblems and the *memento mori* tradition.