

### 3 Memory and the Making of Fiction

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I read somewhere that writers, or perhaps all artists, are haunted or hunted by unusually vivid memories of their early lives – as are the old, whose useful daily memories are decaying. Certainly I remember being obsessed as a child by a kind of ‘glittering’ quality about certain experiences, usually without deep importance in what I thought of as the narrative of my life – experiences excessively bright, strongly outlined, *recognized* so to speak as important, even when they were met for the first time. (*Re-recognized* implies memory, the existence of a former cognition.) It is not too much to say that these experiences were as tormenting as they were delightful, until I, the person who underwent them, formed the project of being a writer – because only the act of writing gave them a glimmer of the importance they had in life, and thus gave them a place, a form and an order which made sense of them. And which they seemed to ask for. Proust, at the beginning of *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, speaks of certain experiences which *forced him to look at them* – ‘a cloud, a triangle, a belltower, a flower, a pebble’ – and gave him, as a child, a sense of *duty* towards them, a feeling that they were a symbolic language which he ought to decipher.

I shall come back to Proust, more than once, in the course of this essay. Now I want to give an example of a moment *recognized* in perhaps 1967 as part of a novel, which I have just, in 1995, written into one. In *Babel Tower*, which is the third part of a four-book series of novels, this memory is written down by Frederica, the central character, in a work she is making called ‘Laminations’, which contains cuttings from news, quotations from books, cut-up letters from lawyers, and odd disjunct records of her own. The memory – which is mine as well as hers – differs from Proust’s involuntary recall of his childhood when he tasted a

madeleine, because it presented itself immediately to be *recognized* as a memory, at the time of being an experience. The mechanism by which it did this is, I think, as mysterious as that of the madeleine.

A woman is sitting in Vidal Sassoon's salon, the Bond Street one. She is having her long hair, which she has always had, shorn into one of those smooth swinging cuts, like blades in their precise edges and points. Two young men are working together on the nape of her neck. Her feet are surrounded by shanks and coils and wisps and tendrils of what until recently was her body. It sifts, it is soft, it pricks between her collar and her skin. One man leans over her and holds the two points of her new hair down, dragged down, to her jaw. He hurts her. If she tries to look up, he gives her a little push down again, which hurts her. The other works above the vertebrae of her naked nape with his pointed shears. She can hear the sound of hair on blade: a silky rasping. He nicks her skin with his points. He hurts her. She is almost sure that the small hurts are deliberately inflicted. Over her head the two talk. 'Look at that one then, look at her strut, she thinks she's the *bee's knees*, the *cat's whiskers*, and she's a walking *disaster*, look at that clump he's done at the back, like a great *bubo* all bulging and she can't see it, she can't see it jiggle and wiggle as she walks, she thinks she looks *delicious*, he told her so, he held the mirror at the right angle, so she couldn't see what a godawful *mess* he had made, cutting higher and higher trying to make it better and now there's nothing left to cut, only a gob at the back of her *lumpy head*.' They laugh. The woman under their hands tries to look up and is jerked down. She thinks, I will always remember this, but doesn't know why; there are many humiliations, many disasters, why will she always remember this one? They let her head up. She sees her face through tears. The line is like a knife along her jaw. They tell her she looks lovely. All the women in the room have the same cut and all look lovely in the same way, except those who don't. When she moves her head, the curtain of her hair swings and re-forms into its perfect edge. Her neck is naked. She gives the two a tip, though she would like not to. Her hair looks good. Does she?

(Byatt, 1996, pp. 388–9)

This account differs from the actual mnemonic in various ways. What is missing is the geometry of the light of the new 'open-plan' salon, the multiplied mirrors which haunt a disproportionate number of my important memories. What is also missing is a primitive fear of lack of privacy which is one of my most persistent emotions. Although the young men did mock the parting customer, the images for her shearing are my own,

verbal reconstructions of an immediate visual impression. I have tied (in 1995) my memory tightly to the meditated cultural themes of the novel's portrait of the sixties – the note of gay and gleeful cruelty in all the new freedoms, the absurd uniformity of all our attempts to look new and different, the sense that sex was still dangerous for women. I have also tied it, in the long metaphorical structure of the novel, to the theme of pairs of men, starting with Kafka's two 'assistants' in *The Castle* who were connected by a student in my extramural class with twins and with testicles, and ending with newly invented identical twin brothers (newly in the 1990s) who are in their turn connected with Nietzsche's Apollo and Dionysos. And partly beginning from there, and from a memory of a sculpture student called Stone who fell under an underground train whilst stoned, I have found the game of 'scissors, paper, stone' patterning my text, and having found it, have elaborated it. I knew moreover, both immediately and in the writing, that the 'shears' are those of Milton's blind fury who slits the thin-spun life – the fear of death is and was in both the experience and the text. But I only noticed on typing out my passage how much it is to do with the fear of execution, of beheading – Frederica played Elizabeth I in *The Virgin in the Garden*, and I was meditating at the time of the haircut on virginity as a defence, a source of power, of not being cut, or harmed, or killed.

### Personal memories

The great modernist writers – Proust, Joyce, Mann, Woolf – weave significant personal memories, recognitions, epiphanies, into a texture of language and thought. The philosopher Richard Rorty sees Proust's projected novel as an exemplary form of a modern, provisional, *ironist* culture, which has given up the search for eternal and immutable laws or theories of human nature. He compares and contrasts Proust with Nietzsche. Both men, he says, believe in self-creation by self-description, in becoming one's 'true' self by redescribing one's world.

For Proust and Nietzsche there is nothing more powerful or important than self-redescription. They are not trying to surmount time or chance but to use them. They are quite aware that what counts as resolution, perfection and autonomy will always be a function of when one happens to die or go mad. But this relativity does not entail futility. For there is no

big secret which the ironist hopes to discover, and which he might die or decay before discovering. There are only little mortal things to be rearranged by being redescribed.

