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Archiving Art
The Value of Nostalgia in Hemingway's A Moveable Feast

Jared Michael Pence

In 1979, Fred Davis published his book Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia, in which he prophesied that “it is conceivable that ‘nostalgia’ qua word will in time acquire connotations that extend its meaning to any sort of positive feeling toward anything past, no matter how remote or historical” [emphasis in the original] (8). Davis’s prophesy about feeling nostalgic for what we’ve never experienced seems to have come true, evidenced by the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of nostalgia as a “sentimental longing for or regretful memory of a period of the past, esp. one in an individual’s own lifetime,” where nostalgia is first and foremost for the vague “period of the past” and is only specific to an individual’s experience in “especial” cases (“nostalgia”). This definition broadens the concept of nostalgia beyond the scope of what a person has experienced to the possibility of nostalgic longing for anything in the past, regardless of any personal connection to it. Rather than seeing nostalgia as longing for our personal experiences, both Davis and current definitions of nostalgia broaden the concept to include longing for what we’ve never experienced. For instance, Davis’s forecast about nostalgia appears in the contemporary proliferation of nostalgic evocations of the 1920s seen in films such as Baz Luhrmann’s The Great Gatsby (2013) and Paula McClain’s bestselling novel The Paris Wife (2011). Arising from this trend is Woody Allen’s Midnight in Paris (2011), a film which specifically revolves around
the nostalgia for 1920s Paris. How is there such prominent nostalgia for 1920s Paris ninety years after the fact, especially when most people living never experienced that time or place personally? We can feel nostalgia for things we never experienced because of the way we remember and archive the past, and even though memory is unreliable for accurate representations of the past, archiving the past through art allows artists and cultural consumers the freedom to discover subjective truth and feel nostalgia for it. The subjective truth and current nostalgia for 1920s Paris rests on how Ernest Hemingway remembered and archived his past in *A Moveable Feast*.

As a young American soldier trying to work through the trauma of World War I, Hemingway spent seven years living in Paris, struggling to establish himself as a writer. Nearly forty years after his time in Paris, Hemingway wrote *A Moveable Feast*, a memoir of his Paris years, which was edited and published by his wife Mary three years after he committed suicide¹. The memoir is a disjointed collection of sketches that details some of the people and places that Hemingway interacted with in 1920s Paris. The book includes often glamorous and mythic representations of his interactions with famous artists and writers as well as depicting a romanticized account of his rise to success as a writer. Even though the preface to the 1964 edition of *A Moveable Feast* makes it clear that Hemingway was not striving for historical accuracy, his memoir has stood as a foundation for representations of 1920s Paris since its publication. In fact, the memoir establishes the remembered archive of 1920s Paris with Hemingway as the principle archon or keeper of the archive. Through an exploration of Hemingway’s memoir as the principal archive of 1920s Paris, discussing the unreliability of memory and the truth value of unreliable, artistic representations in the text, I will show that while critics argue that nostalgia can be dangerous to our present and future, nostalgia for 1920s Paris is constructive and useful. Furthermore, while it is true that memory is possibly inaccurate and unreliable at reflecting the historical past, artistic representation of memories can often better portray truth than texts that strive for factual documentation.

The Archive and the Unreliability of Memory

The term “archive” has received significant analysis as many critics have sought to understand and explain the concepts of memory and nostalgia².
In the introduction to Derrida’s *Archive Fever*, he breaks down the linguistic constructs of the word “archive,” explaining the dual meaning of arkhē as both commencement and commandment (1–2). Anciently, the archive that held historical documents served to establish the commencement of a society as the source of historical origin and sequence. It was also the place where order and law were constructed (commandment), since its foundation was on the precedents of the past as recorded in the documents. The archon, the person who guards or maintains the archive, is in a position of power because of the role the archive has in establishing commandment, law, and order. Of course, the archive was initially a physical place but over time transformed from a literal place to a representative seat of power. Consequently, those in power establish the archive basing it more on what they deem important rather than on some kind of objective historical past. The archive for 1920s Paris (what has been established as important pieces of that past) is built on Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast*, making this memoir the central text of the archive, while establishing the author as the central archon of that time and place.

