

The Organ of Memory

by Theodore Dalrymple (May 2018)

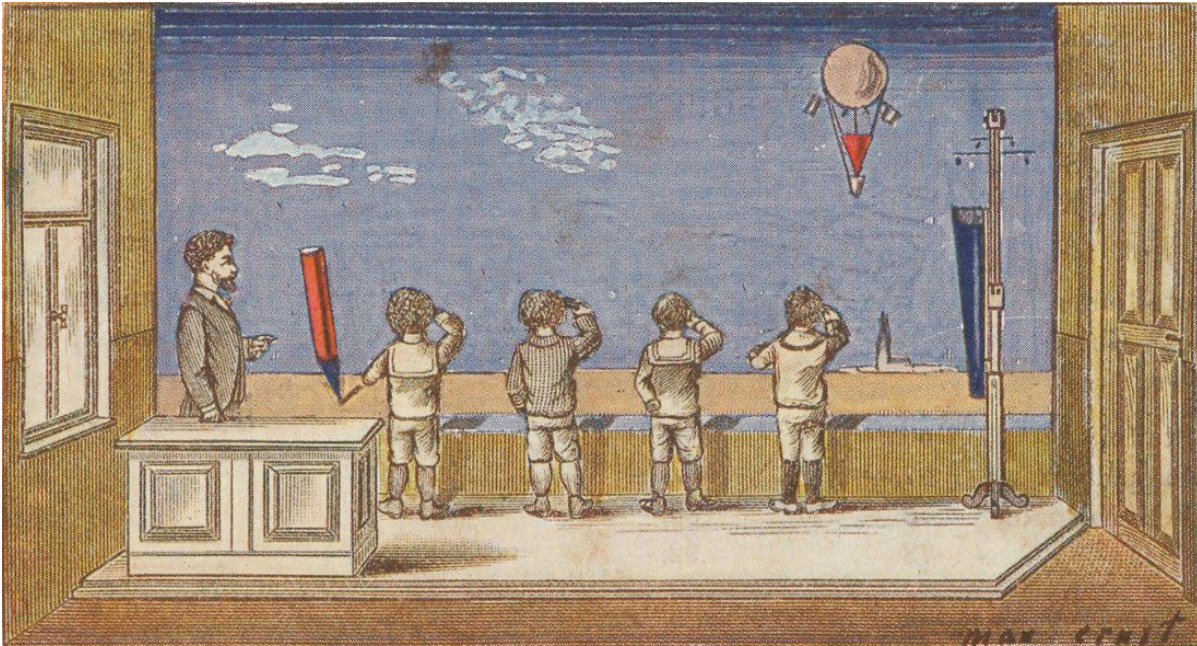


Illustration for Paul Éluard's *Répétitions*, Max Ernst, 1922

Once one has reached a certain age (which no doubt varies according to character), one does not like things to change. Perhaps this is because change inevitably implies the passage of time, the swiftness of which being something one would rather not be reminded of. This, more than inflexibility of mind or the belief that change is always for the worse, explains the older person's preference for stability and for everything to remain the same.

Every year for the last ten years, I have spent a few days in a small Turkish town. My wife and I have always taken lunch in a simple restaurant there, where the food is cheap, excellent and always the same, though the variety of dishes is more than sufficient (it would be easy to be a vegetarian in Turkey, as

in my heart I believe we ought to be).

This year it had been redecorated since we last patronised it, not so excessively that it had changed its character entirely, but noticeably nonetheless. The tables and chairs were more modern; it no longer had quite that rundown quality that we so often take for authenticity, especially where it does in the least not deter local customers, rather the reverse.

But though the food and presumably the cook were the same as ever, the restaurant must have changed hands, for the rest of the staff were unrecognisable to us. The waiter whom we had hoped to see, and who had now for several years greeted us like a long-lost friend, no longer worked there, though he had not been of retirement age or anything like it. We would never see him again.