(Rorty, 1989, p. 99)

Rorty sees Proust's novel as wiser than the systems of the ironist theorists in whom he is interested – Hegel, Heidegger and Kant. 'Proust's novel', he says,

is a network of small interanimating contingencies. The narrator might never have encountered another madeleine. The newly impoverished Prince de Guermantes did not have to marry Madame Verdurin: he might have found some other heiress. Such contingencies make sense only in retrospect – and they make a different sense every time redescription occurs. But in the narratives of ironist theory, Plato *must* give way to St Paul, and Christianity to Enlightenment. A Kant *must* be followed by a Hegel, and a Hegel by a Marx. That is why ironist theory is so treacherous, so liable to self-deception.

(*Ibid.*, p. 105)

Nietzsche, Rorty says, was tempted to identify himself with abstractions like Will to Power, Becoming and Power.

Proust had no such temptation. At the end of his life he saw himself as looking back along a temporal axis, watching colours, sounds, things, and people fall back into place from the perspective of his own most recent description of them. He did not see himself as looking down upon the sequence of temporal events from above, as having ascended from a perspectival to a non-perspectival mode of description.

(*Ibid.*)

Proust makes a pattern from the little things – Gilberte among the hawthorns, the colour of the windows in the Guermantes chapel, the two walks, the shifting spires. Rorty continues,

He knows this pattern would have been different had he died earlier or later, for there would have been fewer or more little things that would have had to be fitted into it. But that does not matter. Beauty, depending as it does, on giving shape to a multiplicity, is notoriously transitory, because it is likely to be destroyed when new elements are added to that multiplicity. Beauty requires a frame, and death will provide that frame.

(*Ibid.*)

I feel very happy with the idea that the novel is a profoundly agnostic and provisional form, connected to local truths and making sense, in the shifting structure of a whole life, of those disproportionately glittering perceptions and events I began with. But *self*-description or re-description is not an adequate account of the way memory works in Proust's novel – and the personal memories of writers are haunted by, and connected to, the memories of the dead, both the immediately dead and remembered, and the long-dead whose memories constructed the culture we live in and change in our turn. George Eliot's fiction springs very powerfully out of her own personal memories – we know as readers of *The Mill on the Floss* that the child Maggie Tulliver, with her passionate attachment to her elder brother and the landscape of her upbringing, grew from the child Mary-Ann Evans. What is more interesting is that Eliot's fiction appears to progress chronologically through the remembered life, not only of the writer, but of her father and her family. *Scenes of Clerical Life* combines her earliest memories of accompanying her father to Arbury Hall with her father's memories and stories of events before her own lifetime; in *Adam Bede*, she bases Adam on her father, and then universalizes him by calling him Adam, and making him, like Christ, the new Adam, the son of a carpenter. She wrote in Chapter 3 of *Daniel Deronda* of the importance of memory in the construction of a life:

Pity that Offendene was not the home of Miss Harleth's childhood, or endeared to her by family memories! A human life, I think, should be well rooted in some spot of a native land, where it may get the love of tender kinship for the face of earth, for the labours men go forth to, for the sounds and accents that haunt it, for whatever will give that early home a familiar unmistakable difference amidst the future widening of knowledge: a spot where the definiteness of early memories may be inwrought with affection, and kindly acquaintance with all neighbours, even to the dogs and donkeys, may spread not by sentimental effort and reflection, but as a sweet habit of the blood.

This passage looks back to Wordsworth, and forward to Proust. Its sense of the importance of the local and the particular is connected to Wordsworth's haunting 'spots of time' by the word spot: Eliot's memory as 'a habit of the blood' is related to Wordsworth's 'felt in the blood, and

felt along the heart' (*Tintern Abbey*, line 29). It prefigures Proust's involuntary memory, which is not an effort of will, but an experience of immediate sensation. Proust was a devoted reader of Eliot. I should like to draw attention also to the passage which speaks of 'the labours men go forth to, for the sounds and accents that haunt it', which contains a biblical echo from Ecclesiastes, a generalization about the repetitions of generations of human lives, and the verb 'haunt', which I discovered was haunting all my thoughts when I first began to meditate on memory and fiction. For particular, local personal memories seem immediately to evoke, in a kind of de Quinceyan involute, the idea of the dead and their memories, our own dead and the long-dead, whose memories haunt poetry.

It is interesting, if we look at Proust's first account of the discovery of involuntary memory, to see how he places metaphors of death and haunting (which are also facts as well as metaphors) just *before* the magic tasting. He says that the memory of intelligence could only have reconstructed a kind of schema, or *décor*, from his childhood, and then goes on

Tout cela était en réalité mort pour moi.

Mort à jamais? C'était possible.

Il y a beaucoup de hasard en tout ceci, et un second hasard, celui de notre mort, souvent ne nous permet pas d'attendre trop longtemps les faveurs du premier.

Je trouve très raisonnable la croyance celtique que les âmes de ceux que nous avons perdus sont captives dans quelque être inférieur, dans une bête, un végétal, une chose inanimée, perdues en effet pour nous jusqu'au jour, qui pour beaucoup ne vient jamais, où nous nous trouvons passer près de l'arbre, entrer en possession de l'objet, qui est leur prison. Alors elles tressaillent, nous appellent, et sitôt que nous les avons reconnus, l'enchantement est brisé. Délivrées par nous, elles ont vaincu la mort et reviennent vivre avec nous.

Il en est ainsi de notre passé. C'est peine perdue que nous cherchions à l'évoquer, tous les efforts de notre intelligence sont inutiles. Il est caché hors de son domaine et de sa portée, en quelque objet matériel (en la sensation que nous donnerait cet objet matériel) que nous ne soupçonnons pas. Cet objet, il dépend du hasard que nous le rencontrions avant de mourir, ou que nous ne le rencontrions pas.

(Proust, *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, vol. 1, p. 44)

## Translation

To me it was in reality all dead.

Permanently dead? Very possibly.

There is a large element of hazard in these matters, and a second hazard, that of our own death, often prevents us from awaiting for any length of time the favours of the first.