Although essentially self-proclaimed, Hemingway as the archon of 1920s Paris establishes both commencement and commandment in writing *A Moveable Feast*. The memoir recounts the commencement or origin of Hemingway as a writer and likewise presents the commandment of how everyone ought to view and remember 1920s Paris. In an interview with writer Alexander Maksik, who moved to Paris in 2002, *World Literature Today* quoted him saying,

I fell in love with Hemingway’s Paris after reading *A Moveable Feast*...So, yes, I was seduced by the Paris of *A Moveable Feast* and *The Sun Also Rises*...I owe a debt to Hemingway because without him, I might have fallen in love with some other imaginary city, and gone off in search of that fantasy. It wasn’t Hemingway’s life in Paris that drew me to the city, it was his writing about Paris that drew me. *A Moveable Feast* is one of the most powerful pieces of writing I’ve ever read. It’s an exquisite book. I’ve lived there. I’ve been drunk in the cafés he describes. I’ve written a novel there. I know the city well and, as I’ve said, been disappointed. But despite that disappointment, I can still read *A Moveable Feast* and feel what I always felt. I think that’s an important distinction—it’s the writing, not the city.
Maksik’s experience with *A Moveable Feast* demonstrates how it is “the writing, not the city” that serves as an archive for Paris, even though it presents an “imaginary city,” and a “fantasy,” which is ultimately a “disappointment.” Maksik’s attitude towards Paris is “seduced” by *A Moveable Feast*, which creates a kind of nostalgia that transcends the disappointing reality, allowing him to read the story and still “feel what [he] always felt.” Although the memoir and the author have been accepted respectively as the archive and archon of 1920s Paris, *A Moveable Feast* is fraught with the complications surrounding the unreliability of memory, which questions the veracity of the archive and potentially invalidates our present nostalgia for 1920s Paris.

While the book concerns real people and real places from the 1920s, its production is a work of remembrance. The stories and descriptions Hemingway wrote were influenced by his present situation; what he remembered and chose to include depended upon his life in the late 1950s when he was writing *A Moveable Feast*. In the preface, Hemingway acknowledges that the book is not attempting to be a historical or precise account when he writes, “If the reader prefers, this book may be regarded as fiction” (6). Interestingly, however, Hemingway does see his remembered past as valuably reflecting on the historical reality: “But there is always the chance that such a book of fiction may throw some light on what has been written as fact” (6). Hemingway himself realized that his book was a function of memory—not just factual history—and his descriptions of himself and others had as much to do with how he felt about his life and career in the late 1950s as it did with the 1920s events he was writing about. He also realized that these biased memories were still valuable.

Hemingway knew his memories would need to be read as fictional, because memory cannot maintain any objective accuracy to historical fact since it depends on human subjectivity. *A Moveable Feast* fictionally represents Hemingway’s memory of his biographical experience in Paris as a poor, newly married writer in the 1920s. He interacted with numerous people who were renowned or would later come to artistic fame. However, *A Moveable Feast* is not a straightforward reflection of Hemingway’s experience. The very fact that it is written means that even if the events made an imprint or mnēmē in his mind as they occurred, there has been time, space, and interpretation separating the mnēmē from Hemingway’s writing of it—a process of anamnēsis. Memory as a process (anamnēsis) cannot maintain a high degree of fidelity to the past, even if memory as a thing (mnēmē) could have. Therefore, reading *A Moveable Feast* with any sense of accuracy or historical fact is problematic.
One example of the way *A Moveable Feast* is contingent upon unreliable memory is the way Hemingway writes about his development as a writer. *A Moveable Feast* suggests writing was a struggle for the young Hemingway, but, being written from the perspective of the old Hemingway, the memoir romanticizes the experience. J. Gerald Kennedy’s *Imagining Paris* discusses Hemingway’s inclusion of his development as a writer in *A Moveable Feast* but calls it a “myth,” a “construct,” and a “distorted version” of reality: “in shaping this myth of his literary beginnings, Hemingway constructs a fantastic place and a selective, even distorted version of his literary apprenticeship” (130). Hemingway was not just recalling what his first attempts at writing were like as a young man; he was explaining as an old man and well-known writer how the process worked for him. He describes his writing process in *A Moveable Feast*:

Sometimes when I was starting a new story and I could not get it going…I would stand and look out over the roofs of Paris and think, “Do not worry. You have always written before and you will write now. All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know.” So finally I would write one true sentence, and then go on from there. It was easy then because there was always one true sentence that I knew or had seen or had heard someone say...I was trying to do this all the time I was writing, and it was good and severe discipline. (20)

Hemingway’s forty years of experience as a writer surely influenced such a description of the writing process. In the process of anamnēsis, the mnēmē of his experience writing in Paris is informed and deformed by the fact that he had an established career as a writer. As Kennedy puts it, “When Hemingway composed *A Moveable Feast*, he obviously foresaw the end of his career; he reflected on his apprentice years as if to consolidate the myth of his origins and to recover, by an act of identification, his earlier relationship to writing” (140). His inability to write has a solution in the story because, with hindsight, Hemingway knows he will be able to write many stories and novels. From his point of view, his ability to “get it going” and “go on from there” was inevitable. He was cognizant of his success as a writer in the late 1950s, so his memory of himself as a writer in 1920s was one where eventually “it was easy” to write.

