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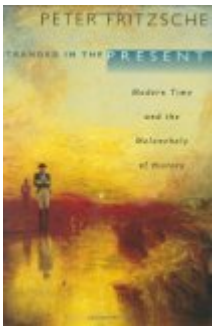

Peter Fritzsche. *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History.* Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2004. 268 pp. $27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-01339-1.

Reviewed by Matthew Brown

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According to the Romantic poet Novalis, our paths in life lead "always homeward" (*immer nach Hause*). Read against the background of the French Revolution and its upheavals, the desire to return to a place and time of safety and security becomes easily understandable. But as Peter Fritzsche's *Stranded in the Present* suggests about this era and its legacy for modernity, we can never truly arrive at this destination. For Fritzsche, the Revolution itself and the entire revolutionary period experienced by its interpreters (and survivors) created a fundamental sense of rupture between past and present as well as between individuals, groups, and their previously accepted sources of personal and social meaning. Following the works of George Steiner and Lynn Hunt, Fritzsche argues forcefully and convincingly for the revolutionary mindsets that accompanied the events of the Revolution and its seemingly endless aftershocks.[1] The creation of a new sensibility about the place of the individual in the drama of history provides the impetus for Fritzsche's work, which traces the dislocations experienced by individuals living through these literally unsettling times. Following an introduction and first chapter on the centrality of the Revolution, Fritzsche continues in thickly descriptive prose, creating a rich cultural history that draws upon an impressive array of sources to create a tapestry of this new historical awareness.

Each subsequent chapter examines a symbol of the shift in outlook by modern Western Europeans and Americans between the Revolution and the first decades of the nineteenth century. The second chapter, "Strangers," examines the experience of exile through diaries, memoirs, and biographical-fictional works, the literary forms most common to describing the initial encounters with the Revolution. For Fritzsche, Francois-Rene de Chateaubriand, the French aristocrat, Romantic author and later diplomat, embodies the modern phenomenon of displacement and discontinuity. His personal experience with the Revolution served as the basis of his enduring feelings of dislocation, which came to structure the ways that he narrated his life. His frustrating efforts to continually recreate himself through his forty-year memoirs, *Memoirs from Beyond the Grave*, stand as a poignant testament to his generation's need

to come to terms with loss and exile, not so much from a place but from another time. Perhaps best captured by Chateaubriand's insight into the difficulties of modern identity that "Man does not have a single, consistent life" (p. 57), his fellow émigrés expressed similar existential anxieties about their own contingency. Writing their lives against the background of historical experience, contemporaries such as the well-known Germaine de Stael and the less-known Madame de Menerville told their stories to create meaning out of the disruptions of their age. The author's insightful readings of these sources help reveal the important relationship between their content and their literary form, but the crucial point for Fritzsche is that the stranger and the exile serve as compelling symbols for modern life itself, or at least life experienced in this nostalgic, melancholic temporal mode.

Chapter 3 turns to related representations of pre- and post-revolutionary time by exploring "Ruins." The subjects of study move from the literary to the physical, though our access to the places of memory remains mediated through their interpreters. De Stael and Chateaubriand reappear, but the central figures here are Dorothea Schlegel and Sulpiz Boisseree. The latter was a German art collector who traveled along the Rhine and attempted to chart the rise of German national consciousness by merging its history to its geography and above all the ruins (castles, churches and towers) of its former greatness meant to be regained (pp. 114-122). The ruin central to this chapter--and one that might have been examined at greater length because of its pregnant symbolism--is the uncompleted Gothic cathedral in Cologne, a monument to the unrealized possibilities of the past and the possibility of realizing them in the future (pp. 108-110).

The changing historical perspectives on the Cologne cathedral help to illustrate the organizing argument of this chapter, which revolves around the fundamental differences between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century understandings of ruins and their significance. Neo-Classical understandings of ruins had stressed the moral lessons gained from recognizing the superiority of nature over human-made edifices, viewing the universal cycles of natural decay and regeneration as permitting the reintegration of nature and humanity. By contrast, nineteenth-century historical and Romantic "theories of ruins" emphasized the uniqueness of the singular ruin and especially its testimony to a particular catastrophic moment. Summing up this distinction, Fritzsche points up the dialectical power of the ruin in the post-revolutionary imagination. "Although history threatened the ruin of the ruin," he writes, "the fragment also spoke through history in a way that the silence of nature's reclamation had not permitted" (p. 105). The ruin served as a reminder of contingency and the threat of sudden destruction, but also allowed tangible access to the "half-hidden" pasts invoked by individuals seeking personal and, increasingly important for Fritzsche in this chapter, national-political meanings.

There is a fluid transition from "Ruins" to Chapters 4 and 5, which bring the story closer to home by examining the localization of national memory. Fritzsche interprets a range of cultural artifacts in these chapters, from literature to the "memory palaces" of nineteenth-century American family parlors to the family quilts that provided a sense of connection (and possession) between passing generations. Drawing upon recent scholarship that understands national identification as a process of exchange between centralizing ideologies and local experience, "Along the Hedges" reveals how literary figures in Britain and Germany imagined the nation through intimate and fragmentary pieces drawn from landscapes of place and time.[2] The chapter opens with brief discussions of William Cobbett and John Clare, but its central figures are the Grimm brothers and their collections of folk stories, word origins, and autobiographical events. Initially derided by their academic contemporaries for a lack

of aesthetic discrimination, their ***Kinder- und Hausmaerchen*** (1812) eventually came to define the accepted, authentic heritage of the German nation (pp.142-156). For Fritzsche, the Grimms' project to build the nation from its "bits and pieces" testifies to the tentative, even precarious nature of collective identity. In their attempt to demonstrate the primordial unity of German-ness intended for preservation, the Grimms paradoxically relied upon the many-sided and contested fragments that they so reverently culled and cobbled. And while their project had a decidedly recuperative impulse, they performed it with a melancholic awareness of the distance between past and present, time lost and meant to be regained.