I feel that there is much to be said for the Celtic belief that the souls of those whom we have lost are held captive in some inferior being, in an animal, in a plant, in some inanimate object, and so effectively lost to us until the day (which to many never comes) when we happen to pass by the tree or to obtain possession of the object which forms their prison. Then they start and tremble, they call us by our name, and as soon as we have recognised their voice the spell is broken. We have delivered them: they have overcome death and return to share our life.

And so it is with our own past. It is a labour in vain to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) which we do not suspect. And as for that object, it depends on chance whether we come upon it or not before we ourselves must die.

(Proust, *Swann's Way*, p. 45)

Our first worship, Sigmund Freud says, was ancestor-worship. Our immediate ancestors *are*, in some sort, our memories – they disappear, as presences, as bodies, but they persist as icons, as hauntings, in our minds. They take with them their memories of ourselves, so that part of us dies with them, as part of them persists in us, both in the genes and in the workings of the brain, both ways. I at least, and I think this is common, became interested in my more distant ancestors at the time of the death of my parents. It was then that I began writing ghost stories, taking ghost stories seriously, and also using a metaphor of ghosts as the life-in-death of poets in poems, of poems in my memory. Poems may live in the mind as icons – I think of *Paradise Lost* and ‘see’ a complex map of colours and gardens and rivers and flying dark and light creatures – or in language learned ‘by heart’, so that when I embark on reciting a Shakespeare sonnet I am confident of being able to feel my way to the end, word by word. It is at the point when one begins to feel one’s own mortality – as Proust was feeling his when he discovered his vocation –

that one becomes able to see not only one's finite life in the world, but one's own peculiar body of connected knowledge (knowledge is memory and mnemonics) as part of the order (provisional) of a work of art. What cannot be written will die with us. And at this point the connection to the great works of the past becomes urgent and personal, a bright discovery, a re-mem-bering of countless other dead or dying memories.

When my own father died I realized that what had died with him was the store of his memories – his memories of his own father and mother, whom I hardly knew, my secondary, or inherited memories. He seemed to realize that this mattered; he talked about his parents on his death-bed as he had never done earlier. I wrote a story about his dying, *Sugar*, in which I tried to be truthful, to put together, to give form and beauty to, the accidents of his death, as I remembered it, and of his and my life, as they presented themselves in 'glittering' significant moments. It is interesting that into this purely personal, carefully factual account, a kind of mythic landscape did extend. It is a fact, though also an unnerving coincidence, that at the time when my father was collapsing on a Rhine cruise, I was watching the *Götterdämmerung* at Covent Garden. This led me, in my story, to a true memory, my compulsive reading and re-reading, as a child, of Norse myths, my interest in the underworld and the Last Battle, Ragnarök, and the paradisaical world that came to be after the death of the gods. That was juxtaposed with another fact, also a coincidence, that I was at the time working on the paintings of Van Gogh, *The Sower* and *The Reaper*, in which the painter mixed precise observation of corn and clods with ancient images of the labours men go forth to, and the reaping Death in a furnace of light. The historical accident of my father's dying in Amsterdam made it possible for me to study these icons during the days of his vanishing. And that again seemed somehow to connect with my father's dying memories of his own childhood as paradisaical, or Arcadian, a time which smelled of horses and fresh grass and there were what he referred to as 'real apples and plums'. I begin to wonder if the forms of particular memories – at least in works of art – tend to call up a penumbra of family memories, ancestral memories, and if Paradise and the Underworld are images of this recollection, recalling of ghosts, re-mem-bering of the dead and the vanished.



### Oral poetry

I have been interested for a long time in the formal structures of oral poetry, about which I *know* very little, the kennings and repeated rhythms of Anglo-Saxon verse, for instance, which Michael Alexander says provide a 'special sort of improvisation-aid, a poetic grammar or rhetoric which acted as scaffolding for their song, infinitely flexible, extensible, adaptable to the job in hand.' Whilst I was informing myself about these structures, I found I was also making discoveries about the subject matter of oral poetry which seemed to relate directly to my sense of Proust's subject matter, and George Eliot's and my own. Oral poetry, several scholars point out, takes place in the present, a perpetual present – Virgil's *written* poetry recalls the written past of Homer, as Dante recalls Virgil, and Milton recalls all three. But Homer's world, supposing his poem was an oral poem, is *now*, and happens again every time the poem is sung – a poem which has not been learned, but is made new each time it happens, within the frame of rhythms and metaphors and names which are its skeleton. Jeff Opland, in an interesting book on Anglo-Saxon oral poetry, includes an excursus on Xhosa and Zulu oral poetry. The Xhosa *izibongo* he tells us, includes poems which most people know, about their clans, poems transmitted in fixed form from generation to generation. 'Heads of households also know the poems treating their departed ancestors, which are recited on ritual or ceremonial occasions, in order to initiate communication between the living and the dead' (Opland, pp. 19–20). Most men seem to know the personal poems about their father and their paternal grandfather, Opland says, but not much further back, though they know the historical poems of the clan. Boys compose their own autobiographical poems as they grow up – from the accidents of their individual lives – as Proust composed his book, which was the redescription and purpose of his life. Boys learn their fathers' autobiographical poems, and use them as a ritual method of communication with their fathers after their death. Here are clan memory, immediate ancestral memory, and personal memory, formalized and recited, in a way I think can be related to what Eliot is doing in the movement of her fictions.

Ronald MacDonald opens his book on epic underworlds in Virgil,

Dante and Milton with Macaulay's observation that Milton's poetry 'acts like an incantation':

Its merit lies less in its obvious meaning than in its occult power. There would seem, at first sight, to be no more in his words than in other words. But they are words of enchantment. No sooner are they pronounced than the past is present and the distant near. New forms of beauty start at once into existence, and all the burial places of memory give up their dead.