Keeping in mind that Hemingway himself permitted the reader of his memoir to regard it as fiction, Hemingway’s own imagination is, of course, at play. Such a dependence on a person’s imagination for historical events may seem problematic. Paul Ricoeur writes that “the constant danger of confusing
Criterion

remembering and imagining, resulting from memories becoming images in this way, affects the goal of faithfulness corresponding to the truth claim of memory” (7). Certainly *A Moveable Feast* is a work of imagination and therefore has little, or perhaps no, relevance to faithfully depicting true accounts, something that Hemingway’s preface reiterates when he admits that *A Moveable Feast* can be “regarded as fiction.” But it does not lose its value—even its historical value—because it is a product of memory and imagination. Ricoeur qualifies his thought about the “constant danger of confusing remembering and imagining” by stating that “We have nothing better than memory to guarantee that something has taken place before we call to mind a memory of it” (7). Ricoeur suggests that there is no better way of establishing the reality of the past than memory. So, as inaccurate or self-aggrandizing as *A Moveable Feast* may be, it is likely the best way of having any record of the past.

Walter Benjamin takes Ricoeur’s acceptance of memory as the best record of the past even further when he suggests that memory is the past. Benjamin remarks that “memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium” (576). It is due to memory that the past exists at all. For Benjamin, memories—while incapable of accuracy or objective truth—are what allow the past to have any significance at all. Speaking of remembering as an archeological excavation, Benjamin says that “it is undoubtedly useful to plan excavations methodically. Yet no less indispensable is the cautious probing of the spade in the dark loam” (576). The dark loam of Hemingway’s memory of 1920s Paris is equally incapable of accuracy or objective truth and is not suitable for a methodical excavation. Hemingway’s subjectivity and imagination taint *A Moveable Feast*, but its cautious probing into his memory still provides useful insight into his character and environment.

**Truth Value in Artistic Representation**

*A Moveable Feast* is not only beneficial because it is the best record we could have of the past (as Ricoeur would suggest), but because as a representation, its artistic approach to the past can more freely draw the reader near the truth. The reason for putting something in an archive is so we can forget it and have someone else remember it for us. When we can pass on the responsibility for remembering to the archive, our imagination and subjective thoughts are then free to deal with the past without concern for accuracy of testimony.
This kind of imagination and subjectivity endorses creative, idealistic, hopeful, and hyperbolic representations of the past. While bearing witness or providing testimony based on memory is under constant scrutiny for how it will lead to commandment and judgment, subjective representation is free from those constraints and is therefore able to approach the truth without concern for its reliability. Free from that pressure for accuracy, artistic remembrances can better represent the past. *A Moveable Feast* serves as an archive for 1920s Paris, thus relieving society of the burden of having to remember, while at the same time allowing society to nostalgically not forget. It is unreliable as a testimony or documentary account of 1920s Paris, but as a subjective representation of memory it can approach the truth without having to declare a verdict of true or false. Because memory is unreliable, it is best to tell and archive artistic stories. Tim O’Brien explores the way that unreliable memory is still artistically useful when he admits that the stories of his experiences in Vietnam are “invented” in *The Things They Carried*. He made things up because, as he says, “I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth” (179), suggesting that how “true” something is might have more to do with the feeling it creates than with the accuracy or objectivity by which facts are related. Like O’Brien, Hemingway’s record is in some ways “made-up” and is not always “happening-truth.” But that does not make it useless. In fact, the artistic construction of *A Moveable Feast* makes it more valuable than verified facts would be to readers trying to understand 1920s Paris. Just as O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* fails to be accurate and thereby gets closer to the story-truth of Vietnam, so Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast* fails to be accurate and thereby creates an artistic nostalgia of 1920s Paris.

