



R.W. EMERSON : MEMORY

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MEMORY is a primary and fundamental faculty, without which none other can work; the cement, the bitumen, the matrix in which the other faculties are embedded; or it is the thread on which the beads of man are strung, making the personal identity which is necessary to moral action. Without it all life and thought were an unrelated succession. As gravity holds matter from flying off into space, so memory gives stability to knowledge ; it is the cohesion which keeps things from falling into a lump, or flowing in waves.

We like longevity, we like signs of riches and extent of nature in an individual. And most of all we like a great memory. The lowest life remembers. The sparrow, the ant, the worm, have the same memory as we. If you bar their path, or offer them somewhat disagreeable to their senses, they make one or two trials, and then once for all avoid it.

Every machine must be perfect of its sort. It is essential to a locomotive that it can reverse its movement, and run backward and forward with equal celerity. The builder of the mind found it not less needful that it should have retroaction, and command its past act and deed. Perception, though it were immense and could pierce through the universe, was not sufficient.

Memory performs the impossible for man by the strength of his divine arms; holds together past and present, beholding both, existing in both, abides in the flowing, and gives continuity and dignity to human life. It holds us to our family, to our friends. Hereby a home is possible; hereby only a new fact has value.

Opportunities of investment are useful only to those who have capital. Any piece of knowledge I acquire to-day, a fact that falls under my eyes, a book I read, a piece of news I hear, has a value at this moment exactly proportioned to my skill to deal with it. To-morrow, when I know more, I recall that piece of knowledge and use it better.

The Past has a new value every moment to the active mind, through the incessant purification and better method of its memory. Once it joined its facts by color and form and sensuous relations. Some fact that had a childish significance to your childhood and was a type in the nursery, when riper intelligence recalls it means more and serves you better as an illustration; and perhaps in your age has new meaning. What was an isolated, unrelated belief or conjecture, our later experience instructs us how to place in just connection with other views which confirm and expand it. The old whim or perception was an augury of a broader insight, at which we arrive later with securer conviction. This is the companion, this the tutor, the poet, the library, with which you travel. It does not lie, cannot be corrupted, reports to you not what you wish, but what really befell. You say, "I can never think of some act of neglect, of selfishness, or of passion without pain." Well, that is as it should be. That is the police of the Universe: the angels are set to punish you, so long as you are capable of such crime. But in the history of character the day comes when you are incapable of such crime. Then you suffer no more, you look on it as heaven looks on it, with wonder at the deed, and with applause at the pain it has cost you.

Memory is not a pocket, but a living instructor, with a prophetic sense of the values which he guards; a guardian angel set there within you to record your life, and by recording to animate you to uplift it. It is a scripture written day by day from the birth of the man; all its records full of meanings which open as he lives on, explaining each other, explaining the world to him and expanding their sense as he advances, until it shall become the whole law of Nature and life.

As every creature is furnished with teeth to seize and eat, and with stomach to digest its food, so the memory is furnished with a perfect apparatus. There is no book like the memory, none with such a good index, and that of every kind, alphabetic, systematic, arranged by names of persons, by colors, tastes, smells, shapes, likeness, unlikeness, by all sorts of mysterious hooks and eyes to catch and hold, and contrivances for giving a hint.

The memory collects and re-collects. We figure it as if the mind were a kind of looking-glass, which being carried through the street of time receives on its clear plate every image that passes; only with this difference, that our plate is iodized so that every image sinks into it, and is held there. But in addition to this property it has one more, this, namely, that of all the million images that are imprinted, the very one we want reappears in the centre of the plate in the moment when we want it.

We can tell much about it, but you must not ask us what it is. On seeing a face I am aware that I have seen it before, or that I have not seen it before. On hearing a fact told I am aware that I knew it already. You say the first words of the old song, and I finish the line and stanza. But where I have them, or what becomes of them when I am not thinking of them for months and years, that they should lie so still, as if they did not exist, and yet so nigh that they come on the instant when they are called for, never any man was so sharp-sighted, or could turn himself inside out quick enough to find.

'T is because of the believed incompatibility of the affirmative and advancing attitude of the mind with tenacious acts of recollection that people are often reproached with living in their memory. Late in life we live by memory, and in our solstices or periods of stagnation; as the starved camel in the desert lives on his humps. Memory was called by the schoolmen *vespertina cognitio*, evening knowledge, in distinction from the command of the future which

we have by the knowledge of causes, and which they called *matutina cognitio*, or morning knowledge.

Am I asked whether the thoughts clothe themselves in words? I answer, Yes, always; but they are apt to be instantly forgotten. Never was truer fable than that of the Sibyl's writing on leaves which the wind scatters. The difference between men is that in one the memory with inconceivable swiftness flies after and recollects the flying leaves,—flies on wing as fast as that mysterious whirlwind, and the envious Fate is baffled.

