

On Smrti

By E.H. Rick Jarow*

“April is the cruelest month, breeding Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing memory and desire...” So, begins T.S. Eliot’s iconic poem, “The Wasteland,” challenging the memory of Chaucer’s April from Canterbury Tales, as being a delightful month to go on pilgrimage. Platonic teachings emphasize that you don’t create, you just remember. Might the inverse might also be true, “You don’t remember, you just create.” As the oneirocritic, Robert Bosnak, contends, you do not actually remember your dreams. You remember your memory you recreate the dream in this time. Since the challenges of post-modernism, this is no longer a far-fetched idea. The eminent historian of immigration, Deborah Dash Moore, defines history in this regard, as “a search for a plausible narrative.” “History” is not a record of what happened, but rather, is a record of what we believe happened, or what we want to believe happened. This brings to the fore Foucault’s documenting the relationship of knowledge to power, as well as Freud’s assertion that material which is unacceptable to the ego, is disguised, in order to make them palatable. This places the notion of memory in a different light. There are incidents that occurred fifty years ago that seem as if they occurred five minutes ago. The depth psychologist and champion of the imagination, James Hillman, referred to this process as “soul-making.” Back to T.S. Eliot: when he studied Sanskrit at Harvard, he was certainly aware that the Sanskrit word for memory, smara (from which smrti “that which is remembered,” is derived) is also an epithet for Kama Deva, the Indian Cupid. Hence, the mixing of memory and desire. Perhaps, in this light, the study of history, which is a form of collective memory, is also a form of mass therapy, an effort to process the collective past. Hegel and Marx both believed classical India to be an inferior civilization because it had “no history,” but collections of mythologies. Maybe classical India, however, held an awareness that all memory is myth, a word which in its early Greek form literally translates as “plot.” Jesus declares (in the Gospel story) “Let the dead bury the dead.” As the Jesus narrative exemplifies, however, burying the dead is no easy task. Perhaps our ongoing, ever-morphing narratives, allow us an oblique opportunity to connect with and process our pain. And in this theatre of memory, the goal may not be to accumulate or catalogue what has been spoken (itihasa), but look a good miller, to process the grain into its essence: from what has passed, and is passing, and is to come, into what always is. Perhaps, the pilgrimage of the mind, on its endless perignation of story, is meant to ultimately take us to love, but that may be unspeakable.

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“April is the cruelest month, breeding Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing memory and desire, stirring dull roots with spring rain.” So, begins T.S. Eliot’s iconic poem, “The Wasteland,” challenging Chaucer’s memory of April from *Canterbury Tales*, as being a delightful month to go on pilgrimage. Spring may indeed be an enchanting and lush season of rebirth, but like any birth, it can also be difficult, painful, and filled with tribulation. Remembering and narrating our discomforts and even our agonies generally hold a different quality than our stories of triumph, but something compels us to do so. Indeed, tragedy is, more often than not, elevated over comedy in a culture’s tapestry of narratives. The following reflection was precipitated by an event: an accident that took place in Uttarkashi, Northern India. While hiking down from a mountain temple to the god Shiva, I slipped and fell through a barbed wire fence and down a ravine. I was carted off to the hospital, a bloody mess, but lived to tell the tale.

About six months after the above incident, I reviewed the notes I had written on the day following the occurrence and noticed that my memory of the accident was significantly different than what I had written on the day after it had happened. My companion on that journey had often joked with me about my “*smrti*,” (memory), or rather my lack of *smrti*, my often inability to recall what happened yesterday or even an hour ago. Perhaps the disjunction between my written and later remembered account of the event is living proof of Plato’s contention that the written word would obfuscate memory and make us all the poorer for it. In a somewhat related vein, one could view such deficiency of recall as an ominous sign of aging, with events fading further and further into some sort of collective amnesia.

I say “ominous” because I witnessed my mother lose her memory, something that contemporary culture calls “dementia” or Alzheimer’s disease. My mother, who had a very strong will and intellect that she was justly proud of, panicked when her grip on her known environment loosened. She would call me in the middle of the night saying things like, “I need “markers right away.” This was to write things down, just about everything, so she would not forget where things were placed or what day it was, etc. Eventually she forgot anyway. She forgot her name, my name, where she was, and where she had been. But some traces remained. She may have forgotten that I was her son, but that did not really seem to matter: whenever she saw me, she would hug me and pat my head. Clearly, something in her was in touch with something in me.

