

REMEMBERING TO HOPE

By JOHN ASHTON

It is as if in each person there is the same little person he was when he was three years old. There are also within him his own parents. These are recordings in the brain of actual experience of internal and external events, the most significant of which happened in the first five years of life.¹

NOT JUST the familiar *id*, *ego* and *super-ego*, to which the 'parent', 'adult' and 'child' posited by transactional analysis bear only a superficial resemblance, but three states of consciousness, whose existence is rendered possible by the astonishing power young children have of recording each and every one of their experiences indelibly on the brain. Eric Berne's 'adult' replaces Freud's *ego* as the central adjudicator responsible in each of us for controlling and modifying attitudes and convictions produced by years of conditioning – though Berne is rather more optimistic than Freud about the possibilities of exercising this control.

Depth psychology and transactional analysis differ from earlier theories of human personality, such as Plato's, by building in references to the past – the individual's past in the case of Freud and Berne, predominantly the past of the race in the case of Jung. Every such theory, though, has to reckon with the power of hidden memories, early programmings of incredible force and complexity; each human being is faced with the task of recovering an authority over his own life that he never really had – the resemblances to the traditional doctrine of original sin are striking indeed.

But psychology is not alone in its concern with the past. Modern philosophers, novelists, poets and dramatists have also absorbed and reflected the temper of the age by stressing as never before the historicity of man. The two greatest novels of this century set out, each in its own way, to recover the past and to impose an order upon it. Joyce works with a single day, the sixteenth of June 1904, Proust with a lifetime of memories. But both are keenly aware of the elusiveness of the past and the urgent need to recapture it. At the

¹ Harris, T. A.: *I'm OK-You're OK* (London, 1973), p 17.

same time both are convinced that the key lies somehow in *immediate* experience, what Joyce calls epiphanies and Proust *la mémoire involontaire* or, another way, *les intermittences du cœur*.

The theme of memory and forgetfulness is cleverly exploited by Tom Stoppard in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*. Asked what is the first thing he remembers, Rosenkrantz forgets the question before he has time to answer. The two characters, who lack all inner consistency, make up for it by battenning upon the fragmentary recollections of *Hamlet* shared by the author and his audience, rejoicing as they do so in the puzzled recognition they evoke in the spectators. Much of the power of the play is derived from a sense of the precariousness of the shared culture on which it is built. In Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, we see a morose old man trying first to disentangle his memories, the ghosts of his former selves, from the desires they continue to excite in him, and then, with an arrogant hopelessness, to erase them. In Harold Pinter's *Old Times*, two characters compete, to the nostalgic sounds of music from the thirties, for the possession of the past of the third. And so on.

Of course, our own culture is not the first to be fascinated by time and its passing; and the tremendous resurgence of interest in history is a feature of the nineteenth century, not of ours. What marks the twentieth century consciousness, it seems to me, is the way in which it joins a fascination with the past to an emphasis upon the present, the instant, the unrepeatable experience. If memory were like a department store in which we could wander at will – if, in other words, we could overcome and banish time – then the task would be relatively simple. But standing where we do, in an individual and cultural now, we have no obvious means at our disposal for recovering our past, still less for harnessing it and making it our own. We are where we are and not in another place; we live in our own present and not at another time.

Nevertheless, the majority of people would have little hesitation in acknowledging that ultimate significance, if this exists, is not to be found simply in present experience. However, since it is only the present that is obviously available to us (and even then, as Augustine asked, how long must an instant be to allow an experience to be felt and recorded?²), we have to consider how to recover the past. Unless, that is, we simply reconcile ourselves to a fragmentary and disjointed existence in which no real significance can be found.

² Cf *Confessions*, II, 14–16.

