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Margins of memory; margins and memory

Abstract:

‘A memory is what is left when something happens and does not completely unhappen’ Edward de Bono

‘Unless we remember we cannot understand’ E M Forster

To the ancient Greeks, Mnemosyne or Memory was the mother of the muses. To some extent memory remains the most significant faculty of most artists. Yet we live in a society where memory-challenging disorders, such as Alzheimer's disease, degenerate older brains almost as quickly as medicine is prolonging older bodies. Starting with an examination of the myth of the mother of the muses, this paper will compare that with contemporary metaphors of the nature and function of memory. It will go on to consider aging writers and memory loss. What falls away? What remains? Finally, it will discuss how memory is portrayed in the poetry of Janet Frame who was herself marginalised by mainstream New Zealand society.

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Keywords:

creative writing—memory

Underlying this paper is a personal thread of anxiety. As a daughter of an Alzheimer's patient, I worry about my memory. As a writer I worry about the impact of loss of memory upon my writing. Is memory everything to a writer? Are there margins or limits to memory or can memory be developed, supported? How is memory treated by writers both as idea and resource? This paper will briefly summarise both ancient myths and current mainstream literature about memory, and consider how it appears in the work of some ancient poets and writers. It will then look at these ideas of memory in the poetry of the New Zealand writer, Janet Frame, an octogenarian at the time of her death, yet also a writer who was marginalised by mainstream society for the stigma of suffering a mental disorder.

Most of the memory improving devices we are regularly encouraged to use in popular media today, such as cross words, sudoku and board games, involve mnemonics, which have been practiced for millennia, as lists, patterns or organising metaphors. In fact, some of the best examples of such skills can be found in the works of the ancient bards or storytellers, of the stature and appeal of Homer, whose 8th Century B.C.E epics, *the Odyssey* and *the Iliad* are believed to have been written down from oral performance. The very word mnemonic comes from the Greek word for memory, *Μνημοσύνη*, Mnemosyne, who in Hesiod's *Theogony* is personified as a goddess. A Titan, she was the daughter of Ouranus (Heaven) and Gaea (Earth), and, according to Hesiod, the mother (by Zeus) of the nine Muses. After defeating the Titans, Zeus celebrated with a series of amorous and generative adventures, including a nine night visit with Mnemosyne, after which she gave birth to the Muses (Castalides or Mousae); one daughter for each night. Each of these muses is associated with an art or science; the combination of the nine, for the Greeks, being the sum of all learning and knowledge: Calliope—Epic poems, Clio—History, Erato—lyrics and love poems, Euterpe—Music, Melpomene—Tragedy, Polhymnia—sacred poems, Terpsichore—Dancing, Thalia—comedy, Urania—astronomy. Mnemosyne, the mother of each of these muses, is mother in more than metaphor or myth; the practices of comedy, tragedy, dance, history, astronomy, music, the recital of hymns, love poetry and epic poetry each require memory both in the artist and the audience. Patterns of sound recognition, appeal to senses, empathy, even rejection—none of these responses is possible without memory. Memory must have been even more necessary in a society with few written texts, and fewer means of recording.

In epic poetry, we see evidence of the work of the memory upon the mind of the performer, and on the subsequent techniques and structure of epic poems. Homer's two great poems open with prayers or invocations to the muse, Calliope, asking her to "tell" each narrator the stories. (Homer, *Odyssey* 85, *Iliad* 1) It would take at least twenty consecutive hours to read each book aloud, or longer, with actors and sets. Little wonder the performer seemed to need divine assistance, as the feat of recollection was spectacular by any standards. (Jordan 7) The performer was required to recite the poems in verse, in the original Greek, in dactylic hexameter. Many of the stories would have been known to the audience and, so, as a part of the craft of storytelling, the performer used devices such as rearranging the order of events and being playful with chronology; using repetitive phrases or epithets, such as "wine dark sea", or "wily Odysseus". Catalogues of heroes, of armies, of battle regalia and arms could be improvised and enhanced (or minimised), to suit the audience. (Jordan 8) Structurally the poems have been seen to form a system of binary contrasts in sections, alternating between battle and human themes. These patterns form evidence

of mnemonics at work. Not only Calliope, but also her mother was required in this epic task of retelling.