The Grimms represented an early example of a trend explored by Fritzsche in further detail in his final chapter on "Household Fairies": the domestication of memory. The increasing emphasis placed on family life and the cultivation of familial memory during the nineteenth century reveals the ways in which modern conceptions of time and history found expressions at all levels of society. Moving across the Atlantic, the author turns to the United States to examine the "work of memory" in the continentally expanding republic of the nineteenth century. Fritzsche offers the example of Harriet Beecher Stowe, the famous abolitionist writer, whose family's move from Connecticut to Ohio in 1832 captured the geographical distances between "East" and "West" and the shifting sense of time, place, and identity created by changing locations for her family and more broadly for the nation (pp. 162-166). To demonstrate the trans-Atlantic character of the changes charted by the work, Fritzsche compares these and other American experiences to the genres and styles of writing that dominated European letters at this time: autobiography, the historical novels of Sir Walter Scott, and the precursor to Proust, the French author Gerard de Nerval.

These literary forms and the middle-class household designed for preserving, ritualizing, and transmitting memory revealed the "historicization of private life" that linked large-scale historical events to the personal and family fortunes of ordinary people. In the domestic sphere, events such as birthdays and family reunions combined with memorial objects such as photographs and scrapbooks to create a sense of continuity in times and places increasingly susceptible to rapid change and a sense of loss. For nineteenth-century Americans, this susceptibility was felt perhaps most poignantly in New England, the site of haunted houses with mysterious pasts and the ghost stories they generated in popular literature. Fritzsche draws upon the imagery of "abandoned" New England to subtly make a broader point about the commingling of triumphant expansionism (Manifest Destiny) and the sense of nostalgia and loss created by this westward movement. Like its European counterpart, Victorianism, American ideologies of progress came with an uneasy feeling about disconnection and the erosion of meaningful pasts, initiating strategies meant to preserve memories through a variety of cultural practices.

The conclusion, entitled "The Historical Age," provides a summary and set of final remarks on the overall significance of the modern West's historical consciousness. Fritzsche highlights both its emancipatory possibilities (the idea that things can, in fact, be different than before) and its ideological justifications for dispossessing those deemed "outside" of modernity (Native Americans and non-Westerners in general), and ends with a call "forward" that at the same time acknowledges the consequences of this imperative.

On the whole, the work is written quite well, making it accessible to a wide readership beyond specialists in modern history. Its style is evocative, eloquent, at times poetic. The author effectively captures the richness of the period under investigation, roughly 1780-1850. We meet some lesser-

known figures in the history of Western Europe and the United States, as well as some more familiar names whose stories are told in intriguing ways. Fritzsche's readings of primary sources are sound, at times quite illuminating, and his mastery of secondary literature on a wide variety of topics stands out, revealing the challenge and reward of writing this type of cultural history. In a word, ***Stranded in the Present*** is an enjoyable and informative work whose relatively short length disguises its richness and depth. At the outset of the conclusion, Fritzsche reviews the task he had set for himself: to explore "the passionate and intimate kinds of cultural activity that this particular conception of history made possible" (p. 201). Undoubtedly the work achieves this goal.

Like any good piece of historical writing, Fritzsche's work raises a number of questions while it sheds light on others. By way of critique I want to raise a set of questions to place the work into a broader discussion of modern, and perhaps premodern, historical consciousness. First, I wonder how the author would extend the story to include the twentieth century and its own ruptures, especially two World Wars and the Holocaust. Was there something distinctive about these events and their effects on personal and cultural meaning, or did they only lead to a heightened awareness of the sensibilities that the revolutionary period had created? Put simply, can we say that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries "played out" the effects of the ruptures at the end of the eighteenth, or did these later historical "right angles" create new forms of temporal understandings incommensurate with previous ones?

These questions concern the period following the revolutionary era. Another set of issues could be raised about times prior to it. Fritzsche makes a compelling case for the differences between pre- and post-revolutionary understandings of time and history, so my criticism does not involve whether or not modern Westerners' conceptions changed fundamentally around 1800. Instead, I wonder why they changed precisely in the ways they did. What was it about the revolutionary era itself that created a new sense of historical time instead of non-historical, even mythical notions? As Yosef Yerushalmi demonstrated in his masterful work, "Jewish History and Jewish Memory," there is no obvious connection between historical catastrophe and historical consciousness. Indeed, in the aftermath of their 1492 expulsion from Spain, a people whose sacred texts enjoined them to "remember" found meaning not in history but instead in the mysticism of Kabbalah.[3] Why, then, did modern Western Europeans and Americans take another route following their own encounter with rupture? Why did they take the plunge into historical sensibility in the precise ways so thoroughly described in this work?

Notes

[1]. See George Steiner, ***In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture*** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971); and Lynn Hunt, ***Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*** (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

[2]. For two examples, see Celia Applegate, ***A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat*** (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); and Alon Confino, ***The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Württemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory, 1871-1918*** (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

[3]. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, ***Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*** (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), ch. 3, especially pp. 73-74.

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