The question operates on two levels, individual and social:

... Not the intense moment
 Isolated, with no before and after
 But a lifetime burning in every moment
 And not the lifetime of one man only
 But of old stones that cannot be deciphered.
 ... I have said before
 That the past experience revived in the meaning
 Is not the experience of one life only.³

Christian theology has not yet fashioned instruments sensitive enough to probe for answers to this kind of question in its own domain. The extraordinary difficulty it has had in coping with the question of the development of dogma is proof that this is true on the broader cultural level, just as its failure to exploit the phenomenon of memory is an indication on the level of the individual consciousness.⁴ For this failure, much of the responsibility must lie with thomistic philosophy and theology.

When thomism was exhumed in the latter half of the nineteenth century, admittedly in a distorted and impoverished form, it was given no more than a cursory dusting-down before being proudly presented to catholic theologians as a storehouse of all they could possibly need either by way of content or by way of method. *Exegi monumentum aere perennius*:⁵ it was in fact as a *philosophia perennis* that this vamped-up aristotelianism was flaunted before the thinkers of the world. Not surprisingly, they took little notice. They had already rediscovered history, and were soon, under the influence of Bergson, to rediscover memory.

For in the thomistic scheme of things, memory was no longer one of the three powers of the soul as it had been for Augustine. Intellect and will had assumed control, and memory (parcelled up into 'intellectual' and 'sense' memory) was relegated to the ante-chambers of the mind. This division resulted from one of the dominant convictions of medieval scholasticism: that essences are unchanging, and so are the most important truths about God, man and the universe. History was not a proper object for philosophy,

³ Eliot, T. S.: *The Four Quartets*.

⁴ This article is chiefly concerned with memory in individuals. A fuller treatment would have to include much more discussion of the social implications of attitudes to the past. On this point Eliot is right.

⁵ 'I have built a monument more enduring than bronze'. Horace: *Odes* III, 30.

and the last major attempt at philosophical reflection upon a historical theme had been Augustine's *City of God*. Not even the uncompromisingly historical character of the christian religion was strong enough to oust Aristotle from his pre-eminent perch. There was no longer and not yet any scandal of particularity. Stars and planets held their courses, encircling the earth, and in their unvarying order was seen an image of the structure of feudal society, with the diminishing spheres of dignity and power so pleasing to the hierarchically minded.

But there is another reason why memory was unimportant to the scholastic philosopher. Living at a time when the cult of immediate experience was unknown, he did not depend, for access to the real, upon efforts to get back beyond the present. No doubt the phenomenal world still had to be transmuted, with the aid of an agent intellect, into concepts the mind could use. But there was no feeling that the present moment was itself specially privileged, no fear that vast tracts of human experience were being left unexplored. Not just the entire created universe but even, up to a point, uncreated being itself was open to man's eager gaze. Essence was not distinguished from substance: it was doubtful if it was really distinguished from existence. And anyway the existential was a concept that had yet to be invented. The true philosopher did not meddle with grubby particulars, and held himself aloof from history. If a thing changed, this was a sign that it was unimportant. For change and movement were not perceived by the mind.⁶

No doubt *memoria*, for Augustine, was not quite what a present-day psychologist would understand by 'memory'. *Memoria sui* was pretty well equivalent to self-presence or consciousness: the inner memory of the mind by which it remembers itself. Still, one has only to glance through the famous book ten of the *Confessions* to realize that Augustine, that undisputed master of the art of introspection, has reflected long and deeply upon the phenomenon of memory. Even images we might nowadays query – the huge halls of memory – convey his awe and excitement as he tiptoes back into his own past.

Augustine, as is well known, saw in the three powers of the soul, memory, understanding and will, a reflection of the blessed Trinity;

⁶ 'With regard to the intellectual part, the past is accidental, and not in itself a part of the object of the intellect. For the intellect understands man, as man: and to man, as man, it is accidental that he exists in the present, past or future'. *Summa Theologica* I, 19, 6 ad 2.

the natural object of the soul's attention is itself, but its supernatural and wholly adequate object is God: *Noverim te, noverim me*, begins his famous prayer.⁷ He did, as it happens, associate the memory with hope; and subsequently John of the Cross was to argue that the 'theological' virtues of faith, hope and charity were the proper supernatural objects of the three powers of the soul, which, by dislodging all other objects, enabled it to reach its true end in God.⁸

