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Cover Page Footnote

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Remembering Things We've Never Done: Memory's Daughters and the Literary Experience

William C. Johnson

From early literature to the present, the creative process has been linked to memory. The Greeks depicted Memory (Mnemosyne) herself as mother of the Muses; without Memory, the Muses would be unable to inspire creative and recreative participation in the arts. Their inspiration, in classical terms, engages artists both in remembering their own origins and then in “re-membering” forms into new formations. Memory is equally important to the perceivers of artistic creations, those inspired by the work of others and who, through reading, share in creating new worlds. Connecting to place and people, by suspending us in that liminal space where fiction and fact, art and life, converge, Memory and her daughters empower us to reorganize our understanding of reality and to shape a deeper understanding of the self.

Although the phraseology may strike the modern ear as odd, we have all found ourselves “inspired by the Muses.” Listening to a symphony (where the Muses’ participation is recalled even in the word “music”), viewing (perhaps in a Muse-um) a painting, or “musing” over a book, we employ a complex of various cognitive faculties, doing so in a dynamic of recognition, information retrieval, re-collection, and memory. And though we no longer write of Mnemosyne as a goddess who helps us collect and recollect the past, remembering her archetypal roles allows us to be more conscious of Memory’s integral involvement in shaping Western thought and culture. Remembering Memory also helps us understand her importance in the writing/reading process and deepens our appreciation of the experience of artistic inspiration—for which her daughters, the Muses, may even today be credited. And recollecting Memory, particularly as she stimulates our active reading both of literature and of ourselves, enables us to stand mindfully in the doorway of the present, poised between past and future, remembering the connectivity of origins and of our own original selves. In other words, by awareness of Memory’s roles and presence, we draw upon and are inspired by memories to weave our literary reading into the narrative of our own experience and to seek through the fragments of lives-in-books our own psychic wholeness.

Re-Membering Memory

In this broader context, it is worth considering the origins of Memory. In the old literatures, both Eastern and Western, it is no coincidence that the subject of creation stories is often the sky/gods’ and earth/beings’ interaction. It is likewise

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no coincidence that in such literature the narrator is inspired (literally in-spirited and breathed-into) by the gods, who are able to tell the stories because they have first-hand experience of "the beginnings." In Western thought, Memory's origins return us to some of the earliest Greek myths, those describing the union of Uranus and Gea and the birth of their twelve children, the Titans.

Being children of Uranus (Sky) and Gea (Earth), the Titans are cosmic elements. Among those twelve Titans is Mnemosyne. By her nephew Zeus, she had nine children—the Muses—hence Memory's essential connection with history and the arts. Thus, with divine help Memory originates and gives birth to inspiration. The Muses themselves echo their function, and the word "muse" is linked etymologically with pondering, collecting, recollecting, and reminding. It is important to think of the Muses (i.e., history and the arts) as offspring of Memory, for, without Memory, neither history nor the arts would exist.

Yet Mnemosyne is greater than her genealogy and her progeny. Ginette Paris writes that Mnemosyne "is at the source of every culture and her work is essential to the survival of every group[. . .]. In an oral culture memory includes all knowledge, all practical know-how, all history, and all the mythology handed from one generation to another" (119). The names of Mnemosyne's Muse-daughters give some idea of their scope: Calliope presides over epic poetry; Clio over history; Euterpe over lyric poetry; Melpomene over tragedy; Terpsichore, choral dancing; Erato, love poetry; Polyhymnia, sacred music; Urania, astronomy; and Thalia, comedy (Morford 61-62). Through their mother, Memory, the Muses keep us in contact with the first things (origins and originals), with those beginnings when earth (Gea) and heaven (Uranus) were united. Memory, therefore, remembers and reassembles our original oneness and wholeness, both collectively and personally. By musing, we are reminded of both what was and what will be; by re-calling, we call into active presence what already is. According to Hesiod, Mnemosyne knows "all that has been, is, and will be." Mircea Eliade suggests that:

when the poet is possessed by the Muses, he [sic] draws directly from Mnemosyne's store of knowledge, that is, especially from the knowledge of "origins," of "beginnings," of genealogies. The Muses sing, beginning with the beginning—the first appearance of the world, the genesis of the gods, the birth of humanity. The past thus revealed is much more than the antecedent of the present; it is its source. In going back to it, recollection does not seek to situate events in a temporal frame but to reach the depths of being, to discover the original, the primordial reality from which the cosmos issued and which makes it possible to understand becoming as a whole. (71)