In *The Republic*, principally in his famous allegory of the Cave, (Plato, Book VII ll514–520) Plato goes further than his predecessors and successors in indicating that we remember even when we have not had prior experience. This concept was picked up by the writers in the Neo-Platonist tradition but also captured so beautifully by Wordsworth in *Intimations of Immortality* when he says:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy! (Wordsworth 352)

Two other later epics also give a location and function to memory in their great works. In Book VI of the *Aeneid* and later in Dante's *Purgatorio*, cantos 28-31, the souls of the dead flit and cluster around a river of Hades, like bees around a stream of honey. It is Lethe, the river of forgetting, the place where souls are dipped, to forget their past lives. In Dante it is in the hope of the progress of the soul to Paradise; in the *Aeneid* it is in the process of metempsychosis or reincarnation; before being transmogrified into new bodies. As well as Lethe, the river of forgetting, the Greeks and Romans also recognised a pool of Mnemosyne in Hades and Eunoe, the river of memory or of the memory of beautiful deeds. Dante also drinks from this river in Purgatory. (Dante Canto 33) For both poets, remembering and forgetting are part of the progress of the soul.

Writing about memory in about 350 BCE, Aristotle said, "Memory is, therefore, neither Perception nor Conception, but a state or affection of one of these, conditioned by lapse of time ... there is no such thing as memory of the present while present, for the present is the object only of perception, and the future, of expectation, but the object of memory is the past. All memory, therefore, implies a time elapsed; consequently only those animals which perceive time remember, and the organ whereby they perceive time is also that whereby they remember." (Aristotle 1) Aristotle distinguishes between memory, recollection, learning and relearning, and also associates capacity for learning with the affections and the effects of presentation or experience. As well as being associated with time he identifies the importance of place or locus (places/loci) in memory. Rather alarmingly he states,

Hence both very young and very old persons are defective in memory; they are in a state of flux, the former because of their growth, the latter, owing to their decay. In like manner, also, both those who are too quick and those who are too slow have bad memories. The former are too soft, the latter too hard (in the texture of their receiving organs). (ibid)

Even before Plato and Aristotle, it was customary to develop mnemonic structures to increase and develop the skills of remembering. These have been recollected in

Francis Yates' *the Art of Memory* in which diagrammatic mnemonics are used to capture recollections as correlations with the structure of a house—with rooms and features standing for parts of the memory. Yates begins with the Greek orator Simonides of Ceos (556-468 BCE). (Yates 7) Simonides was characterised as being the inventor of the system of memory-aids described as Visual Imagery Mnemonics, as he saw poetry, painting and mnemonics in terms of intense visualisation. His mnemonics method involved encoding information into memory by conjuring up vivid mental images and then mentally placing them in familiar locations, such as in the rooms of a house, or auditorium. He became aware of this process during a tragic event in which he was requested to remember the exact locations of people who were killed by a roof collapsing at a banquet he had attended. He was able to remember where each person was seated, due to visual memory associations. Once again it is the notion of locus or place, even architectural space which is an important component of memory.

Moving quickly through the centuries, memory, in contemporary psychology, is the storing of learned information, and the ability to recall that which has been stored. It has been suggested that three processes occur in remembering: perception and registering of a stimulus; temporary maintenance of the perception, or short-term memory; and lasting storage of the perception, or long-term memory. Two recognised types of long-term memory are procedural memory, involving the recall of learned skills, and declarative memory, the remembrance of specific stimuli. (Stanford 2004) There are also theories to explain forgetting, in particular the concept of disuse, which proposes that forgetting occurs because stored information is not used; and that of interference, which suggests that old information interferes with information learned later. (Driasmaa 7, 8)

In popular psychology, the best-known chronicler of the vagaries of memory is Oliver Sacks, who also distinguishes two kinds of memory, calling them procedural and episodic. Episodic memory can also be called semantic or explicit memory, or declarative, as mentioned earlier. It tends to develop later in childhood and depends on complex interplay between upper parts of the brain. It is the perception of particular and unique events, in which the original experience is received through the compilation of senses and impressions that make us individuals. These experiences are not only unique the first time, but are also revised or re-categorised each time they are recollected. (Sacks 225) Procedural memory involves larger, more primitive parts of the brain, the subcortical structures. These motor memories can be maintained intact even after accident or illness attack the brain. Here the remembering is literal, exact, of patterns and sequences that have developed from repetition and fixed action patterns.