The initially unlikely correlation of the memory with the virtue of hope gains plausibility as we consider it. For just as the memory, which Augustine did his best to relate to the future as well as to the past, is that power of the soul which situates its possessor in time, so the virtue of hope, though looking to the future, is grounded in the past. Hebrew has two sets of words for 'hope': one (acknowledged by the lexicons), expressing an eager watchfulness, an expectancy, a looking to the future; the other (picked up by the Septuagint)⁹ denoting an attitude of trust and confidence or an actual seeking for refuge. And this makes sense. Just as those who have had no experience of being loved find it impossible to love, so those who have been constantly deceived and disappointed by others find it impossible to trust. Trust is made possible by the experience of reliability, hope by the experience of success, of an obstacle surmounted. The memory of the past colours and even determines one's attitude to the future: 'Memory's lord is lord of prophecy'.

One entry into the question how human beings come to terms with their own pasts is through art. There are literally dozens of examples available. But one particularly interesting reflection on memory is contained in Alain Resnais' film *Muriel*, in which he approaches this favourite theme rather differently than in his other works.

The film is set in post-war Boulogne, itself a town in search of

⁷ 'May I know you, may I know myself'. *Soliloquies*, 2.

⁸ 'Faith in the understanding, hope in the memory and charity in the will'. (*Ascent of Mount Carmel*, II, vi, I). Augustine had already prepared the way for this development by linking the memory with hope (e.g. *Conf.* IX, 8). Cf. Pedro Lain Entralgo; *La Espera y La Esperanza, Obras* (Madrid, 1965), part I, chaps 2 and 4, pp 309-897.

⁹ 'The translators of the Septuagint have found statements of hope primarily where the thought is of trust and refuge in God... Hope is not in the first place a situation of tension towards the future, a wish or the indication of a goal that one awaits with tension - it is above all, and the Septuagint emphasizes this very strongly, a situation of surrender and trust, which naturally cannot be realized in a vacuum but which requires one who stands over against us and calls us to trust'. Zimmerli, W.: *Man and his Hope in the Old Testament* (London, 1971), p 9.

an identity, half-destroyed but re-growing. H  l  ne lives there because she remembers Boulogne as it used to be. She sells antiques, which she keeps in her own flat, precious and inert objects with hidden memories of their own. Partly for that reason, partly because they only half belong to her, they are disquieting companions for a woman who is manifestly reluctant to live in her true present. She is a restless and uneasy person whose one ambition gradually emerges in the course of the film. Her thoughts and imagination turn constantly to a time twenty years earlier, at the beginning of the war when she was in love (or fancied herself in love) with a young man called Alphonse. The immediate past carries no meaning for her: if she could she would obliterate it. Her secret desire is to live her life again, to recreate those few exciting months and so commence a new life – with Alphonse – starting where they left off long years before. Alphonse suddenly appears out of nowhere and comes to visit her; when he protests against her constant harping back to the past, she exclaims in astonishment, *Vous   tes venu pour   a* – That's why you're here !

Alphonse himself, far from wishing to live in the past, spends his time running into an empty future. His whole life is a lie and he has a hundred memories, all of them false. His mind is stocked with stories of previous experiences and achievements, which he selects so as to impress or gratify anyone he happens to be with. Unlike H  l  ne, whose life has a real though dangerously romanticized centre, Alphonse is so hollow that he could not survive at all without an endless supply of protective masks. Because he is incapable of acknowledging his past or of accepting the consequences of his own actions, he cannot live in the present either. He has to keep deceiving himself in order to avoid total disintegration.

His young mistress, Fran  oise, is a much less complex personage. Sensible, straightforward, extrovert, she has neither the need nor the inclination to worry about herself. She is marked, in the film, by her lack of memory. She is selfish and inquisitive.

Bernard, H  l  ne's nephew has a secret: he hates and despises himself for having taken part, when on military service in Algeria, in the torture and murder of an Arab girl, the Muriel of the title. He has brought back with him films, tapes and a diary, all of which serve to remind him of his own guilt. For him, memory is a tyrant, to which he is obsessedly enslaved. To escape from it would be, he feels, to deny his own being. He is in hell.