Through the unfolding of their family history, the timeless Muses are intimately identified with time, from its earliest moments and figurations through its present manifestations and to its future unfoldings. Zeus, son of Chronos, is father of the Muses; thus, history and the arts are in part engendered by the Son of Time. And time is intimately identified with, and essential to, narrative, which in its most elementary form is the accounting of a temporal succession of events; in

one pattern or another, narrative is fundamental to “story,” where it connects times, worlds, and people in active, patterned participation. It is no wonder that we are fascinated with that which transports us from one time to another. In Alice Walker’s *The Temple of My Familiar* and in Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones*, regression upon regression returns us to time before time and to the roots of the primordial and primitive, to the prime, the origins, of being. Rene DuBos posits that even Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild* probably owes part of its success to its ability to evoke “ancient precivilized traits that persist in man’s [sic] nature” and that celebrate “the mysterious and wonderful world of the past which survives in the deepest layers of man’s [sic] nature” (qtd. in McConkey 33).

Robert Sardello observes that “Mnemosyne [. . .] brings the gods into active, playful, artful speech, uniting their fateful workings with the world we daily inhabit, making a bond or bridge between the world available to our senses and the ever-present action of the gods” (39-40). To be possessed by Memory is to be empowered to see the present in the larger picture, to know where boundaries are, and to have the choice to exceed them. The timelessness of these states, especially in terms of the unconscious, implies their coexistence; this atemporal simultaneity gives rise to a form of insight or intuition that perceives hidden connections between and among events over the span of all time. Just such a condition of no-time/time/all-time is nicely exemplified in one of the great tales from Northern mythology. The chief Norse god Odin, guide of souls, bears a raven on each shoulder; one (Huginn) is Thought; the other (Muninn) is Memory. Each morning, Odin dispatches these birds to fly out into the world; each evening the birds return home to Valhalla where they relate the day’s events so that Odin, who, on the basis of what Thought and Memory counsel him, determines the fate of humankind.

Memory also has her dark side. She can destroy time, especially the past. To lose memory is to have amnesia, etymologically linked with “mnemonic” and Mnemosyne. To have amnesia literally means to lose our memory of the past, to be out of active contact with the roots and origins of being. Pausanias, in the second century C.E., gives an account (9.39.8) of Mnemosyne’s spring, next to which flows another fountain—the spring of Lethe. The first one connects us with primordial design and oneness, the second to forgetting, to being hidden, and to not even noticing what else is hidden (qtd. in Karenzi 121). To lose contact with Mnemosyne is to lose our connectivity, a sense not just of the historical past, but of our personal and collective place. Thus, epic literature almost always rings with a sense of *nostos* (nostalgia), of homecoming, a remembering of, and returning to, where we came from, lest we forget. The loss of Memory is associated with the loss both of past and future, a condition similar to that of the damned spirits who inhabit Dante’s *Inferno* and who ultimately are disempowered by living solely in their present.

To Hesiod, Mnemosyne weaves the fabric of our lives. But Hesiod also notes that Mnemosyne’s patterning of our lives is capricious. In the words of Virginia Woolf, “Memory runs her needle in and out, up and down, hither and thither. We know not what comes next, or what follows after” (49). Memory’s “capriciousness” is a complicated subject, and she only appears capricious because we situate ourselves in worlds that are logical, orderly, and comfortably framed by our

limited experience and limited scope. Unlike us, Mnemosyne is not so constrained, and the sometime jumble of Memory ought to remind us that pattern itself is fleeting and is something *we* create; it is also something that can be created and recreated, *ad infinitum*, with the same materials, much like the unending weaving of Odysseus's Penelope. Accordingly, the "same" plot can be used, reused and revised countless times in equally, countless poems, plays, and novels. Mnemosyne's capriciousness does not reflect a fault but, instead, suggests that Memory "is nimble, innovative, interpretive" and that she "works in more than one direction," producing more a tangle than a single taut thread (Sexson 41-42). At the same time, that tangle offers each of us, as writer, reader, critic, or individuating psyche, a way to find our own story in multiple forms and by means of various voices calling us from numerous sources. Weaving becomes a characteristic metaphor for memory's operation; the analogy is appropriate because it suggests the procedural nature both of weaving—in which new and different patterns, designs, and forms are constantly being produced—and of memory, always in the process of bringing forth different memorial configurations and an ever newly shaped Self (Olney 20).