(MacDonald, 1987, p. 7)

Milton's language produces the same effect as Proust's magic *madeline* – the past is present, and the burial-places of memory give up their dead. In the *Odyssey*, the hero visits the land of the dead, meets the shades of his mother and of the seer, Tiresias, and hears a prophecy of his future. In the *Aeneid*, the hero also visits the Underworld, accompanied by the sybil, or prophetess, and meets the shades of his dead companions, of Dido who turns away from him into the grove, and of his father, who tells him also a narrative of the future, of the Roman state he will found. In the *Divine Comedy* Dante is guided through the Inferno by the shade of Virgil, and meets both classical, Christian and mythical ghosts – including Ulysses, and Judas – as well as personal friends and enemies of his own, who have the kind of local life and idiosyncrasy that Proust's society figures, and that his friends and enemies are to have. *Paradise Lost* is a later story which claims that it is earlier than the others, and takes place before there are any human dead to have any memories. The memories the reader shares are those of Satan, excluded from Heaven, an eternal inhabitant of the underworld prepared for the sinners, peering in at Paradise, whose beauty renders him briefly 'stupidly good', *imagining* the life in the walled garden from which he has always been excluded. Dante's Gate of Hell proclaims itself older than all created things which are not eternal – it is older than Virgil's mythic Avernus; however, the Christian texts which claim priority work by *remembering* their predecessors and ancestors. Consider, for instance, Milton's image for the fallen angels

who lay entranced  
Thick as autumnal leaves that strew the brooks

In Vallombrosa, where the Etrurian shades  
High overarched embower –

(*Paradise Lost*, I, lines. 302–5)

These lines remember Virgil's description of the ghosts crowding the banks of the Styx stretching out their arms in vain longing for the other shore 'thick as the leaves of the forest that at autumn's first dropping fall':

quam multa in silvis autumni frigore primo  
lapsa cadunt folia . . .  
stabant orantes primi transmittere cursum  
tendebantque manus ripae ulterioris amore

(*Aeneid*, VI, lines 309–14)

Wordsworth's *Prelude*, or 'poem on my own life', is haunted by the words and ambitions of all these predecessors, but finds its significance in the contemplation and interrogation of his *particular, personal* memories – substituting spots of time, and glittering visions of real mountains – for angelic visitors, and the visionary dreariness of a woman struggling against a wind 'with her garments vexed and torn' for ghosts. Or invoking books. Book V of *The Prelude* is called 'Books' and contains both meditations on fairy tales and myths in the construction of a mind, and several summonings of the dead – the drowned man who rises upright from Windermere, Wordsworth's dead mother, and the dream of the fleeing Arabian knight with his symbolic stone and shell, running from the deluge – the fleet waters of a drowning world – with a stone that represents Euclid's Elements, and a shell that utters,

in an unknown tongue  
Which yet I understood, articulate sounds  
A loud prophetic blast of harmony;  
An Ode, in passion uttered, which foretold  
Destruction to the children of the earth  
By deluge, now at hand.

(*Prelude*, V, lines 91–7)

Wordsworth's sense of his self-construction is behind George Eliot's, and hers plays a part in Proust's, as I have said. It is interesting to find how *naturally* Paradise and the Land of the Dead occur at the point

where Proust's narrator, in *Le Temps Retrouvé*, makes his discovery of the mechanism of involuntary memory which reveals to him the nature of the book to come which itself gives meaning to his life. The narrator is undergoing his own experience of 'visionary dreariness'; he has seen a beautiful row of trees but, like the Coleridge of the *Dejection Ode*, he 'sees not feels' how beautiful they are. He is going to a *matinée* at the house of the Prince de Guermantes, and his carriage turns into streets which go to the Champs Elysées.

They were very badly paved at this time, but the moment I found myself in them I was, none the less, detached from my thoughts by the sensation of extraordinary physical comfort which one has when suddenly a car in which one is travelling rolls more easily, more softly, without noise, because the gates of a park have been opened and one is gliding over alleys covered with fine sand or dead leaves . . .

(Proust, *op. cit.*, VI, p. 206)

The name, Champs Elysées, Elysian Fields, is a fact of Parisian history and geography, and Proust's account is precise and factual as to time and place. But the detail of the carriage on soft sand, and the dead leaves, recall the golden sand of the arena where the fortunate souls disport themselves in Virgil's Elysian fields, and the dead leaves, not insisted on, are surely the leaves of Homer, Dante, Virgil and Milton's Vallombrosa. The narrator recalls his past, as he travels, 'gliding, sad and sweet'. He meets M. de Charlus, who has had a stroke, but whose memory is intact, and who speaks to him rather like Wordsworth's shell.

And the traces of his recent attack caused one to hear at the back of his words a noise like that of pebbles dragged by the sea. Continuing to speak to me about the past, no doubt to prove to me that he had not lost his memory, he evoked it now – in a funereal fashion but without sadness – by reciting an endless list of all the people belonging to his family or his world who were no longer alive, less it seemed with any emotion of grief that they were dead than with satisfaction at having survived them . . . 'Hannibal de Bréauté, dead! Antoine de Mouchy, dead! Charles Swann, dead! Adalbert de Montmorency, dead! Boson de Talleyrand, dead! Sosthène de Doudeauville, dead!' And every time he uttered it, the word 'dead' seemed to fall upon his departed friends like a

spadeful of earth each heavier than the last, thrown by a grave-digger grimly determined to immure them yet more closely within the tomb.

(*Ibid.*, pp. 211–12)

The Baron's Elysian lists of the dead are surely related to Homer's lists of dead heroes, which Virgil repeated word for word, giving them extended life-in-death, though the Baron is determined that the dead shall not be resurrected. The narrator, however, continues on his way, and in the courtyard of the Guermantes house has an experience that repeats the sudden bliss of the experience with the madeleine, when he trips on an uneven paving-stone.

The emotion was the same; the difference, purely material, lay in the images evoked: a profound azure intoxicated my eyes, impressions of coolness, of dazzling light . . .

