

Female Memory in Narrative

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It is with a woman's memory and body that I am happy to serve literature. In the entrails of past ages I try to search, among so many memories, for women's memory in particular. I am trying to find out how this memory is made up, from what material and with what texture. In the final analysis this memory has always been all around, at every period since the creation of the world.

Having shared intensely in the invention of language, it was enriched by the special mystery of emotion. Even without words, virtually aphasic, it has continued to accumulate reality.

This female memory was present in the Bible, when the Hebrew God of the Old Testament, by rejecting woman as a valid interlocutor, inflicted on her a deep historic wound. A sadness which has its origin, contrary to Freud's theory that women suffer from nostalgia for the phallus, in the fact that they were so often marginalized in Bible stories, as for instance when Sarah, Abraham's chief helper, was cast out of the Holy Alliance by God and her husband.

Woman's memory was in Troy, where it encountered wily Ulysses. And again when it predicted that the hero's return to his home on Ithaca and to Penelope's arms would come to pass through adversity and hair-raising adventures.

Out of love this memory entered Julius Caesar's tent. Beneath the canvas the Roman soldier took off his cloak of power and ambiguity and on occasion relished his mortality.

That ancient memory wept beside Cassandra, daughter of King Priam of Troy, whose prophecies were condemned as untrue by Apollo, lovelorn and rejected, and were never taken seriously. Because of their tragic nature those prophecies have to this day remained as thorns in women's path. How could we forget Cassandra who finally resigned herself, after a series of setbacks, to entering the royal palace at Mycenae with Agamemnon, to whom she had been given as the spoils of war, though she already knew full well that they would both be murdered by the vengeful Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus?

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That memory, close to the gods and oracles of a mythical Greece, stored up the traces of a chaotic ancient world that continued to seek adventure even though it was on the verge of ruin. Perplexed, it watched the inexorable progress of the first heterodoxies, the rise of official insubordination. At the gates of the Delphic oracle in that same ancient Greece, it was racked by anxiety. How could it obey the command 'Know yourself', inscribed at the entrance of the famous temple, if women's situation prevented them from showing publicly any doubt or resistance? Here notwithstanding at the very centre from which the enigmas radiated, the woman Pythonissa in the shape of a snake would confront Python. But to whom would Apollo, who was burning to communicate with human beings, entrust the task of revealing the future? To woman's voice, which would bear for humanity the weight of his enigmas. To the voice that was tempted to compete with Apollo and would maybe amend his words, coining in their place words he had not dictated.

It was also at that obscure and fascinating time that female memory encountered Apollo's sister, the contrary Artemis, an ambiguous goddess, both savage educator and hunter, who was caught unawares in her sanctuary. In this inaccessible place Artemis brought up the girls who were given into her care, returning them a year later to the city, the gynaeceum and the world of men. At this point they were domesticated and ready to give up revolt and insubordination.

An Artemis whose dominating authority required girls' hair to be cut short on their wedding night. With this civilizing act of submission they were to appear ugly and contemptible before their husbands who, on the contrary, wore their hair that night magnificently arranged, for them a symbol of power and beauty.

That female memory also trod the sacred earth; it entered temples; it appropriated the speech in which the numberless gods were worshipped. Dressed yet again in white, it led the procession for the Eleusinian mysteries. Until one day it was expelled from the religious celebrations, pushed aside from the epicentre where God's spirit dwelt.

Cast down by all these backward steps, that memory then travelled round the world. It was a nomad when humans were discovering the world. Above all it became acquainted with domestic spaces. Confined between the living-room, kitchen and bedroom walls, it committed itself personally to collecting day by day the crumbs of history that fell to it.

That endless social exile made woman's memory a matrix from which the narrative thread was woven: a powerful store of metaphor and oral technique. And the more that memory was enclosed within the bounds of the private, the more it used the subterfuges of symbolism. As if woman had been deliberately created as a symbolic nature: someone who, because she could not play an active role in the vast complexity of daily life, became over the years a genre whose identity had to be deciphered poetically and with difficulty.

The result was that, in domestic language – the only way its existential crisis could be expressed – the female gender was said to over-use allusions, insinuations, half-articulated suggestions. As well as being incapable of articulating a direct, incisive discourse, which meant that women were accused of being evasive, cunning, always ready to change their minds. A portrait that the classical Greeks

confirmed by associating cunning with the female figure of 'Methis': that same cunning whose political nature helped women cope with oppressive domination by men.

At least in those far-off times women did not make use of the art of memorizing and preserving knowledge. They had not learnt to preserve memory as the Homeric epic poets, veritable poets of memory, did with Homer's story in all its wealth of detail. Or as the Incas did, jealously preserving a memory that was never supposed to disappear; in faraway America they created a caste, the '*amautas*', whose task was to maintain and preserve in their memory the present reality and the history of their empire.

And so, without writing or access to normative culture, women could only invent the reality they did not have, imagine what they did not know or what they gathered in fragmentary form.

Then with what secret pleasure did women add to the adventures that were brought to them within their homes and from which they were excluded, elaborations of a different kind that they wished they could have experienced. An exercise that was fruitful of course, but frustrating. Through it they were gradually able to put together the basic framework of their interior memory.

Step by step they welcomed into their individual and collective mentality a version that came from their day-to-day lives. An intimate, modest daily experience that went beyond the social position assigned by male society. However, in studying the origins of that memory or of all the other memories, we are inevitably projecting ourselves into the earliest times. In other words, a nebulous era when human suffering and uncertainty gave rise to gods, legends and myths as ways of bearing the dense mystery in which all humans were plunged.

It was from this mythological mould that Mnemosyne emerged, an illustrious goddess in the Greek pantheon who was given the gift of memory. The power to distribute among mortals the memory that was destined to forget nothing.

A goddess and yet a woman, Mnemosyne connects memory to the world of women. To the female gender, lacking in so many rights, she guarantees full enjoyment, despite the social exile they were subjected to, of the prerogatives inherent in memory.

Mnemosyne embodies that founding era of the human imaginary. In addition to retaining human events she inherits the feeling for time from Chronos her brother. He teaches her the benefits and disasters that flow from the imperceptible passage of time in the lives of mortals. Consequently she has the task, among many others, of registering births, deaths and the passing of the seasons. And particularly of marking the ages of life as they go by, until we reach the antechamber where we await the signs of death.

With these instructions the goddess travels through the interstices of time and history. She appears in the acts that begin the world. In addition to controlling memory and time, she gives birth to nine daughters, the Muses, whose main virtue is that they inspire the path of art.

In the midst of this constellation of coincidences, there is an almost immaterial symmetry: she turns her grandson Orpheus into the poet of the Orphic songs. Perhaps she draws the poetic line with unadorned words. Words of banal origin

that gleam when they are polished and covered in translucent jewels, to become the poetic ornaments in which we dress human facts and actions.

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