Our examinations and accounts of Memory reflect the variety of her identities, voices, and functions. Mnemosyne fashions, re-shapes, and continues to pattern our various ways of constructing our culture and thought. Ironically, despite millennia of philosophical, theological, scientific, medical, and technological explorations of who she is and what she does, Mnemosyne herself remains illusive. She appears transcendently in an infinite variety—much the same as archetypes are reflected and expressed in, but are not the same as or limited to, the myths that depict them. Her own dispersed activities, sometimes reflective and sometimes anticipatory, allow us, as well as induce us, to generate psychic wholeness.

Memory and the Psyche

If we consider Memory as archetypally active, it is perhaps she who stimulates us into actions that draw us towards the wholeness that is her origin. Such an action might be any analytic process, either psycho- or literary analysis, that would move us to remember or to seek connection. These processes are neither arbitrary nor completely private, except insofar as the analyst and reader incorporates the text into his or her own experience.

The text of a book and the text of a life are readable in many of the same ways; our knowledge of one assists in the knowing of the other. We know Odysseus' Ithaca, Arthur's Camelot, Dickens' London, Thoreau's Walden, and Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County because our memories—conscious and unconscious, individual and collective—tell us we have been to the heart of these places. Similarly, we recognize such people as Medea, Dante the pilgrim, Hamlet, Emma Bovary, Faust, Prufrock, and Sula because they stimulate in our own memory the very deepest parts of our own Self (sometimes, until then, unknown even to ourselves). We remember them and, in doing so, remember our psyches. As we constitute the meaning of the literary text, we constitute ourselves (Iser 150).

We might find it useful to consider memory a force of the psyche, an energy that, like Psyche herself, has its own reality. In analytical psychology, for example, developing a creative, collaborative relationship with our unconscious and ultimately seeking psychic wholeness are the goals of analysis. In archetypal psychology the goal is soul-making. The work of Memory is identifying and recreating that wholeness that was and can be again and healing the broken yet reparable soul. Memory, the soul's magnet, draws us to our dispersed psyches and, in the process of recollection, reassembles our fragmented self. Memory blends fictions and perceived realities, shaping and reshaping each as she weaves new fabrics out of old cloths. Irish playwright Brian Friel comments on this fiction/reality liminality when, in his play *Dancing at Lughnasa*, he revisits his own childhood. He begins his play with "And so, when I cast my mind back to that summer [. . .] different kinds of memory offer themselves to me" (1) and ends with the profound observation:

But there is one memory of that Lughnasa time that visits me most often, and what fascinates me about the memory is that it owes nothing to fact. In that memory, atmosphere is more real than incident and everything is simultaneously actual and illusory. (71)

Perhaps the illusory nature Friel describes is a result of the inability to actually hold onto a definition of Self. As we attempt to define who we are, we find ourselves limited by our relationship to space, to time, to other persons (living and dead, "real" and fictional), and to an unlimited array of factors that shift each time any of the other factors change. In one sense, the psyche's search for wholeness and stability stimulates the life quest itself. In this pursuit, Memory reminds us of our fragmented oneness and suggests that what was can be again. Prose fiction, drama, and poetry all provide us examples of these relationships and these factors; the artist originating such works creates a new world that, in its own ways, becomes part of our world and our revised reality. In the non-fiction of our daily lives, our longing for contentment, rest, self-knowledge, and self-atonement, reflects the same push and pull of Memory's activities.

In dealing with the fragmented self in search of wholeness, archetypal psychologist James Hillman, like Friel, believes that the empirical facts of one's life are far less important than how one remembers them, how one internalizes and is driven by them, and how one weaves them into realities of one's own. Hillman and others reconceive therapy in terms of an analysis of fiction, in which imaginative art becomes the model and in which patients are brought to a consciousness of their stories and then are set upon the work of re-writing the story collaboratively by retelling it in a more profound and authentic style (45). Thus, the transference of "fiction" and "reality" is effected, and an individual becomes author of his or her own life.