This command of old facts, the clear beholding at will of what is best in our experience, is our splendid privilege. "He who calls what is vanished back again into being enjoys a bliss like that of creating," says Niebuhr. The memory plays a great part in settling the intellectual rank of men. We estimate a man by how much he remembers. A seneschal of Parnassus is Mnemosyne. This power will alone make a man remarkable; and it is found in all good wits. Therefore the poets represented the Muses as the daughters of Memory, for the power exists in some marked and eminent degree in men of an ideal determination. Quintilian reckoned it the measure of genius. *Tantum ingenii quantum memoriae*.

We are told that Boileau having recited to Daguesseau one day an epistle or satire he had just been composing, Daguesseau tranquilly told him he knew it already, and in proof set himself to recite it from end to end. Boileau, astonished, was much distressed until he perceived that it was only a feat of memory.

The mind disposes all its experience after its affection and to its ruling end; one man by puns and one by cause and effect, one to heroic benefit and one to wrath and animal desire. This is the high difference, the quality of the association by which a man remembers. In the minds of most men memory is nothing but a farm-book or a pocket-diary. On such a day I paid my note; on the next day the cow calved; on the next I cut my finger; on the next the banks suspended payment. But another man's memory is the history of science and art and civility and thought; and still another deals with laws and perceptions that are the theory of the world.

This thread or order of remembering, this classification, distributes men, one remembering by shop-rule or interest; one by passion; one by trifling external marks, as dress or money. And one rarely takes an interest in how the facts really stand, in the order of cause and effect, without self-reference. This is an intellectual man. Nature interests him; a plant, a fish, time, space, mind, being, in their own method and law. Napoleon is such, and that saves him.

But this mysterious power that binds our life together has its own vagaries and interruptions. It sometimes occurs that Memory has a personality of its own, and volunteers or refuses its informations at its will, not at mine. One sometimes asks himself, Is it possible that it is only a visitor, not a resident? Is it some old aunt who goes in and out of the house, and occasionally recites anecdotes of old times and persons which I recognize as having heard before, and she being gone again I search in vain for any trace of the anecdotes?

We can help ourselves to the modus of mental processes only by coarse material experiences. A knife with a good spring, a forceps whose lips accurately meet and match, a steel-trap, a loom, a watch, the teeth or jaws of which fit and play perfectly, as compared with the same tools when badly put together, describe to us the difference between a person of quick and strong perception, like Franklin or Swift or Webster or Richard Owen, and a heavy man who witnesses the same facts or shares experiences like theirs. 'T is like the impression made by

the same stamp in sand or in wax. The way in which Burke or Sheridan or Webster or any orator surprises us is by his always having a sharp tool that fits the present use. He has an old story, an odd circumstance, that illustrates the point he is now proving, and is better than an argument. The more he is heated, the wider he sees; he seems to remember all he ever knew; thus certifying us that he is in the habit of seeing better than other people; that what his mind grasps it does not let go. 'T is the bull-dog bite; you must cut off the head to loosen the teeth.

We hate this fatal shortness of Memory, these docked men whom we behold. We gathered up what a rolling snow-ball as we came along,—much of it professedly for the future, as capital stock of knowledge. Where is it now? Look behind you. I cannot see that your train is any longer than it was in childhood. The facts of the last two or three days or weeks are all you have with you,—the reading of the last month's books. Your conversation, action, your face and manners report of no more, of no greater wealth of mind. Alas! you have lost something for everything you have gained, and cannot grow. Only so much iron will the loadstone draw; it gains new particles all the way as you move it, but one falls off for every one that adheres.

As there is strength in the wild horse which is never regained when he is once broken by training, and as there is a sound sleep of children and of savages, profound as the hibernation of bears, which never visits the eyes of civil gentlemen and ladies, so there is a wild memory in children and youth which makes what is early learned impossible to forget; and perhaps in the beginning of the world it had most vigor. Plato deploras writing as a barbarous invention which would weaken the memory by disuse. The Rhapsodists in Athens it seems could recite at once any passage of Homer that was desired.

If writing weakens the memory, we may say as much and more of printing. What is the newspaper but a sponge or invention for oblivion? the rule being that for every fact added to the memory, one is crowded out, and that only what the affection animates can be remembered.

The mind has a better secret in generalization than merely adding units to its list of facts. The reason of the short memory is shallow thought. As deep as the thought, so great is the attraction. An act of the understanding will marshal and concatenate a few facts; a principle of the reason will thrill and magnetize and redistribute the whole world.