Resnais shows us, then, in this film four characters who have the

qualities of their memories: Hélène, attractive but silly and romantic, Alphonse, false and deceitful, Françoise, colourless and common-sensical, Bernard harsh and un pitying, especially to himself. In their different ways they are weak because their memories are weak:¹⁰ they are what they remember, their past lives on in them. What is lacking in the film is any sense that they or their pasts are redeemable. Their creator offers them no hope of escaping from what they have been or what they have done.¹¹ Happiness, he suggests, lies if anywhere in the power to accept the past and to move on. (Nowhere does he envisage mastering or absorbing it, like Proust). But what if the past is unacceptable, as it certainly was for Bernard? Resnais has no answer, except possibly oblivion. But is there no other answer available?

One very different answer is given by Max Scheler, who argues (in the wake of Augustine?) that the past, at least in its most important aspect, can be *changed*. The power to alter the past he ascribes to repentance (*reue*): the only human act capable of coping effectively with error, failure and sin. Of course evil is not in itself reversible, and the consequences of evil can persist. Scheler admits this, but had he lived to see the sheer horror of Hitler's 'final solution' in his native Germany, he might have been a little less ready to say, as he does, that historical reality is incomplete and, so to speak, redeemable. It simply is not true that 'the extent and nature of the effects that every part of the past may exercise upon the sense of our life still lie within our power at *every* moment of our life', and in particular that this proposition is valid for every 'fact' in 'historical reality' whether in the history of the individual, the race or the world. For there are some 'facts' in all these spheres of reality which

¹⁰ An excellent example in fiction of a character whose personality is summed up in his attitude to time is Hardy's Sergeant Troy: 'He was a man to whom memories were an incumbrance, and anticipation a superfluity. Simply feeling, considering and caring for what was before his eyes, he was vulnerable only in the present. His outlook upon time was as a transient flash of the eye now and then: that projection and consciousness into days gone by and to come, which makes the past a synonym for the pathetic and the future a word for circumspection, was foreign to Troy. With him the past was yesterday; the future tomorrow; never, the day after'. *Far from the Madding Crowd*.

¹¹ Towards the end of the film, Alphonse's brother-in-law Ernest sings a derisive ballad on the inexorability of Time – 'Monsieur le Temps':

*T a bien du bonheur ici-bas
Mais comme on ne s'en aperçoit pas
On préfère craindre l'avenir
Regretter le passé et dire,
Déjà, déjà, déjà . . .*

is preceded by a growing sense of uneasiness and discomfort; and the dull torpor of the state of sin gradually gives way to a gnawing consciousness of real misery. Initially, this is still a self-centred are irredeemably evil. Neither individuals nor nations can altogether eradicate the effects of their own sin upon the sense of their life when these include the corruption or destruction of other human beings.¹²

So in the following quotation from Scheler 'is' should be replaced by 'maybe':

Remembering is the beginning of *freedom* from the covert power of the remembered thing and occurrence. It is precisely by being remembered that experiences usually make their exit from the inner temple of our life; it is the way in which they become detached from the centre of the Self whose attitude to the world they formerly helped to form, and in which they lose their direct impact.¹³

That assertion would have wrung assent even from Freud: it can be understood simply on the level of the *psyche*. But Scheler goes on:

Repenting is equivalent to reappraising part of one's past life and shaping for it a mint-new worth and significance.¹⁴

Repentance is . . . a true incursion into the past sphere of our life and a genuinely effective encroachment upon it.¹⁵

Valuable as Scheler's insights are, one cannot altogether escape the feeling that the reconciliation to which repentance leads is, for him, self-reconciliation, and the forgiveness self-forgiveness. The bible had a rather different and altogether more profound view of the matter. There, repentance is seen essentially as a *return*, and the whole movement of return is beautifully displayed in two well-known passages, the story of Hosea's wife and the parable of the prodigal son.¹⁶