(*Ibid.*, p. 217)

He tries to seize the 'dazzling and indistinct vision' as it passes, and realizes it is Venice, which he has tried earlier to preserve with deliberately memorized 'snapshots' (the French for snapshot is *cliché*) but which is now recalled as a complete sensuous atmosphere by the involuntary recall triggered by the uneven stones. He finds in the experiences of Combray-madeleine and Venice-stones 'a joy which was like certainty, and which sufficed without any other proof, to make death a matter of indifference to me'. A few moments later a servant knocking a spoon against a plate, and then the wiping of his mouth with a too stiff napkin, recall both the row of trees which had previously seemed lifeless (through the connection with the tapping of a hammer against the wheel of the railway carriage from which he had seen the trees) and the sea at Balbec, seen from his hotel as he wiped his mouth with an analogous cloth. These experiences make the past vividly alive in the present. The narrator thinks hard about why and how these memory-experiences are so full of happiness and significance and comes to the conclusion that it is because all our past experiences are *separate*,

immured as within a thousand sealed vessels, each one of them filled with things of a colour, a scent, a temperature, that are absolutely different one from another, vessels moreover, which being disposed over the

whole range of our years, during which we have never ceased to change if only in our dreams and our thoughts, are situated at the most various moral altitudes and give us the sensation of extraordinarily diverse atmospheres.

(*Ibid.*, p. 221)

And, Proust seems to be saying, if by hazard we connect – through a madeleine or a stone – to one of these *separate* atmospheres and places

for this very reason it causes us to breathe a new air, an air which is new precisely because we have breathed it in the past, that purer air which poets have vainly tried to situate in paradise and which could induce so profound a sensation of renewal only if it had been breathed before, since the true paradises are the paradises we have lost.

(*Ibid.*, pp. 221–2)

He speaks in an exalted yet precise language of the effect of these retrieved memories on his consciousness. What he repeatedly calls the *resurrections* of buried time move him, he says, by ‘the miracle of an analogy’ to a moment, a timeless moment outside time, where death is not fearful, and the work of art can take shape. He uses the word ‘*chainon*’, connecting link, in a bridge which the unconscious memory finds it can throw between the separate summits of the landscape of the past: I want to come back to the microcosm of ‘linked analogies’ (to use Melville’s term) or the ‘hooks and eyes of memory’ (to use Coleridge’s) shortly. But I should like to observe, before leaving the passage we have been thinking about, that the Narrator’s discovery of his Paradise Lost is followed by the Prince de Guermantes’s *matinée* which is a kind of grimly tragi-comic vision of the Underworld, where the *haut monde* are undergoing metamorphoses before sinking into death. They become their ancestors as their faces become those of their parents or relatives; their places and genealogies forget them. Proust himself evokes the Homeric *Nekuia*, or meeting with the ghosts. Odette appears to have kept her youth –

And yet, just as her eyes appeared to be looking at me from a distant shore, her voice was sad, almost suppliant, like the voice of the shades in the *Odyssey*.

(*Ibid.*, p. 323)

One friend is recognizable only by his laugh:

I should have liked to recognise my friend, but like Ulysses in the *Odyssey*, when he rushed forward to embrace his dead mother, like the spiritualist who tries in vain to elicit from a ghost an answer which will reveal its identity, like the visitor at an exhibition of electricity who cannot believe that the voice which the gramophone restores unaltered to life is not a voice spontaneously emitted by a human being, I was obliged to give up the attempt.

(*Ibid.*, pp. 314–15)

### ***Babel Tower***

I began with a quotation from *Babel Tower*, the third in a series of novels which began with *The Virgin in the Garden*. I think I began writing a long novel because, having read Proust, I saw it as a solution to the problem of being haunted by ‘glittering’ memories which appeared to solicit a place, a hearing. When I began the first novel I must have been in my middle twenties, very conscious of being, as I then thought, old, and having for the first time behind me a piece of public history *lived through* – the Second World War, the 1950s, the time of the Festival of Britain and the Coronation of Elizabeth II, of the coming of television, which I already knew would change all our apprehensions of our experiences and our world, would form and reform all our memories and methods of memorizing in then unimaginable ways. Proust’s novel was art coextensive with his life.

One of the experiences which formed my schooldays was the first performances of the York Mystery Plays, in which I failed to get a part, but which involved almost everyone in York at the time in excited cultural activity. I decided to write my novel about a performance of a play, in verse, about Elizabeth I, which would involve a whole community, and I thought I was interested in plays and pageants because of their cultural inclusiveness. But looking back, I am sure it was partly because the Mystery Plays, enacted in the ruins of St Mary’s Abbey, had a setting which spoke to some primeval schema for human narrative with which I was already working. (I had the great good fortune to have *Aeneid* VI and *Paradise Lost* IX and X among my set books for A Level, as well as *King Lear* and Mann’s Dionysiac/Apollonian *Tonio Kroger*.) The Mystery

Plays had heaven in the ruined Gothic arches, and a Middle Earth built between Heaven and the Mount of Hell where stood, as Donne said they were said to, Adam's Tree and Christ's Cross in one spot of time and place. I was obsessed by Paradise Gardens, by the topography of this religious theatre. I failed to write a thesis on temptations in Gardens from Spenser's 'Bower of Bliss' to 'Paradise Regained'. But I did study the iconography of Elizabeth I, especially in the works of that great scholar Frances Yates, who found that the Virgin Queen had managed to substitute herself, or be elegantly substituted by her poets, for both the Queen of Heaven (the Virgin cast out of English cathedrals in the days of Edward VI's puritan iconoclasm) and for Virgo-Astraea (a paradoxical goddess of justice and fecundity). Elizabeth had managed to be born under the harvest-time sign of Virgo, who can be related to Artemis and Astarte, the turret-crowned Cybele, the goddess of the groves, queen and huntress, chaste and fair. I discovered the Darnley portrait, that white-faced icon (Figure 1). I discovered Spenser's Dame Nature, who is both male and female and therefore self-sufficient and creative, and made myself a figure in a garden who represented female power and creativity – and separateness, an essential part of Elizabeth's survival. What interests me is that I almost immediately connected my white-faced human divinity to Keats's undying Moneta in *The Fall of Hyperion* – a figure, related to Aeneas's Sibyl and Dante's Virgil, who initiates the poet into awful secrets – and distinguished between the poet and the mere dreamer. Moneta is life-in-death. She resembles Proust's dying gods or aristocrats who have become their own effigies. In my novel I made the dying Elizabeth (who refused to go to bed) arrange the flutes of her gown into her own effigy. Keats's unfinished dream-vision *The Fall of Hyperion* is a later version of the also unfinished epic, *Hyperion*, which tells of the fall and mortality of the Titans, and in which Moneta's predecessor is Mnemosyne, the goddess of Memory.