Nostalgia based on subjective representations like *A Moveable Feast* is disconcerting to critics such as Fredric Jameson who, in his essay “Nostalgia for the Present” argued that nostalgia is dangerous. He says that nostalgia can so powerfully impact how we view ourselves that “the sense people have of themselves and of their own moment of history may ultimately have nothing whatsoever to do with its reality” [emphasis in original] (281). His concern about nostalgia is that by focusing too much on the past, society will neglect to alter the present and thus harm or even destroy the future. This concern is directly addressed in Woody Allen’s *Midnight in Paris* where the ideal setting for analyzing nostalgia is 1920s Paris, a setting that relies on the archive established by *A Moveable Feast*. Gil Pender, a modern American, is magically transported back in time, experiences 1920s Paris, but eventually chooses to remain in his
present. Gil’s nostalgia is critiqued by his fiancé and others, including Paul Bates, the presumptuous and condescending character who mockingly refers to Gil as “Miniver Cheevy” and tells him that “nostalgia is denial” 5. Denial of the painful present” (Midnight in Paris). Paul echoes the argument of Jameson, that nostalgia has dangerous consequences for how we live in the present. But Gil, the nostalgic romantic in denial, is the one who learns and grows in the film. Characters like Inez and Paul, who never had any nostalgia, are the most hollow and unhappy characters. While in the end, Gil realizes that he cannot live in the past and does not want to. His nostalgia makes him more mature, creative, and assertive. Gil’s nostalgia for 1920s Paris provides him with a mature identity and ideology that give him the determination to leave his unhealthy relationship with Inez, embrace his passion for writing, and find happiness. The characters who criticize nostalgia must live in the unsatisfying present, while remembering the past motivates characters like Gil to live life more fully. Allen’s film resists the fears that Jameson espoused and instead demonstrates that nostalgia is constructive, even when basing the longing on a subjective archive, it is good for us. Despite the fact that Gil’s nostalgia is based on the fictional, inaccurate archive of A Moveable Feast, it is useful and even healthy to experience that nostalgia.

The value of subjective representation is not just clear in 2011 artistic creations like Midnight in Paris, but it was also apparent to Hemingway himself. Hemingway was aware that the accuracy of his work, although often autobiographical, was obscured by his unreliable memory. As Verna Kale has noted, “Hemingway seems aware that translation and autobiography are both artificial systems that rely on language and the subjective experience of the reader. Because it cannot be explained to anyone who was not there, Hemingway plays down the importance of the era (‘personally I don’t think it was worth much’)” (139), helping to explain why he felt he could express a lot by saying very little. In fact, one of the hallmarks of Hemingway’s style is his “iceberg theory” that encourages writing as little as possible to convey an idea or image 6. Hemingway writes only what is necessary to avoid misguided attempts at being accurate or truthful because descriptions are always filtered by human subjectivity. Hemingway’s very style of writing suggests that he had at least a subconscious grasp of the unreliability of memory. The fact that he did not stop writing suggests he also understood that there was value in nostalgia and subjective, artistic representation.
It is true that memory is inherently subjective and therefore questionable and problematic for establishing order or pronouncing judgment, but even subjective representations based on memory are beneficial and productive. While a memoir like *A Moveable Feast* fails to achieve historical accuracy, it succeeds in creating a nostalgia that is free from having to assign truth or falsehood and instead can be a vehicle for nostalgia that helps cultural consumers learn and grow. Like Gil Pender, when we turn to 1920s Paris through *A Moveable Feast* (or potentially to any other memory-based representation of the past), we are able to understand an artistic truth (or story-truth) that can be more valuable than objective history. As fictional art, nostalgic representations of the past as depicted in *A Moveable Feast* provide a space for artistry that, because of its freedom, can perhaps approach truth more closely than witness or testimony by representing, rather than passing judgment on, what is “true.”

**Endnotes**

1 See Gajdusek’s *Hemingway’s Paris* 8.

2 See Ricoeur 166–76; Agamben 137–65, esp. 143–46; and Marlene Manoff’s extensive report “Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines.”

3 See Ricoeur’s discussion of Aristotle’s terms mnēmē and anamnēsis 18–19.

4 See Jameson 286–87.

5 Jameson’s distrust of nostalgia is reminiscent of Edwin Arlington Robinson’s Miniver Cheevy, the poetic character whose nostalgia for swords, steeds, Camelot, and iron clothing, turn him toward melancholy and drinking.

6 Hemingway succinctly describes his “iceberg theory” in *Death in the Afternoon*: “If a writer of prose knows enough of what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing” (192).
Works Cited