In analysis, it is often through memory that what we knew becomes what we know. In a complex dynamic of cognition and recognition, of calling in the present, on the past, to shape the future, we bring images and imagery to the threshold of decision and action. In this liminal space and time, reflection (which Jung, among others, identifies as the more conscious counterpart of memory) connects us with

dreams, symbols, and fantasy (Samuels 128-29). Thus, reflection becomes instrumental in bringing meaning to one's life. Both memory and reflection participate in the opening and developing of our psyches; both extend our psychic boundaries by expanding experience and reality. In their own ways, reflection and memory help create the worlds we, as writers as well as readers inspired by our own muses, experience and perceive in literature. This is, in part, how psychoanalysis functions when it encourages a remembering of our stories and, then, with the joint work of analyst and analysand, leads to a re-membering (through amplification and circumambulation) of the materials from a new point of view and within a new narrative. This is how artists and reflective readers operate. For many readers, these new narratives and new worlds are "new" only in the sense that they are fresh to our consciousness, having already existed in the unconscious, and are now re-collections energized by reflection (literally by bending again and, in this case, paradoxically, bending back to what is the newly-composed Self). By such means identity is constructed and reconstructed, woven and rewoven, repeatedly. In the midst of the Heraclitean flux of all things, Memory allows us a poised receptivity, even if only briefly, of the self that was, is, and can be.

Towards a Literary, Psychic Wholeness

In making ourselves whole, we both write as well as read our stories; Memory's many roles and functions become especially evident and important in considering writer/reader interactions. These connections, and our own psychological, psychic, and even neurological participation in them, are complex and may be exemplified by the very ways we respond to a work of prose fiction or a narrative poem. After reading such a piece, we do not remember the whole story, action by action, line by line. Instead, we recall the "essence" of the work, internally indexing it in various ways. When one of those indices reminds us of the story's essence, we may expand it into our own version of that original, yet we are likely to tell our version differently depending on which index brings the story to mind and of what else it reminds us (Schank 25).

As readers, it is the (re)creative work of the artist that allows us to find the sources of Self that characterize our humanity. Memory ultimately links us to the origin of things, empowering us with an expanding awareness of time and an ability to reorganize our worlds. The heaven-and-earth union of Uranus and Gea provides the transportive link for readers recollecting that they are part of something larger than themselves ("That Man may know he dwells not in his own," as Milton writes in *Paradise Lost*). The literary experience can do this, too. In our own literary and literate culture, one has only to look at the considerable body of current literary criticism to witness how powerful is this notion of Memory as encapsulating cultural identity or how powerful is the assertion of family- race-gender-memory. Each has become both a public and personal necessity. The popularity of written and cinemagraphic narratives that concern, for example, the Holocaust, slave narratives, and world wars, suggests our contemporary inner longing for identification with our past, so that by rediscovering connectedness we might be better prepared to shape our future. For us memory is thus both

recollective and anticipatory, adapting with self-adjusting plasticity to changing stimuli and circumstances.

Truly encountering the present enables one to transcend time, where past, present and future all exist in a different relation to time than that experienced by the conscious ego. Memory links our personal narrative with a larger trans-temporal, trans-spatial narrative, examples and fragments of which comprise the subject of literature at all times and in all places. Conversely, without memory, narrative—the unfolding of a series of events—could not exist. Had we no memories, either personal or collective, either conscious or unconscious, we would have no remembrance of the meaning of words and, therefore, would have no ability to understand text. The *via linguistica* would lead us to no place, as place could not be carried from there to here or here to there.

Our personal memories, then, which we so often take for granted, become very much a part of the reading/writing process. The artist, whether reader or writer, may not be conscious or cognizant of the extent to which memory shapes artistic expression, but gathering from the past, reshaping known material, selecting what to include in accordance with the needs and interests of the present are essential to any artistic production, and all of these operations rely on memory as an active, creative force, not just as a “receptacle for the dead weight of times gone by” (Flores 381). Memory is thus essential both to creation and to re-creation. The Muses who inspire our reading/writing are the same ones who, through their mother, make possible our reading/writing.

