

European History

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It was not a consequence of brain damage that once caused me temporarily to lose my memory. I suspect now it was the traumatic experience of my family history, my European parents and the way in which I had sought to slide over the broader facts of history, simply by rote learning them without understanding anything of that history.

My father's father had been chief archivist at the Registry for Births, Deaths and Marriages in Haarlem, Holland during the 1930s. He took a particular interest in his own family genealogy and kept accurate records of all those ancestors that had preceded him. He was obsessed with factual memory. At the same time he confused family boundaries by taking his older daughter as his wife, for which he was eventually imprisoned in 1945, the charges brought against him by his then nineteen-year-old daughter. Less than twenty years later on the other side of the world in Australia, my own father behaved similarly with my older sister.

The sliding doors peel open and I feel the pressure of countless bodies urging me forward. The inside of the Exhibition Building is broken into halls filled with desks and chairs lined up in rows. In between the desks large letters of the alphabet signify subjects, and student numbers.

I sit in the row marked E for European History. My desk rattles. I shift it to get a better balance, but it wobbles even more. I look down and see that I have dislodged the cardboard wad someone has put there before me to keep the desk stable. I fiddle with it. I tear it in half, roll it into a thicker piece and stick the bits in two positions under the legs to fix my desk in place.

'Do not touch your paper until you are given the signal,' a voice calls over a microphone. I cannot see where the voice comes from, but I do as I am told like all the other students in the Exhibition Building. I am bursting with facts and figures, all the dates I have piled into my mind.

'You may begin.'

The rustling sound, as a thousand sheets of paper turn in unison. I look at the pages of questions, one after the other.

'Do not lift your pens until reading time is over.'

For fifteen minutes I look at the pages in front of me. I read through the questions. I cannot write yet. I will not write yet or I will be disqualified. I cannot hear the other students reading the questions on the page. I can only hear murmurs, grunts and sighs as they read and prepare to answer.

I cannot think. I have opened the page and each question swims in front of me. The letters form words, and the words form sentences, but none of it makes sense and I am gripped with terror. My body freezes and my mind empties. There is nothing there.

I suspect I have a strong memory of this – my sixteen-year-old self's experience of sitting for the European History exam in the equivalent of what is today known as Year Eleven – because it is a memory of a time when my memory failed. My memory let me down. We know now that memory is unreliable, but in those days

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I did not. In those days I prided myself on my superior ability to rote learn and to retain facts and figures. It had become my way of learning from earliest days. It was the way we were taught at school in the mid-to-late 1960s in a Catholic convent, a school for girls that valued the acquisition of knowledge as a static thing, that valued the piling in of facts, certain acceptable facts, into one's memory and then reproducing them as necessary and at will.

As we milled outside the Exhibition Building, hundreds of students, those from 'modern' state schools in brightly coloured clothes, those from Catholic schools in uniform; I did not speak to anyone. I was trying to keep all this knowledge inside of my head and I was scared that if I spoke to anyone about anything, it would all come rushing out of me.

For the last week I had walked through the streets near the house in Parkdale where I then lived with my mother and my five remaining sisters and brothers. History notebook in my hand, I walked to the sea. The whole time I kept my head down to read again and again the history dates, about the wars and revolutions that had happened more than one hundred years ago to people whose names I tried to remember and whose dates of birth and death I needed to retain. All these facts. I pushed the information into my head as I walked along the beach. My running shoes squelched in the sand. Sometimes I looked up to get my bearings, to see that I did not walk into a tree or a person or a building, to see that I did not walk onto the road, in front of a car or a bicycle or even a train.

When I walked along the street with my book in my hands and my eyes on my book, the world around me did not exist, only the facts on the page that I forced into my brain. My parents were European. I recognised the characters in these books. They could have been my ancestors. I should remember them.

John Hughes writes about his experience as a second-generation Australian, the business of living in two worlds, and the importance of avoiding actual knowledge, 'that by knowing just a little, not only was he able to establish his own sense of self, he could also make himself however he wanted' (Hughes, 2006, 2).

Like Hughes, without actual knowledge, whenever I imagined what life was like before my own began, I saw it as a series of images, in black and white, without sound, flat, one dimensional, like old photographs spilling out of albums, curling at the edges and fading in the centre. I saw a world of war, of bombs and starvation, set against the picture post-card tranquillity of Holland. My mother's Holland, with its frozen rivers teeming with children on skates in winter and later, in the springtime, lined with tulips and daffodils. Holland, the Netherlands, the land of longing, where it never gets hot and always stays green, even under the snow and ice of winter. In my child's mind, I heard the name *Neverlands*, a country I could never come to know myself except in my imagination. I heard it not so much as a place from the children's story of Peter Pan but as a place forbidden to me. Holland was in the centre of Europe and just as Hughes's past evoked for him a sense of something foreign lodged within, so it was for me.