In Greek philosophical theories of recollection (Plotinus), memory only exists outside of the *Nous* and is ever weakened by time. Likewise, “You don’t create or learn, you just remember,” affirms Plato’s theory of recollection¹. But I wonder if the inverse might also be true, “You don’t remember, you just create.” Indeed, the temporal aspect of memory is said to be a function of the imagination, for the Muses who govern inspiration (the former word for creativity) are the daughters of Memory. Likewise, the oneirocritic, Robert Bosnak, has continually demonstrated that you do not actually remember your dreams. You remember your memory;

¹*Phaedo*, 72-76. fellowship with the pure and uniform and divine.” The main task of philosophy is, therefore, not to impart some new knowledge, really unfamiliar to the soul, but to help it to remember. Ignorance is oblivion, knowledge is recollection, “learning is just recollection.”

that is, you recreate the dream in current time (Bosnak 1996). Since the arrival of post-modernism, this is no longer a far-fetched idea. The eminent historian of immigration, Deborah Dash Moore, following post-modern insights, has defined history as “a search for a plausible narrative.” “History” is not (and cannot be) a record of what happened, but rather, is a record of what we believe happened, or what we want to believe happened. Perhaps unwittingly, the New York Times slogan “All the news that is fit to print” typifies this. More recently, there are scores of neuroscientific studies on Memory “Reconsolidation,” (Haubrich and Nader 2018) the process by which the brain is said to fill in lacunae well after any factual occurrence. Perhaps this is all a symptom of our cultural descent into prosody. In classical cultures of Greece and India, for example, what was known and what needed to be remembered was transmitted through verse, the remembered master-narrative of a community, with the bard being the repository of the narratives that held communities together.

The question may then arise, “Who decides what is fit to print, and who decides what is misinformation?” If you have waded through the work of Michelle Foucault, something that the mainstream media has not, you are aware that “knowledge” has ever-existed in a relationship to power. I remember traveling through communist bloc countries during the era of Soviet domination. The first monument you would see upon entering a major city was always the radio tower; for whoever controls the information controls the culture.

What if the most stringent censorship of information, however, comes neither from the government nor the news media. Perhaps we need to revisit Freud, who in the West, first detailed the censorship mechanisms in our dreams. Material that is unacceptable to the ego, defined here as “our imagined sense of self-identity,” does not get into our personal New York Times. It is disguised, like coating bitter pills with sugar, to make them palatable.

This places the notion of memory, literal memory in any case (as distinguished from other forms of “remembrance”), in a different and perhaps more diffused light. When I look over my own issues with forgetfulness, I see that while I may not remember what occurred five minutes ago, there are incidents that occurred fifty years ago that seem as if they occurred five minutes ago. The depth psychologist and champion of the imagination, James Hillman, referred to this process as “soul-making,” echoing D.H. Lawrence’s rhetorical question: “Have you built your ship of death?” (Lawrence 1932).² I assume that this means the construction of the stories, themes, and memes we may take with us when we exit this stage. After all, the overwhelming majority of our memories and even our “landmark events” are destined to be forgotten. Does anything, can anything, in fact, ever get through, or do our ships just help us get toward the edge of the abyss? (Hillman 1817).

I wonder, then, in my own case, if my lack of memory is more or less an unconscious choice. After all, how many things can one take seriously? My name?

²*Have you built your ship of death, O have you?
O build your ship of death, for you will need it.
The grim frost is at hand, when the apples will fall
thick, almost thundrous, on the hardened earth.*

Well, I have had three different official nomenclatures in this lifetime and a number of “knick-names” in communities that I have been a part of. The process of forgetfulness and compensation is clearly evident in the contemporary culture of data overload in which just about everyone walks around with a portable brain in hand, the mobile phone. There’s just too much information for one skull to hold.