Both types of memory interact and function to make us sensible, reasonable people. But some of the effects of Alzheimer's and dementia are to attack either or both of these functions, usually first rendering patients incapable of recollecting personal memories then eventually of procedural skills. Sacks is particularly interested in people whose episodic memory has been stolen, or damaged, leaving them bereft of meaning or semantic understanding of their lives. He cites Umberto Eco's novel *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*, where the narrator, an antiquarian bookseller, "is

a man of Eco-like intelligence and erudition. Though amnesic from a stroke, he retains the poetry he has read, the many languages he knows, his encyclopaedic memory of facts; but he is nonetheless helpless and disoriented (and recovers from this only because the effects of his stroke are transient).” (Sacks 2004) In his recent book, *Musicophilia*, Sacks devotes a chapter to a patient called Clive, who was also the subject of a film by Jonathon Miller. Having lost his episodic memory through an illness, encephalitis, Clive can still function musically with his procedural memory, reading music, recalling, singing and performing songs. (Sacks 227)

Another aspect of procedural memory is that while it is repetitive, functional, generated by momentum and expectation, if it were to be interrupted, considered moment by moment, it can cause forgetting. For example, to pause in the process of walking in order to recall each aspect of motion in taking a step can cause us to lose the “motor melody.” (Sacks 227) Similarly, a recital of a script or recollection of a song seems to need reiteration of the procedure; it is difficult to pick up an isolated line. Like listening to music, reading or hearing poetry is not a passive process but an active one, involving a complex range of connections, inferences, expectations and surprises. We remember a line or phrase as we do a snatch of melody or transitions between musical sounds. We remember these isolated phrases at several levels; first as they are recalled to us by external stimulus, secondly as a part of the original piece they represent, finally, re-created with the old and new contexts. Poems, in fact, can operate as mnemonics. In this way much of Shakespeare’s language has been reinvented colloquially, in some cases to have the original meaning changed, even reversed, by the frequency of quotation. A good example of this is the phrase “Now is the winter of our discontent” (Richard II Act 1, Scene 1 lines 1-4), which is often stopped there, and negates the fuller meaning of the phrase “made more glorious...” The episodic has been eroded by procedure. What has entered the mainstream is incorrect.

It is fascinating to turn to poetry now, after these observations about memory; in particular to look at how it appears and influences the poetry of one of New Zealand’s greatest writers. Perhaps it is rather an obvious, even naïve, focus, but, as collections of images and lines, poems can connect us to the original stimulus for the writer, then go on to become capsules of recollection for our own memories. Janet Frame is world-recognised for her novels and short stories but also trickled poetry into publication over her long life, before she died in 2004. Obviously, as an autobiographer, she acknowledged that much of her inspiration was of, about and out of memory. The first part of her epic trilogy, *To the Is-Land*, opens with this invocation:

From the first place of liquid darkness, within the second place of air and light, I set down the following record with its mixture of fact and truths and memories of truths and its direction toward the Third Place, where the starting point is myth. (Frame frontispiece)

However, it was a small poem of hers that first gave me the idea for this paper. It has in fact served as a mnemonic for this writer.

The Place

The place where the floured hens
sat laying their breakfast eggs,
frying their bacon-coloured combs in the sun
is gone.

You know the place—
in the hawthorn hedge
by the wattle tree
by the railway line.

I do not remember these things
—they remember me,
not as child or woman but as their last excuse
to stay, not wholly to die.