Then saw I a wan face,  
Not pined by human sorrows, but bright-blanced  
By an immortal sickness which kills not;  
It works a constant change, which happy death  
Can put no end to; deathwards progressing





*Figure 1* The famous Darnley portrait of Elizabeth I, by an unknown artist, illustrates how she became an iconic figurehead open to multiple interpretations.

To no death was that visage; it had passed  
The lily and the snow; and beyond these  
I must not think now, though I saw that face

(*The Fall of Hyperion*, lines 256–64)

I found I was patterning my novel on a series of metaphors of white (death, stone, effigy), red (blood, violent death, also life, also loss of virginity) and green (the garden, the resurrection of the grass every spring). These fundamental markings, analogies, recurrent spots of colour, were mnemonics in the texture of my text, like patterns in embroideries or knitting, holding together the very personal and the largely cultural, the factual and the mythic. They were, as Proust says about the form of his novel, there *to be discovered* like the ‘laws’ of nature, patternings ambiguously ‘out there’ and present only in my own head, my own brain, my own life.

### Memory structures within texts

I began writing the novel at a time when writers were very afraid that language was only a self-referring system, without any real link to the outside world. This leads to the idea of memory *within* a work of art, constructing a text. I remember being at a seminar of Frank Kermode’s, in the early days of literary theory in England, when he remarked that it was impossible to hold the whole of a long novel in one’s head, so that any account a critic gives of a novel must consist of certain stressed themes, or highlighted relationships, or spotlighted metaphors. I remember thinking that this both was and was not true – if you are writing a long novel there is a sense in which you do, precisely, *remember* all of it, including in some sense the part which is not written, which feels like a projected memory-image or mnemonic, as the whole of *À la Recherche* must have felt to Proust at the time of its conception.

This is a difficult thing to write about, and yet the fascination of the interlocking systems of mnemonics that constitute a novel in progress is one of the reasons I agreed to write this essay. I have never been quite able to understand the paradigm (now being rejected, as far as I understand, by cognitive theorists) of the ‘picture in the head’ surveyed by a homunculus, representing either consciousness or memory. My own

most basic metaphors for this process have no homunculus. One is of feathers – being preened, until the various threads, with their tiny hooks and eyes, have been aligned and the surface is united and glossy and gleaming. The other is of a fishing net, with links of various sizes, in which icons are caught in the mesh and drawn up into consciousness – they come up through the dark, gleaming like ghosts or fish or sparks, and are held together by the links. Both of these descriptions are metaphors for something I do *feel* going on in my blood and brain and nervous system when I sit down to try to work. Memory within a text is always of two sorts, even when there is only one paragraph of it. There is memory of its own contents and coherence, and there is memory of the outside events – the madeleine, and beyond the madeleine the walled garden of Combray, and beyond the walled garden of Combray the walled garden of Paradise Lost – which are or will be part of this particular text. There are – before thought structures – rhythmic memories, and iconic visual memories, which must be allowed to form and be preened, so to speak.

Rhythmic memories are to do with the blood, and with language. I myself learn easily ‘by heart’, along the blood, and perhaps my most primitive and profound delight is to hear the rhythms of grammar and cadences of plosives and gutturals and tones working with and against the breath and the heartbeat. This is why I mentioned the mnemonics of the oral poets – I was delighted to read in one of those books of the dactyl being a long and two short joints, measured on a dactyl or a finger, so that Homer’s rosy-fingered dawn is rhododactylos, a finger-mnemonic for a beat. We all experience the torment and delight of searching for something we *know* we know and have forgotten. With verses I usually find the significant shiny words by humming the rhythm, and finding the grammatical pointers, and with prose there is something of the same thing. I find that writing – more particularly verse, but prose too – is not unlike remembering: a rhythm begins to sing, a grammatical structure begins to hold, and the ‘right’ precise words take their places in the structure, like fish in a net, of which the knots are the small words and the rhythm. Rhythmic memory is knitting, and it extends over long passages marked with markers I can hardly describe – they are in a way *buried*

*colours, the ghosts of colours* – twenty pages back there was a dark purple bit that needs a balance here, I think, a flash of yellow, a lighter purple, a dark gash, a run of pale marks.

This may sound like iconic memory, rather than bodily or blood memory. They overlap – the experience of looking at and memorizing a painting is rhythmic, a memory of scanning and saccades of the eyes, but the image of constructing a geometric icon is different. I used to have an almost eidetic memory – I could semi-visualize whole pages of text and ‘read’ them off, and I still know where, geometrically, something I am searching for, read or written, is on the page. But also one builds large static structures of mnemonics to put things into, to remember their relations. My own structures are rather like abstract paintings – a rising series of increasingly acute triangles in complementary colours may represent one text in construction, a series of concentric spirals, or even a double helix, another. My study of Frances Yates for Elizabeth brought me up by accident against the Elizabethan memory theatre, which derived from mediaeval systems for memorizing rhetorical arguments and facts. I think all theatres are memory theatres: one of the reasons one does not like to see films of novels one loves is the profound interference with the mnemonics of the novel caused by the image of the film, whereas no performance of King Lear, good or bad, disturbs our memory theatre of it in the same way. The Renaissance rhetoricians remembered arguments by placing them in visual arenas – sometimes in real places where they had stood and deliberately memorized. What interests me particularly about Frances Yates’s arcane discussions – which range from astrology and cosmology to memorizing a ram with large testicles to remind lawyers of an opponent and his witnesses (testes) – is that both heaven, Paradise and Hell were pictured as memory systems, as stages, as internalized *frames* for remembering our lives (Figure 2).