In each case, sin is conceived not in the greek way, as a missing the mark, but as a straying or departure. In each case, repentance reaction, which would of itself lead to remorse rather than to

¹² The comforting assurance of forgiveness afforded by the confessional can at times be a substitute for Alphonse's masks; or, like poor Mary Tyrone's cocaine in *A Long Day's Journey into Night*, it is simply a passport to uneasy oblivion. The sacrament of penance makes nonsense except as an occasion for facing up to an acknowledged sinfulness, and turning to God (and maybe also to the community as a whole) in sorrow.

¹³ Scheler, Max: *On the Eternal in Man* (London, 1960), p 41.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p 41ff.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p 44.

¹⁶ Hos 2; Lk 15, 11-32.

genuine sorrow. But it opens the way for a recollection of a state of earlier bliss, a recollection controlled by the absolute assurance of a love experienced in the past and reaching into the present. It never occurs to Hosea's wife that her husband may have divorced her and remarried; the prodigal is so certain of his father's forgiveness that he seeks – unsuccessfully – to tone down its effects. But confident as they were of being forgiven and restored to grace, they knew that to return was not the same as staying at home. They could no more blot out the memory of their own infidelity than the memory of what it was to be loved.

The two passages exhibit, to a quite remarkable degree, not just the same convictions but the same articulation. Hosea's over-riding sense of the mercy of God, his *hesed*, his steadfast goodness, gave him an insight into the response God elicits from the human heart closely resembling that of Jesus, nearly eight centuries later. The pattern of the response of the prodigal son had already been recorded. The structure of repentance was the same in each case, the differences merely accidental (except no doubt for Jesus's teaching on the *fatherhood* of God). The movement is controlled by the remembrance of an all-forgiving love, which in fact proved ready to welcome back without reproaches or conditions.

What if they had not remembered? In the bible, forgetfulness is the great sin, nestling in the heart of every infidelity. In a situation of trial and temptation – the situation out of which the psalms of supplication are written – the temptation is to take the present experience of desolation as normative. Because God's presence is not *felt*, he cannot be there! All he has done in the past, the acts in which his concern and generosity have been effectively displayed, is ignored as irrelevant to the present situation of felt misery. This was the temptation to which Israel succumbed in the desert; this was the temptation which Christ overcame on the cross.

Forgetfulness is characteristic of the man who lives, like Sergeant Troy, *merely* in the present, who is unable or unwilling to turn to the past for encouragement and assurance.

Religiously speaking, memory leads to repentance and return. Forgetfulness means that one has succumbed to the temptation to stray. The lesson of the parable of the prodigal son is summed up by St Paul: 'God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us'.¹⁷ What we have to remember is *both* our

¹⁷ Rom 5, 8.

own sinfulness *and* the love of God. But the love is stronger than the sin. 'We love, because he first loved us'.¹⁸ In his first letter, St John shows his awareness that there are times when the sense of sinfulness is misleading and exaggerated. But provided that we can show love in our own lives, this does not matter. 'By this we shall know that we are of the truth, and reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts and he knows everything.'¹⁹

No one who has not felt himself loved can look forward to the future with confidence and serenity. That statement is true whichever way we turn it, whether we have religious beliefs or not. There will be occasions in every man's life when he needs to recall the experience of being loved, occasions therefore within the religious man's life when he needs to recall that he has been loved by God. The feeling of present desolation may be strong – it was strong enough to make our Lord himself exclaim, 'my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' And unless memory is powerful enough to combat grief and loneliness, there is no chance of holding on to one's faith in the goodness of God.

The incarnation meant the entry of the Son of God into human time, and made it possible for him to endure a sense of desolation unthinkable in an eternal now. The temptation he underwent on the cross, the temptation to forget, is one which every christian individually and the Church as a corporate group is likely to suffer from time to time. Will we, like him, remember to hope?

¹⁸ 1 Jn 4, 19.

¹⁹ 1 Jn 3, 19–20.