For both artist and receiver, Memory flows freely between the unconscious and conscious, allowing a suspension of “reality” and immersing us in liminality where “the impossible” is held up as “possible” and where fiction becomes fact. Memory herself is composed as “much of fantasy as of recovered information [. . .] mak[ing] stories of the past by giving shape to fragments of lost experience—personal, cultural, archetypal—and [she] stories the present by giving depth to the immediate” (Sexson 43). Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* gives rich, rhythmic voice to this when the title character actually is created out of memory itself, born of the memory of a mother escaped from slavery, who cannot forget having killed (out of love) her infant daughter. The reader never is certain if *Beloved*, the young woman who years later enters the mother’s life, is “really” a person or a memory-generated fantasy. In literature as in life, the experience of memory sometimes floods us unawares and often catches us, like *Beloved*’s mother, off guard. Memory’s actions are, and her presence is, intimately connected with associations. One action, one thing, re-minds us of another, and that, of another. The smallest gesture, the slightest bit of dialogue, can link us with a character who moves us to recollect other characters or other people we know or have known. These associations reshape who we are. And whether consciously done or not, the memory connections are either stimulated by, or are themselves, a longing that pulls us nostalgically backward and telically forward to the Self from which we came and to which we strive to return. Such deep longing, *Sehnsucht*, keeps us connected, in much the way that the pulley in George Herbert’s poem continuously draws us to heaven or that Pascal’s “cross-shaped hole in the heart of Man” makes us yearn for oneness with God.

Ultimately, how we remember our life is less important than how we inter-

nalize those remembrances and are moved by them and how, with the creative cooperation of Memory, we weave them into our own realities (Hollis 80). Who, for example, has not in some ways identified with, or even for a time "become," Juliet or Romeo, Huck or Jim, Daisy Buchanan or Nick Carraway, Gertrude Morel or her son Paul? "Fiction" and "reality" thus change places. As Friel suggests in recalling Lughnasa, the literal "facts" are not important, but the atmosphere, the images, are what matter most (71). Although memory is transmitted in more ways than by language, it is language that triggers the retrieval processes; certainly this is the situation in the literary experience in which language stimulates images that in turn create realities.

Through reflection, by means of Memory, in the words of a poem, drama, or novel, the reader/writer brings to consciousness not "fictions" as we think of that word, but old realities newly-articulated. Inspired by their own Muses, readers as well as writers become instruments of the work that incarnates through them. This is effected by a creative, imaginative response to the yet unformed ideas that lie dormant in all of us but that are stimulated by the literary text. Just as the artist is the voice that brings Logos into consciousness and, as with Orpheus, sings new words and fresh worlds into being (in this case as literary creations), so the reader responds by joining in the creative act, remembering these words and worlds through his or her own experience. As readers we participate in the creation insofar as our personal and collective histories, our own memories (individual and collective), are triggered by the artist's words, images, depictions of place and action, and narrative. Thus, the writer as well as the reader, in great part through a kind of mutual psychogenesis that is both creative and evolutive, produces the literary experience.

The intimate connections between present and past, between past and future—these "confluences," as Eudora Welty calls them—affirm larger realities than the subjective can comprehend. The connections could not exist without Memory, who continually facilitates the weaving of Self. Nor could the literature exist in which and through which fragments of the Self are expressed. In this context, E. M. Forster's dictum "only connect" assumes a meaning much larger than perhaps even he might have imagined when in 1910 he penned his famous term.

When we are moved by a story, poem, or drama, it is in part because the artistic work sets off a chain of associations that often involve moving us beyond ordinary self-experiencing. There is a kind of recognition of something deep within us, a memory of something, some place, someone we "know," but not necessarily in the essentially phenomenological, empirical, or intellectual way we use to identify or classify "knowledge." As Paul Jordan-Smith writes,

when we are touched by a story, when this phenomenon of recognition takes place, we are somehow connected with someone else for whom the story also had meaning. The story, like any linguistic construct [. . .] is a symbolic structure. What differentiates it from the language of ordinary discourse is that it is a description of people that are not here now and perhaps never existed, doing things that are not now happening and perhaps never happened (in the histori-

cal sense), usually in places other than the place here, in which we are hearing the story told. (51)

Thus, it is that memory/Mnemosyne leads us to recall those places we have never been and those things we have never done, but places and things that, having once been brought into consciousness, are very much a part of our psychic reality. By engaging the unconscious, by drawing it into the conscious, Memory/Mnemosyne becomes an integral part of our Self-creation, as well as of literary creation, from creative writer to creating reader. In the conscious as well as in the unconscious, Memory and her daughters lead us to the threshold, and poised there we encounter both literary and psychic realities, are transformed and (re)created anew. In this process the Psyche re-collects its wholeness, doing so in the art of writing as well as in the act of reading. ☐

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