My profound memory of the set of the York Mystery Plays feels in this context like a race memory, a kind of *grammar* of constructing narratives of our lives and deaths, endlessly transmutable. I connect it to the biologist E. O. Wilson’s belief that there is a particular landscape human beings find attractive and delightful – a high clearing, with a wood behind it and a river and a prospect and a bluff. He says that this was a

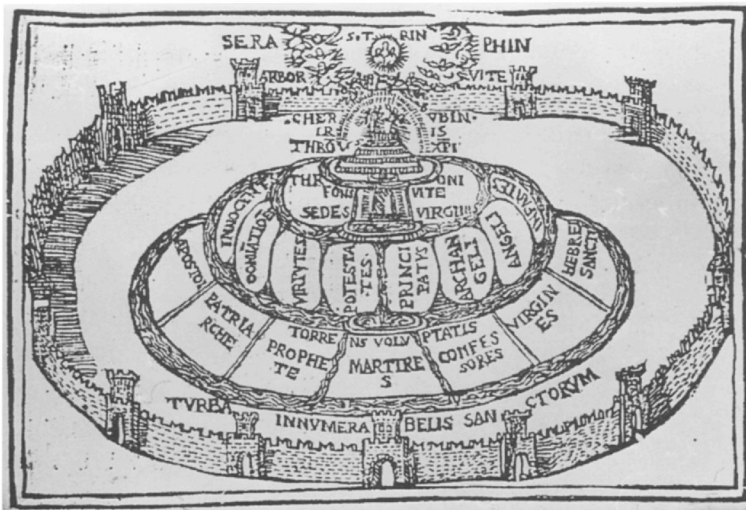
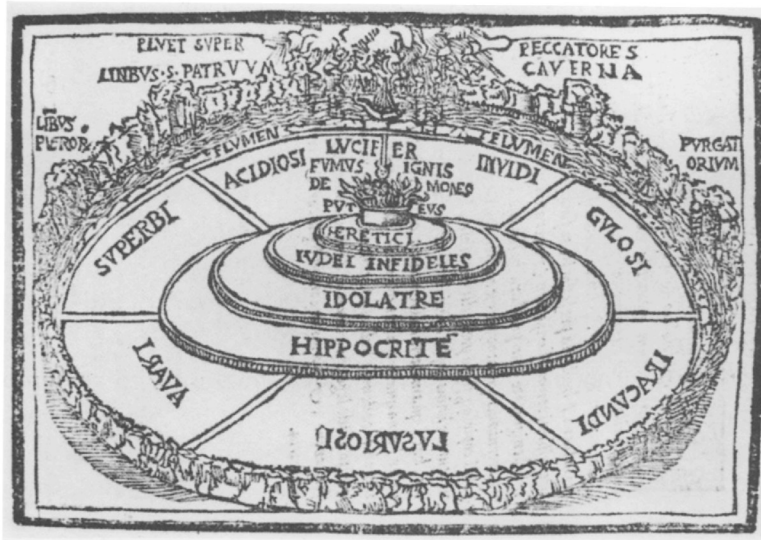


Figure 2 Memory theatres. These sixteenth-century Dante-esque diagrams illustrate how people used images as aids to memory. *Above*: Hell is divided into eleven places – steps for four types of sinner lead up to the central well, surrounded by locations for perpetrators of the seven deadly sins. *Below*: Paradise is surrounded by a wall sparkling with gems, and the throne of Christ lies in the middle.

good place for primitive hunter–gatherers to feel safe and find food, but it is much the same landscape as the one described in John Armstrong’s pursuit of ‘The Paradise Myth’ in paintings, poems and plays through the ages. Certainly by ‘scanning’ remembered constructed images of my own I can call up not only whole passages from many books and paintings and real places, but the connections between these, and projects for the future.

A concrete example of mnemonics within a text might be the use of repeated lists. I have spoken of the formal rhetorical device of the list of heroes, or places, in an epic – Milton’s lists, in particular are delightful in the way they use the sensuous rhythms of the language and bring together, say, serpents from all histories and myths into one composite image. But lists work like the recapitulating pattern in a mnemonic. At the beginning of this chapter I quoted one such list, Proust’s list of icons which solicited his own memory and desire to write: ‘a cloud, a triangle, a belltower, a flower, a pebble’. It is rhetorically interesting to see how in the long passage at the end of *Le Temps Retrouvé* to which I have been referring throughout this chapter, he recapitulates repeatedly by listing the experiences which have formed, or will form, his novel.

In fact . . . whether I was concerned with impressions like the one which I had received from the sight of the steeples of Martinville or with reminiscences like that of the unevenness of the two steps or the taste of the madeleine, the task was to interpret the given sensations as signs of so many laws and ideas, by trying to think – that is to say, to draw forth from the shadow – what I had merely felt, by trying to convert it into its spiritual equivalent. And this method, which seemed to me the sole method, what was it but the creation of a work of art? Already the consequences came flooding into my mind: first, whether I considered reminiscences of the kind evoked by the noise of the spoon or the taste of the madeleine, or those truths written by the aid of those shapes for whose meaning I searched in my brain, where – church steeples or wild grass growing in a wall – they composed a magical scrawl, complex and elaborate, their essential character was that I was not free to choose them, that such as they were they were given to me.