But defect of memory is not always want of genius. By no means. It is sometimes owing to excellence of genius. Thus men of great presence of mind who are always equal to the occasion do not need to rely on what they have stored for use, but can think in this moment as well and deeply as in any past moment, and if they cannot remember the rule they can make one. Indeed it is remarked that inventive men have bad memories. Sir Isaac Newton was embarrassed when the conversation turned on his discoveries and results; he could not recall them; but if he was asked why things were so or so, he could find the reason on the spot.

A man would think twice about learning a new science or reading a new paragraph, if he believed the magnetism was only a constant amount, and that he lost a word or a thought for every word he gained. But the experience is not quite so bad. In reading a foreign language, every new word mastered is a lamp lighting up related words and so assisting the memory. Apprehension of the whole sentence aids to fix the precise meaning of a particular word, and what familiarity has been acquired with the genius of the language, and the writer, helps in fixing the exact meaning of the sentence. So is it with every fact in a new science: they are mutually explaining, and each one adds transparency to the whole mass.

The damages of forgetting are more than compensated by the large values which new thoughts and knowledge give to what we already know. If new impressions sometimes efface old ones, yet we steadily gain insight; and because all Nature has one law and meaning,—part corresponding to part,—all we have known aids us continually to the knowledge of the rest of Nature. Thus, all the facts in this chest of memory are property at interest. And who shall set a boundary to this mounting value? Shall we not on higher stages of being remember and understand our early history better?

They say in Architecture, "An arch never sleeps;" I say, the Past will not sleep, it works still. With every new fact a ray of light shoots up from the long buried years. Who can judge the new book? He who has read many books. Who, the new assertion? He who has heard many the like. Who, the new man? He that has seen men. The experienced and cultivated man is lodged in a hall hung with pictures which every new day retouches, and to which every step in the march of the soul adds a more sublime perspective.

We learn early that there is great disparity of value between our experiences; some thoughts perish in the using. Some days are bright with thought and sentiment, and we live a year in a day. Yet these best days are not always those which memory can retain. This water once spilled cannot be gathered. There are more inventions in the thoughts of one happy day than ages could execute, and I suppose I speak the sense of most thoughtful men when I say, I would rather have a perfect recollection of all I have thought and felt in a day or a week of high activity than read all the books that have been published in a century.

The memory is one of the compensations which Nature grants to those who have used their days well; when age and calamity have bereaved them of their limbs or organs, then they retreat on mental faculty and concentrate on that. The poet, the philosopher, lamed, old, blind, sick, yet disputing the ground inch by inch against fortune, finds a strength against the wrecks and decays sometimes more invulnerable than the heyday of youth and talent.

I value the praise of Memory. And how does memory praise? By holding fast the best. A thought takes its true rank in the memory by surviving other thoughts that were once preferred. Plato remembered Anaxagoras by one of his sayings. If we recall our own favorites, we shall usually find that it is for one crowning act or thought that we hold them dear.

Have you not found memory an apotheosis or deification? The poor short lone fact dies at the birth. Memory catches it up into her heaven, and bathes it in immortal waters. Then a thousand times over it lives and acts again, each time transfigured, ennobled. In solitude, in darkness, we tread over again the sunny walks of youth; confined now in populous streets you behold again the green fields, the shadows of the gray birches; by the solitary river hear again the joyful voices of early companions, and vibrate anew to the tenderness and dainty music of the poetry your boyhood fed upon. At this hour the stream is still flowing, though you hear it not; the plants are still drinking their accustomed life and repaying it with their beautiful forms. But you need not wander thither. It flows for you, and they grow for you, in the returning images of former summers. In low or bad company you fold yourself in your cloak, withdraw yourself entirely from all the doleful circumstance, recall and surround yourself with the best associates and the fairest hours of your life:—

"Passing sweet are the domains of tender memory."

You may perish out of your senses, but not out of your memory or imagination.

The memory has a fine art of sifting out the pain and keeping all the joy. The spring days when the bluebird arrives have usually only few hours of fine temperature, are sour and unlovely; but when late in autumn we hear rarely a bluebird's notes they are sweet by reminding us of the spring. Well, it is so with other tricks of memory. Of the most romantic fact the memory is more romantic; and this power of sinking the pain of any experience and of recalling the saddest with tranquillity, and even with a wise pleasure, is familiar. The memory is as the affection. Sampson Reed says, "The true way to store the memory is to develop the affections." A souvenir is a token of love. Remember me means, Do not cease to love me. We remember those things which we love and those things which we hate. The memory of all men is robust on the subject of a debt due to them, or of an insult inflicted on them. "They can remember," as Johnson said, "who kicked them last."

Every artist is alive on the subject of his art. The Persians say, "A real singer will never forget the song he has once learned." Michael Angelo, after having once seen a work of any other artist, would remember it so perfectly that if it pleased him to make use of any portion thereof, he could do so, but in such a manner that none could perceive it.