Back to T.S. Eliot: when he studied Sanskrit and Buddhism at Harvard, he was certainly aware that the Sanskrit word for memory, *smara* (from which *smṛti*, “that which is remembered,” is derived) is also an epithet for Kama Deva, the Indian Cupid or God of Desire. Hence; the mixing of memory and desire. Perhaps, in this light, the study of history, which is a form of collective memory, can be envisioned as one form of mass-therapy, an effort to process the collective past. Hillman takes this a step further, in *Lament of the Dead*, his discussion of Jung’s Red Book with Sonu Shamdasani, where he insists that the true task of humanity is to come to terms with the dead (Hillman and Shamdasani 2013), which I would characterize as the slice of human history within our conscious and unconscious purview. In this sense whatever we remember is what we need to process (i.e., reconcile with), just as what we never can forget (holocausts, disasters, plagues, reigns of terror) are the mountains of process we are asked to climb. On the other hand, there are many like situations and events that we want to forget, or that we conveniently forget, only to have them rear their ugly heads at the most unexpected and inopportune times.

There are some “spiritual bypass” teachings that employ rhetoric like “nothing has ever happened,” since the world of form is seen as an “illusion.” In this view, memory is a long step down from the timeless contemplation of the Absolute, the “Good,” which is arguably the true remembrance. While temporality is undeniable, to say “Nothing has ever happened” does not ring true. A dream is still happening if you are in it; especially if you are falling down a steep ravine! In the marvelous text from Classical India, *Yogavasishttha*, Vasishtha is asked by his interlocutor, Rama, about the difference between a dream and a lifetime³. From the point of view of death, says Vasishtha, there is no difference at all. Indeed, desire and memory may fuel the dream, but what we actually remember of it when we wake up is an open question. Now, in the *Yoga-Sutras*, *smṛti* is declared to be a *ṛtti* (YS 1.11), a transformational state of mind with which one identifies. It is a sort of *kleśa* or affliction (YS 2.3-9) and an *antarāyas* or obstacle (1.29-40) to the attainment of yoga, but it appears to be a necessary *kleśa* for humanity (Miller 1996). I am not sure if the same can be said for chronology. Yes, time is passing, but is it moving forward (as we are conditioned to believe), around in cycles, or doing figure-eight summersaults on the backdrop of eternity? Perhaps, the “*kleśa* aspect” of time is the particular story that we tell ourselves about it, admittedly partial, but apparently essential, for so many stories ever-abound.

One time, while visiting my mother in her dementia unit, I met a woman in a wheel chair who had just come into the ward. She was dazed and confused to say

³*Vasishtha Yoga Samhita* (योगवासिष्ठम्) is a historically popular and influential syncretic philosophical text of the Yoga tradition, dated to the 6th CE or 7th CE — 14th CE or 15th CE. The complete text contains over 29,000 verses. The short version of the text is called *Laghu yogavāsīṣṭham* and contains 6,000 verses.

the least and turned toward me. “I don’t know where I am,” she said, pitifully. I dutifully explained to her that we were in a town in upstate New York, New Paltz (which interestingly enough is a skewed memory of the original Huguenot name, Neu Falles), but I could not help thinking that some yogis meditate for eons to reach such a state. If you have not been prepared for it, however, you will not recognize it. The Tibetans tell us, in this vein, that after death, everyone experiences the clear white light of pure awareness, but almost no one can recognize it, and so we go stumbling back into *samsara*, repeated death and birth, reenacting and repeating the stories that bind us.

But just what is this *smṛti* that we identify with? I once attended a ceremony in which we were guided in the use of psychoactive plants. When the evening was over, I turned to a fellow participant and said, there is no way I can drive home, I cannot remember the first road to take. “Don’t worry,” my friend replied, “the machine will take you home.” I am still unclear about exactly what he meant by “machine”. Was it my GPS? My car, or perhaps my mind? Indeed, in the classic Indian text, the *Bhagavadgītā*, the mind is likened to a machine and its memories therefore are envisioned as purely mechanical. The *Gīta* (18.52) literally states that all living beings are revolving around on a machine of *māyā*, illusion.