“I do not remember them they remember me” (Frame 141)—it is the switching of that verb, the subject/object action of remembering—which so charged my first reading of this poem and caused me to reflect upon the nature of recollection. Memory must not only be “of” something; it also acts upon us unbidden and causes us to remember, when we think it is we who commit the remembering. It is passive and aggressive, as well as both procedural and episodic. We may not know “the place” but her recollection excites in us the charge and sensation of memory, even of nostalgia.

In many of Frame’s poems in *the Pocket Mirror* collection, the idea or image of memory is even more aggressive or active. In “Sunday Drive”, “Memory recurs, cripples. There is no relief from its pain”. (Frame 147) In a poem titled “Memory”, it is described as “A mental bombsite, nothing more, / empty of peace, empty of war”. (ibid 199) The idea of memory creating margins, causing prejudice that marginalises outsiders, is alluded to in the poem: “Had man no memory”. Frame implies that memory is identified as the source of margins or boundaries, trickery and conflict. “Had man no memory” there would be “the chill simplicity of love and hate without boundary”. (ibid 264) Similarly, there are “The Dead” who “have no memory” and therefore no boundaries; or margins

A torn scarf flows in and out of their head, controlled
by the wind of forgetfulness, not by the dead,
and where the end and the beginning may be,
the dead do not know
who have no memory, no memory (ibid 290)

These poems present an idea of memory that is episodic, historic, social, even cultural, linked by starts and stops in a linear way—active not passive. In other poems Frame seems to effect a switch between episodic and procedural memory, sometimes with comical or grotesque effect, as in “Around the rugged rocks the rugged rascal ran” in which she imagines a scene of carnage, had the poor subject of the mnemonic tongue twister actually run around some of the jagged beaches of the South Island.

I remember him running and running along the beach
The cuts on his feet bleeding, his eyes staring wild
...
They made us say it too, slowly and quickly to

Improve our speech
Did he understand and deplore
The too many trivial uses of adversity? (ibid 175)

In Frame's particular case, after many traumatic events of her early years which culminated in a period of being institutionalised with a mental disorder, (explicated in her autobiography, *To the Is-land*) some of the apparently autobiographical poems long for or celebrate the procedural patterns of normal life. "Clock Tower" (ibid 124) is about the ordinary establishment of a flat in Dunedin; books on bookshelves, a table for working on, a cherry tree, the view, the neighbours. All these will send the "journeying memory into collapse"; (Frame 124) to deny any past tribulations or deprivations. As one who was marginalised by society those everyday procedures of life become novelties, surprising episodes, longed for glimpses of normality.

In *the Dreams*, once again the everyday recollections of a small town childhood are turned into evidence of the narrator's difference or otherness from the mainstream. The writer's siblings could keep bantams and rabbits, but "nothing stayed" for her. (Frame 267)

Nothing stayed with me...
Dust did not stay, nor shadows.

But once her brother's bantams die and her sister's rabbit escapes perhaps to be hunted by the hawk, she begins to "turn the memory" and transform it into a reflection of survival, realising that in having nothing stay she has lost nothing either. Now, no longer as child she can "let the dreams escape at last and unwittingly make friends with the hawk." Frame's poetry in *the Pocket Mirror* collection, then, often reveals caution and apprehension about memory, with particular episodic memories of specific and even, in her case, traumatic events. With apologies to Wordsworth in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, these recollections do not cause tranquillity, nor arise out of contemplation; and memory itself is problematic, threatening.

Frame's use of memory is many-faceted. At times influenced by the incantatory rhythms of the verse, the procedural, at other times she catches the quirky episodic observation of the outsider, one who has been marginalised from the mainstream. Above all, memory provides both the rubric and the raw material of her craft. Perhaps as well as puzzles and crosswords, our modern papers and magazines could be advised to carry poems for memory work? Poems, with their patterns or bursts of imagery and sound, like the structures of the Greek memory houses, retain cultural as well as personal memories. Each word charged with layers of intention, they give utterance to feelings for which most of us have no words. "We do not remember them they remember us." (Frame 141)

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