My mother had bemoaned her loss of Europe and of all things cultural through her migration to Australia. Memories became my mother's 'currency', at least for the time of my growing up when her difficulties with nine children and an alcoholic and abusive husband were so acute that she could not but fill the gap of her sadness with her memories of a grand European past. Her memories sustained me, too. They

nurtured me throughout my own difficult childhood and created a sense of my family as unique, a uniqueness that resided in the foreign.

But Europe was also a place of war and horror. I knew this from my father. I knew that he had fought in the Second World War, and through this, at least in part, he had become the man he was. So Europe for me became a hybrid – the beauty and the beast of my parents' past.

How could I then have retained these facts from European history? This longing, this nostalgia as Hughes describes it, 'for a culture and a place of which we have no direct experience...[is] like having a memory of something you don't know' which then overrides memory (Hughes, 2006, 4). It can limit our focus and lead us to forget. We reconstruct ourselves to fit our memories, and the facts become irrelevant.

This falls in line with Marianne Hirsch's notion of 'post-memory', whereby she argues, 'the past is ...not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment. To grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation' (Hirsch, 2008, 107). More confusion, more forgetting.

Paul John Eakin writes about the links between memory, narrative and identity, the way we spend our lives constantly speaking and reformulating our stories as part of our identity formation. We do so out of our memories and imagination. We do this so naturally we do not even notice we are doing it. It is only when it breaks down, in instances such as in Alzheimer's, or autism, that we become aware of it in others. This process of self-narration 'constantly unfolds in our heads in however loose and disorderly a fashion...[We] are always talking to ourselves about ourselves, if to no one else, making plans about the future, what we'll do, reviewing what we've done, thought and felt' (Eakin, 2008, xiv). Some of us become autobiographers and write our stories down. To do so we create and reformulate new senses of identity. This includes the business of remembering and of forgetting.

The rules of self-narration begin early. In the classroom. In the playground. Deviations from these rules risk censure. When a person offers too much information or too little information when giving voice to their public self-narrations, their audience can register disapproval, whether by rolling their eyes, withholding their applause or shifting in their seats. Failures of self-narration can be far more severe in cases such as in adult amnesias. Eakin uses the story of a certain Mr Thomson from Oliver Sacks's book, *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat* (1985). This man who suffered the brain damage of Korsakoff's psychosis had truly lost his memory and 'spent his waking hours in frenetic self invention trying to construct new identities to take the place of the old ones he had forgotten' (Eakin, 2008, xiv). In Sacks's words, Mr Thomson had been 'pithed, scooped out, de-souled by disease' (Eakin, 2008, 15).

My memory lapse was not a consequence of brain damage, but what sort of memory mal-practice was this that it should have precluded the possibility of real learning, of real understanding? Narrative identity with its links to memory is not something we can simply rote learn. It comes upon us unbidden from the storehouse of our knowledge accumulated over time and through our own idiosyncratic experiences. It is also culturally idiosyncratic and constrained by the broader social practices of the day. It becomes our own unique story. But as John Berger writes, 'No story is like a wheeled vehicle whose contact with the road is continuous. Stories

walk like animals or men. And their steps are not only narrated events but between each sentence, sometimes each word, every step is a stride over something not said' (Jaireth, 2009, 78).

Why do I imagine now that I can remember so clearly these events from my mid-to-late teens? The experience is multi-factorial, made up of the way in which I sought to learn then, the facts of my family history and the trauma that my parents had fled in Europe only to repeat the pattern, in the form of my father's alcoholism and abusiveness, for which reason at that time we were living apart from him.

In the days when I studied European history at school I doubted the value of my own story, based on my memory. This is not uncommon in the young, who have yet to have the wisdom of their years behind them. At sixteen years of age, lacking my own story and bearing a secret I could not tell, I thought I needed somehow to absorb other people's words and ideas, the facts and figures as presented in the history textbooks of the day. I did not know then that they were not absolute facts, and that to some extent there is no such thing as a fact except perhaps in terms of real physical objects and events. They are constructions, interpretations.

Now I realise that my own interpretation of events, through careful reflection and including some consideration of the thoughts and ideas of others, is of value. In those days however, I thought my own mind was unworthy and unreliable because it contained a secret knowledge that made the outward, known 'respectable' story of my family life absurd and obscene. I relied entirely therefore on my serial recall through memorising, which is of course different from memory, and proved dangerous and destructive.