Of course, we could hardly expect that we were as regretted in the minds of those whom we missed as they were in ours. A waiter must serve thousands of customers a year, and those who stand out in his memory must either be regulars whom he had served more than two or three days a year, or perhaps those who made themselves particularly odious or objectionable. People are not of symmetrical importance in each other's memories. We are apt to forget this: and we are often not as important to others as others are to us, contrary to what our instinctive egotism and self-importance often leads us to believe.

Moreover, we differ in the retentiveness of our memories. Surely most of us have been embarrassed at some time or other

in our lives by a failure to recognise someone whom we have met who recognises us. We know, when we recognise others but they do not recognise us, that we feel mildly humiliated or insulted by the difference, as if they considered us not worth remembering because they are more important than we; presumably the reverse also applies.

When I was a small child I was plentifully supplied with aunts and great aunts whom I recognised but could not name. To this day, I am unable to say how they were related to me, and I daresay that I shall go to my grave still not knowing. I remember in particular my Aunt Hannah, an elegant, intelligent and distinguished lady, whom I would now, many years and decades too late, love to question about her life, which must have been an interesting one. She would have remembered the last quarter of the Victorian age with clarity, but one has no sense of the fleetingness of life or the importance of the past when one is young.

Anyway, my aunts and great-aunts would ask me, 'Do you know who I am?' and I would answer that I did. My lie was swiftly detected when they then asked me to name them and I couldn't, at least not without error and confusion. They laughed at this but, young as I was, I knew even then that they were slightly offended. Were they not sufficiently important to me for me to commit their names accurately to memory, which in my case was in other respects quite good? With the perversity that is natural to Man, or at any natural rate to me, I set about deliberately *not* remembering them, as a small act of independence on the part of one who was not by nature courageously rebellious.

Memory is a notoriously fickle faculty. The psychoanalysts

presumed that nothing is either remembered or forgotten except for a reason; and while I have little doubt that this principle is false, it does, like many a false principle, contain within it an element of truth.

When I was eleven, I tried strenuously to remember the definition of a contour for my geography class but, strange to relate, I never could remember it. This was odd because I could remember every other definition I was taught, and thanks to stamp-collecting I could find Nyasaland or the Solomon Islands with ease on a map of the world.

I now realise that I was playing a game with my geography teacher, and he with me. We developed a ritual in which he would ask me, in front of the class, to define a contour, and I would duly fail. There would be general levity, and yet there was no humiliation in it for me because the humour depended on the contrast between my inability to remember this one thing and my capacity to learn in general. In a way, therefore, it was a form of flattery that I myself provoked by my refusal to learn the definition.

I remember my teacher's face very clearly. He would then have been about forty and probably, actuarially-speaking, he is now dead. But for me, of course, he is forever trapped in the time-amber of my recollection of him. His face is round and shinily well-scrubbed; it exudes a good humour and benevolence that clutches at my heart to recall, for I did not know then that such was not to be taken for granted in this world. He laughs at me, but there is no malice in his laughter, rather affection; he must have liked teaching boys like me. The discipline he exerted had the transparent quality that George Orwell attributed to a style in good prose: you did not notice

that it was there. Though by no means perfectly-behaved—we flicked ink pellets constantly at our Latin and maths masters the moment they turned their backs to face the blackboard, and thought it great fun to torment them—we would never have cheeked *him*. Why there was this difference, I cannot say; I doubt that he was more intelligent than they, rather the reverse.

Looking back, I realise what I did not realise then, that good schoolteachers are above the price of rubies. There is a moral grandeur in what they do, for even if they may sometimes be colossi in the eyes of their better pupils, in the eyes of the world they are relatively humble. They are the springboard from which their pupils may overleap them, and it takes a special kind of goodness, genuine humility, to take pleasure in being overleapt by those who shortly before were in your charge.

Is this reflection only the fruit of nostalgia occasioned by selective memory? Memory is now so much mistrusted by psychologists that they seem almost to deny its possibility as a guide to anything. Experiments demonstrate that eye-witness accounts of events are thoroughly untrustworthy (as the Russians say, 'He lies like an eye-witness'); what we tell ourselves are stories that masquerade as memories.