Hegel and Marx both believed classical India to be an inferior civilization because it “had no history.” Instead, they were said to have collections of mythologies. Maybe classical India knew something, however, that post-modern thought is just arriving at: that all history and thus all memory is myth, a word which in its early Greek form literally translates as “plot.” We are, all too often, however, encouraged to identify with one particular story and view anything else to be misinformation, myths that are not true. With the advent and development of ever-increasing subjectivity and focus on individuality, the processing of narrative proves to be increasingly frustrating, as there are multiple versions of just about everything: the post-modern perspective demands simultaneous multiplicity.

Mnemosyne, mother of all the muses, is after all memory herself, and she gives birth to all the arts and letters, music, melody, math and the sciences. This is quite a different riff on the idea that “nothing has ever happened.” Perhaps we need not discard *smṛti*, but not fixate on it: for in addition to what is remembered, there is the vast open spaciousness, the clear white light of openness. Giving it a name, is giving it a memory, for language is remembered. As I was falling through the fence and down the ravine, there were no words, no thoughts. Many have had a similar experience when almost getting hit by a moving car. It lifts you out of whatever narrative is playing in the mind and moves you right into the brilliance of this moment.

George Santayana’s dictum that we study history so as not to repeat it may be a gross misnomer; for we do keep repeating it, as anyone who has lived long enough is apt to tell you. Oh, but we have progressed! When Thoreau was told how wonderful it is that, with the invention of the telephone, someone in Maine can now talk to someone in Kentucky, he wryly remarked that is all well,

providing that Maine and Kentucky actually have something to say to each other⁴. Indeed, one of the principal functions of language is to create boundaries of belonging, and the sense of belonging may be our root need. Hence, we cling to it with ferocity

I find myself going over the accident regularly; not because I want to, not to understand, interpret, or to learn anything in particular from it, but because, as with the sudden heart attack I once suffered, it awakened something intangible that keeps demanding attention, that wants to be remembered, even if such “memory” is a process of constant re-creation amidst the utter temporality of everything. But this, like all other memories and dreams, eventually fades, even if the fading process lasts for centuries - as in collective cases. I guess I am writing this to console myself. Don’t worry, don’t disrespect the memories that bind our minds and hearts, just understand that they are creative stories, musings of our being.

There may be other dimensions to memory however. Perhaps the literalizing of memory as a recording of the past offers access to only the lower dimension of its possibilities. The tenth century Kashmiri philosopher and spiritual adept, Abhinavagupta, described memory, especially poetic memory, not as a discursive recollection of past events, but as an intuitive insight, a recognition (*pratyabhigñā*) that transcends personal experience and opens one to a wider universe through the evocation and awareness of beauty⁵.

Jesus declares (in the Gospel story) “Let the dead bury the dead.” As the Jesus narrative exemplifies, however, burying the dead is no easy task. Perhaps our ongoing, ever-morphing narratives, allows us an oblique opportunity to connect with and process our pain. And in this theatre of memory, the goal may not be to accumulate or catalogue what has been spoken (*itihasa*), but look a good miller, to process the grain into its essence: from what has passed, and is passing, and is to come, into what always is. Perhaps, the pilgrimage of the mind, on its endless peregrination of story, is meant to ultimately take us to love, but that may be unspeakable. The last words of this reflection, therefore, go to the classical Sanskrit poet, Kalidasa, who in the fifth chapter of his play, *Shakuntala*, offers the classical Indian version of Plato’s *anamnesis*.

*Seeing rare beauty, hearing lovely sounds,
even a happy man becomes strangely uneasy.
Perhaps he remembers, without knowing why,
loves from another life buried deep in his being. (Sakuntala V.2)*

⁴Thoreau, Henry David, *Walden*: “We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate...”

⁵See Stoler Miller (1984, p. 40). Mammata (*Kāvyaśāstra*, X. 199) sees memory as a metaphorical poetic phenomenon (*alamkāra*) and is described as the recollection of an object as it was experienced when a similar object was seen (324). Other poetics emphasized the relationship between visual perception (*dr̥ṣṭa*) and recollection with a more generalized concept of recollection so that the recollection of an object arising from perception is always related to a like object previously seen. Hence, what is termed “memory” is envisioned as an ongoing process of likeness (metaphor) and never as a literal reportage of “what happened.”

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