

Columbia:

a journal of literature and art

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Source: *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art*, No. 46 (2009), pp. 32-36

Published by: [Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41807718>

Accessed: 14-08-2015 19:05 UTC

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by David Shields

Memory

In Greek mythology, Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, is also the mother of the nine muses.

Tell the story of your life that is the most emotionally cathartic; the story you “remember” is covering the “real story,” anyway.

Reality takes shape in memory alone.

Memory: the past rewritten in the direction of feeling.

Human memory, driven by emotional self-interest, goes to extraordinary lengths to provide evidence to back up whatever understanding of the world we have our hearts set on — however removed that may be from reality.

Consciously or unconsciously, we manipulate our memories to include or omit certain aspects. Are our memories therefore fictions?

Memories have a quasi-narrative structure, constituting a story or a scene in a story, an inbuilt successiveness strong enough to keep the narrative the same on each act of remembering but not strong enough to ensure that the ordering of events is the ordering which originally took place.

Scooter Libby, Dick Cheney's former chief of staff, hired a memory-loss expert to make the case that Libby forgot about Valerie Plame's employment status due to the "vulnerability of memory." Libby's defense team argued that "any misstatements he made during his FBI interviews or grand jury testimony were not intentional but rather the result of confusion, mistake, or faulty memory."

Our personal experience, though it may convey great truths, most likely won't be verified by security camera tapes later. We usually think of memory in just this way, as if a recorder planted in our head could be rewound and replayed. But memory often stores perceptual information in verbal forms, not images. We remember a "light blue Rambler," but because we have translated it in our minds into a verbal construct, we would find it difficult to retranslate the memory into an image, recreating exactly the right shade of blue. Autobiographical memory is a recollection of events or episodes, which we remember with great detail. What's stored in that memory isn't the actual events, but how those events made sense to us and fit into our experience.

We tend to think of our memories as having been tucked away for safekeeping in, say, file cabinets or dusty, old boxes in the backs of closets or filed away on the hard drives of computers where they can easily be accessed by the click of a button. All it takes to remember events and objects is to open the boxes, open the files, and there our memories will be, waiting for us. But, just as boxes and files molder and rot and computers become infected with viruses, making the files inaccessible or corrupted, so do our memories. In a sense, all memories have been forgotten. Memories are predicated on loss. It's through the act of remembering that we bring these forgotten experiences back from oblivion. They require this rescuing because they've run their course. These experiences are complete and have been relegated

to our memories. In other words, to remember is to recall what we've forgotten. But it's not as if our memories have been rubbed away by years of wind and rain like names and dates on a gravestone; instead, our memories are filled with gaps and distortions, because by its very nature memory is selective.

The genius of memory is that it is choosy, chancy, and temperamental.

Through the loss of the real, the passing of the actual moment into history, and through the selective and transformative qualities of memory, I construct a representation — a shadow, an image of that experience which stands for the experience — yet one that allows me to access it as if it were a reality. Remembering is an intentional mental act that requires an object or experience to be remembered, and because the experiences and objects we remember come from our own boxes and files, and these storage systems are full of holes and gaps, what we remember will always be insufficient to fill in every hole. To fill in the holes, we turn our memories into specific images, which our minds understand as representing a specific experience, object, or thought. Our past experiences have been dismantled, analyzed, recollated, and then made ready for imagistic recall. The images we store in our memories are not exact replicas of what we experienced; they're what our minds turn them into. They are what we need to recreate the story, which is the full experience the image represents.

Freud: We have no memories from our childhood, only memories that pertain to our childhood. Is a story merely a memory of a memory? How can a memory, which is grounded in an image (e.g., a light blue Rambler) and which rings so true to me, be false? If this is false, then what is truth? And why does this matter?

It's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen.

“Did this happen?”

“Yes.”

“Did this happen in this way?”

“The answer to that, if you’re a grown-up, is ‘Not necessarily.’”

Nonfiction writers imagine. Fiction writers invent. These are fundamentally different acts, performed to different ends. Unlike in fiction, where the reader’s only task is to imagine, the nonfiction reader is asked to behave more deeply: to imagine, and also to believe. Fiction doesn’t require its readers to believe; in fact, it offers its readers the great freedom of experience without belief — something real life can’t do. Fiction gives us a rhetorical question: “What if this happened?” Nonfiction gives us a statement, something more complex: “This may have happened.”

In Proust, for example, who is to me at base an essayist, nothing ever happens. The only obstacles are that someone might rebuff someone else or someone might get sick or grow old, and even these are usually hypothetical obstacles. People presumably get educations, travel, buy paintings, go on diplomatic missions, but the events are for the most part meetings between various people (or simply sightings of one person by another, sometimes thanks to a stroll or a ride in a carriage) and what these meetings bring out, on a psychological level, about life itself. How can a work be considered “fiction” when there’s no plot? Philosophy, perhaps, or criticism, but not fiction.

Carpenters restore old homes to their architectural and design period, not knowing, really, what color the walls were first painted. If restoring a home is like writing a nonfiction narrative, and if choosing the paint for one wall is like imagining one moment in the larger story, shouldn’t we acknowledge that the house and its walls were in fact never one particular way? On a single wall, sometimes wallpaper hung, sometimes paintings

stared, sometimes children penned their names, sometimes flies sat, sometimes dust settled, sometimes sunlight blazed, sometimes fingerprints shimmered. The lost story the carpenter tries to restore isn't one particular story, but a pool of possible tales, with different perspectives from different characters, told at different times for different reasons. The nonfiction writer who works to revive a lost scene adds one similar story to the collection of stories that ever existed for that moment. The entire platform of my imagination, my purpose, my hope, my intent is different from that of a fiction writer's. I don't seek to tell the best story. I seek to tell a story that once was. I seek to fill a place that once had meaning with meaning again. ■■■