Perhaps. But sixty years ago, as a small boy, I was taken by my best friend's mother, together with my best friend, on a holiday in a cottage near Beachy Head, a chalk cliff of 500 feet in height famed for both its beauty and its convenience for intending suicides. That summer in my memory was one of perpetual sunshine, which no doubt casts on my memory's veracity; sunshine is rarely perpetual in England. But I

remember the rock pools through which I clambered in search of spiny little fish, and I distinctly remember also being taken to listen to an organ concert in the theatre on Eastbourne Pier, given by a man called Sandy MacPherson.

Now there is absolutely no reason why I should remember the name of Sandy MacPherson, except that I was taken to hear him. It is true that he was once very famous in Britain; he played Wurlitzer for the BBC during the war and broadcast so frequently (to keep up morale) that one woman wrote to the BBC to complain that she would be quite reconciled to air raids if only a bomb would fall on MacPherson's organ, preferably while he was playing his signature tune on it. But he was immensely popular.

After the war, however, his fame declined, although he was still billed at Eastbourne as being famous and my friend's mother thought we were exceptionally lucky to have the opportunity to hear him play in person. It was my first encounter with celebrity.

His music was very tame: it was entertainment, I suppose, for the respectable petty bourgeois, a class that has all but disappeared, who eschewed excitement and the sensual, feared the intellectual and therefore despised it, and liked what it knew. (MacPherson wrote a book titled *Know Your Hymns*, when such knowledge might have still seemed useful or desirable.) By the time he died in 1975, on his 78th birthday, he must have known that the art-form at which he excelled, and to which he had devoted his life, was as extinct as the volcanoes of the Auvergne, and dead beyond any possibility of revival. I have tried to listen to such of it as I can find on the internet: it is to real music what blancmange is to *mousse au*

chocolat.

There is, as I have said, no reason (other than a true memory of my holiday near Beachy Head) why MacPherson's name should be known to me. I would never have listened to him on the wireless, his performances on which became fewer and fewer as public taste changed and overtook him. Fragmentary as my memory is, some fragments of it represent reality as faithfully as the shards of pottery so beloved of archaeologists.

Speaking of past civilisations is appropriate in MacPherson's case. His music was petty bourgeois to its core, and to my



ears spiritless and dull however skilfully-played; it was terminally dull. But the way he presented himself also reflected the different tastes and aspirations of his listeners from anyone's today. He dressed in conspicuously immaculate white or black tie, or alternatively in

expensive very well-tailored suits (even when playing for the radio, when none of his audience could have seen him). Not for stage-proletarian raggedness, or the pretence that such raggedness was natural for him. He played for an audience that aspired to dress better than it could afford, not worse.

I have no idea whether he had a happy and fulfilled life: whether, for example, the long, slow but total and final eclipse that he suffered in the last quarter of his life, having previously enjoyed considerable fame, cast a shadow retrospectively on all that had gone before. Is it better to

have triumphed early in life only to fail in the end, or to have failed early in life only to triumph in the end?

An entertainer who ceases to entertain is a sad, even tragic, figure. I have known people who, having once attracted an audience, became so accustomed to and dependent on its attention that they felt truly alive only in its presence. Without it, they were like deflated balloons. To be was for them to be seen, and appearance was reality. But audiences are fickle. As a result, they, the entertainers, had to behave in an ever more outré way or, if they were intellectual performers, make ever more outrageous claims and mental pirouettes: anything to draw attention to themselves to reassure them of their own continued existence. But all revolutions, even those in mere fashion, devour their young; to serve the revolution, said Bolívar, is to plough the sea.

I do not know whether Sandy MacPherson ever tried to move with the fashion: I suspect not, because he knew that he was not capable of it and it would be futile for him even to try. He knew how to do one thing, and that became totally redundant in the new world in which he found himself. Perhaps he accepted the fact with a good grace, perhaps not; but in a swiftly changing world, his fate will become that of ever more people. I have seen the future, and it is personal obsolescence.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is [The Proper Procedure](#) from New English Review Press.

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