Whenever I engage a memory I situate it within physical space. I must locate myself to remember. The Exhibition Building had been constructed to commemorate grandeur, the glories of the gold rush with a tilt in the direction of mother England. It was built as a venue for the exhibition and display of artefacts. We put things on display to show others what is available and in so doing we create a façade, a carapace. There was once talk of pulling down the Exhibition Building. Instead they restructured the halls, maintained the facade and kept the best, the dome.

I imagine I forgot all the facts I had rote learned for my European history exam as a consequence of spending so much of my time creating a façade of respectability for the rest of the world, while all the time back at home strange things were happening about which I could not think and to which I could not refer. I could not give voice to the depth of my life's experience. I could only talk about the superficial. My story was crushed beneath a need to create a good impression.

Most often I locate my early memories in the privacy of my childhood home. But when my memories emerge from public spaces, such as the Exhibition Building then my experience expands beyond to take in something of the experience of a foreigner in a strange land, even though Australia is the land of my birth. It is also a land that was once possessed by others in the Dreaming and later stolen. The so-called facts of European history, peppered with tragedies, how could I possibly remember them through rote learning without allowing for an emotional response?

Subhash Jaireth argues that the body carries memory. We need to visit commemorative sites in order to be in touch through our bodies with what it had been like for those who came before us, for those who have suffered pain, or have lost their bodies through 'the ultimate sacrifice' of war (Jaireth, 2009). He also locates memory

in language but notes the tendency of language to fail us, 'because it isn't transparent as it should be, because its relation with the real is at best tenuous and contestable, because it is inherently heteroglossic, unable to hide the gaps through which alien voices can enter and hence contaminate, distort and disrupt the authorial intention' (Jaireth, 2009, 76).

In order to allow memory to express itself through language we need first a visual image, for example that of my student-self sitting in the Exhibition Building alongside thousands of other students, who appeared at the time to be able to remember the facts that I had temporarily forgotten. The terror of my failure of memory returns to a terror of losing my ability to tell a story, if not my story then someone else's story as retold through the images of material events and the passage of time.

Memory makes connections. It provides a link between the past and the future. It allows an overview of events that might otherwise be kept separate and because of the ferocity with which some events or experiences come together in our memories at times we may prefer to forget, we may in fact forget them altogether, especially in the face of trauma.

My memory came back to me eventually as I sat in the Exhibition Building all those years ago, enough to enable me to pass the exam. But my memory of that time is a memory of failure. It is the time I first remember the realisation that my way of working in the world did not work. Even when I had passed my exams well, I needed to develop a different form of memory, one that relied more on my own ideas and experience rather than simply on rote learning the ideas of others. I did not realise this at the time.

When I first began work on this essay my mind went blank, in much the way it did when I read through the questions in the Fifth-Form European history exam in 1968. I cannot do this, I thought. Then I remembered the experience of sitting for that exam, and other events came back to me.

Although I am four years younger, my sister and I shared a bedroom where I witnessed my father's many visits during the night (Hanscombe, 2013). I then spent the rest of my childhood waiting for my turn. In my mind the two – European history and my father's history – became confused. The history I had learned at school, the facts, figures and details, the superficial goings on, held the same quality of secrecy as existed within my family. Small wonder then that I could not process these events, other than through the rote learning and regurgitation of historical facts, while behind the scenes the story of my family life, and the multiple hidden stories of other people, nations and cultures within the history of Europe dashed onto the stage and were soon forgotten.

In time the drama of life events fade much like the pain of childbirth fades, but the memories linger and with memories come scars and scar tissue. Memory exerts its effects long after the event has registered even unto the next generation and the next. We carry the weight of the sins and triumphs of our ancestors. Memory is the conduit between the past and the future. As Sue Campbell writes 'the memory of a time of loss, while re-evoking grief, may also gain overtones of resilience as it takes its place in a personal history where one has struggled to overcome loss' (Campbell, 2006, 364). But the gaps in experience need to be examined, even those incidences of forgetting by looking below the surface.

This includes looking at the secrets, which, according to Annette Kuhn, might 'inhabit the borderlands of memory... They are a necessary condition of the stories we are prompted by memory to talk about our lives' (Kuhn, 2002, 2). Emotional and experiential memory are the bedrock of 'living autobiographically', while my back story includes my family history as it emerged in Europe, and my witnessing of parental abuse. Behind the incidental failure of my actual memory within the Exhibition Building is the story of inter-generational abuse and betrayal of love and trust. It provides some evidence of the redemptive nature of autobiography and its roots in memory. The past and the present move into the future with each new generation, and like the stirrings of memory they stay with us forever.

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