(Proust, *op. cit.*, p. 232)

These lists, these recapitulations, give to Proust's long, winding sentences the form of memory and searching and connecting itself – the listed *things* and the *words* which are the symbols of these things, are the meshes of the net of my memory-metaphor, the knots which hold together and draw up objects in a coherent form. 'Coherent', or to use Coleridge's spelling, cohaerent, clinging together, is a word as important, in its different way, as 'haunting' when it comes to the vocabulary of memory in art. I ended *Sugar* with such a list, which has various functions. It is a recapitulation of the memories already elaborated in the preceding narrative – and of the ancient mnemonics which were brought into intricate life in the writing of the story. It is also an initiation of another cycle or recycle of the series of personal and family memories which it represents iconically. And it is mythical, I now see for the first time, in the *factual* way in which the Champs Elysées are mythical. It contains gold wings, Paradisal real apples and pears, and a furnace or oven through which one of my aunts, who gassed herself, entered the world of the dead. And it is an izibongo, an attempt to speak to my dead father. The moment described is that at which, as a child, I made a leap into my father's arms on the night of his unexpected return from the war.

This event was a storied event, already lived over and over, in imagination and hope, in the invented future. The real thing, the true moment is as inaccessible as any point along that frantic leap. More things come back as I write; the gold-winged buttons on his jacket, forgotten between then and now. None of these words, none of these things, recall him. The gold-winged, fire-haired figure in the door is and was myth, though he did come back, he was there, at that time and I did make that leap. After things have happened, when we have taken a breath and a look, we begin to know what they are and were, we begin to tell them to ourselves. Fast, fast, these things took and take their place beside other markers, the teapot, the horse-trough, real apples and plums, a white ankle, a coalscuttle, two dolls in cellophane, a gas oven, a black and white dog, gold-winged buttons, the melded and twisting hanks of brown and white sugar.

(Byatt, 1987, p. 248)

### Proust compares his novel to a cathedral.

In long books of this kind there are parts which there has been time only to sketch, parts which because of the very amplitude of the architect's plan, will no doubt never be completed. How many great cathedrals remain unfinished! The writer feeds his book, he strengthens the parts of it which are weak, he protects it, but afterwards it is the book that grows, that designates its author's tomb and defends it against the world's clamour and for a while against oblivion.

(Proust, *op. cit.*, p. 431)

### Frances Yates says,

The high Gothic cathedral, as Panofsky has suggested, resembles a scholastic summa in being arranged according to a system of homologous parts and parts of parts. The extraordinary thought now arises that if Thomas Aquinas memorised his own *Summa* through 'corporeal similitudes' disposed on places following the order of its parts, the abstract *Summa* might be corporealised in memory into something like a Gothic cathedral full of images on its ordered places.

(Yates, 1966, p. 79)

Both Proust's *roman-cathédrale*, and Yates's Summa-cathedral are careful memorized constructs. Proust also has a different image of his work – the novel as a dress, made of pieces tacked and fitted together, of *stuff*, like a mosaic, to fit a body – or (he ends) like the different pieces of [dead] jellied meat in Françoise's harmonized *boeuf en daube*. I see my mnemonics as related to both cathedral and dress – except that I see the dress as knitted, with the language as the yarn or thread, into which the rhythmic pattern of stitches, colours and forms is worked.

### Conclusion

I had meant to attach these writer's thoughts about memory to things I have been reading about the biology of memory: I do feel that both Proust's sense that whole memories (paradisal memories may be *triggered* by sensations) and my own sense of trawling a network for flashes of significance (or preening hooks and eyes, *connections*) work well with recent ideas of neural networks, with the discrete storage of parts of sensations and experiences in different parts of the brain, with the behaviour of axons and synapses as they are beginning to be understood.



Semir Zeki argues that the understanding of colour vision, for instance, has been delayed by the description of it as a dual process, in which a sensory 'impression' is then 'received' by an associational cortex. Colour vision, he says, involves what are thought of as 'higher' mental activities from its beginning – it involves memory, learning and judgement. Human beings, we are now told, differ from (most) other creatures because we can form images, in memory, of what was, but is not, there, and can use those images to make an idea of our continuous selves, a self-consciousness made of coherent memory images, which has what Hamlet said distinguished us from the beasts, 'discourse of reason, looking before and after'. We plan and imagine the future because we remember and form images of the past. Because we form images we are self-conscious – and with this reflexiveness, Gerald Edelman argues, came the fear of death, and of extinction of the self-conscious mind. Because we remember, because we form images, we are human, we name and record and compare colours. If I put it that way, I am almost able to answer the question I have asked myself ever since I realized that what I wanted to do was to make stories of life and death, to make images that will hold and place those glittering perceptions of which we appear to be *excessively*, superabundantly conscious. Why make works of art? Why not just live? Proust noted that the remembered experience was the paradisaical one, *because it was a memory*. We are individuals because we are self-conscious and we are self-conscious because we make images. We are self-conscious and are therefore *interested* in the images we make and in the fact that we make them. We need to make images to try to understand the relation of our images to our lives and deaths. That is where art comes from.

I want to end with what I find the most moving image of both the mnemonic of the memory theatre, and of the making of images itself, Matisse's *Red Studio*, reproduced on the back of the jacket of this book. This has been called the greatest of Matisse's studio allegories, in which he assembles both the two-dimensional shadowy (but brilliantly dark red) world of his everyday surroundings, and a scattering of placed icons, recalled images of images, coherently connected by the simultaneous limitations and complexity of his palette. In some of these allegories the painter himself is present, a shadowy two-dimensional

faceless figure, less real than the paintings; here there are only the paintings, so the paintings *are* the consciousness, as Proust became identical with his book.

I have stood for hours in front of this painting trying to follow the invisible threads which electrically link the different pinks and blues and greens. I counted fifteen pinks, once. It is an ambiguous picture, both flat and three-dimensional, and in that, I instinctively think, like many mnemonics, with its emphases and its background objects waiting to be scanned into significance. The clock is there, the drawers, the chair. The imaginary world lies brilliantly amongst these objects, which nevertheless map it and hold it together. It is paradisaic brightness in the red cavern of the skull. Art is the subject of art, but this is because we are creatures that remember, make images, and we need to do this as much as we need to breathe and to feel our blood run. Art is life, in a way that earlier maps of mind and body did not quite understand.

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