We remember what we understand, and we understand best what we like; for this doubles our power of attention, and makes it our own. Captain John Brown, of Ossawatimie, said he had in Ohio three thousand sheep on his farm, and could tell a strange sheep in his flock as soon as he saw its face. One of my neighbors, a grazier, told me that he should know again every cow, ox, or steer that he ever saw. Abel Lawton knew every horse that went up and down through Concord to the towns in the county. And in higher examples each man's memory is in the line of his action.

Nature trains us on to see illusions and prodigies with no more wonder than our toast and omelet at breakfast. Talk of memory and cite me these fine examples of Grotius and Daguesseau, and I think how awful is that power and what privilege and tyranny it must confer. Then I come to a bright school-girl who remembers all she hears, carries thousands of nursery rhymes and all the poetry in all the readers, hymn-books, and pictorial ballads in her mind; and 't is a mere drug. She carries it so carelessly, it seems like the profusion of hair on the shock heads of all the village boys and village dogs; it grows like grass. 'T is a bushel-basket memory of all unchosen knowledge, heaped together in a huge hamper, without method, yet securely held, and ready to come at call; so that an old scholar, who knows what to do with a memory, is full of wonder and pity that this magical force should be squandered on such frippery.

He is a skilful doctor who can give me a recipe for the cure of a bad memory. And yet we have some hints from experience on this subject. And first, health. It is found that we remember best when the head is clear, when we are thoroughly awake. When the body is in a quiescent state in the absence of the passions, in the moderation of food, it yields itself a willing medium to the intellect. For the true river Lethe is the body of man, with its belly and uproar of appetite and mountains of indigestion and bad humors and quality of darkness. And for this reason, and observing some mysterious continuity of mental operation during sleep or when our will is suspended, 't is an old rule of scholars, that which Fuller records, "'T is best knocking in the nail overnight and clinching it next morning." Only I should give extension to this rule and say, Yes, drive the nail this week and clinch it the next, and drive it this year and clinch it the next.

But Fate also is an artist. We forget also according to beautiful laws. Thoreau said, "Of what significance are the things you can forget. A little thought is sexton to all the world."

We must be severe with ourselves, and what we wish to keep, we must once thoroughly possess. Then the thing seen will no longer be what it was, a mere sensuous object before the eye or ear, but a reminder of its law, a possession for the intellect. Then we relieve ourselves of all task in the matter, we put the onus of being remembered on the object, instead of on our will. We shall do as we do with all our studies, prize the fact or the name of the person by that predominance it takes in our mind after near acquaintance. I have several times forgotten the name of Flamsteed, never that of Newton; and can drop easily many poets out of the Elizabethan chronology, but not Shakspeare.

We forget rapidly what should be forgotten. The universal sense of fables and anecdotes is marked by our tendency to forget name and date and geography. "How in the right are children," said Margaret Fuller, "to forget name and date and place."

You cannot overstate our debt to the past, but has the present no claim? This past memory is the baggage, but where is the troop? The divine gift is not the old but the new. The divine is the instant life that receives and uses, the life that can well bury the old in the omnipotency with which it makes all things new.

The acceleration of mental process is equivalent to the lengthening of life. If a great many thoughts pass through your mind, you will believe a long time has elapsed, many hours or days. In dreams a rush of many thoughts, or seeming experiences, of spending hours and going through a great variety of actions and companies, and when we start up and look at the watch, instead of a long night we are surprised to find it was a short nap. The opium-eater says, "I sometimes seemed to have lived seventy or a hundred years in one night." You know what is told of the experience of some persons who have been recovered from drowning. They relate that their whole life's history seemed to pass before them in review. They remembered in a moment all that they ever did.

If we occupy ourselves long on this wonderful faculty, and see the natural helps of it in the mind, and the way in which new knowledge calls upon old knowledge—new giving undreamed-of value to old; every relation and suggestion, so that what one had painfully held by strained attention and recapitulation now falls into place and is clamped and locked by inevitable connection as a planet in its orbit (every other orb, or the law or system of which it is a part, being a perpetual reminder),—we cannot fail to draw thence a sublime hint that thus there must be an endless increase in the power of memory only through its use; that there must be a proportion between the power of memory and the amount of knowables; and since the Universe opens to us, the reach of the memory must be as large.

With every broader generalization which the mind makes, with every deeper insight, its retrospect is also wider. With every new insight into the duty or fact of to-day we come into new possession of the past.

When we live by principles instead of traditions, by obedience to the law of the mind instead of by passion, the Great Mind will enter into us, not as now in fragments and detached thoughts, but the light of to-day will shine backward and forward.

Memory is a presumption of a possession of the future. Now we are halves, we see the past but not the future, but in that day will the hemisphere complete itself and foresight be as perfect as aftersight.

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