

‘Autoptes or An Eyewitness’

Reading and Remembering as a Hermeneutic Exercise

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In his 1903 essay ‘An Introduction to Metaphysics’, Henri Bergson suggests that an individual’s consciousness can be likened to two spools, one uncoiling its thread and the other simultaneously rolling up that thread (11-12). The first spool represents moments lived, memories acquired. The second spool, which gathers these memories, forms our consciousness and ‘it swells incessantly with the present that it picks up on its way’ (12). ‘Consciousness’, Bergson claims, ‘means memory’ (12).

Memory is crucial to the construction of the conscious Self. Autothetic consciousness, or the awareness of oneself as existing within time (in the past, the present and in hypothetical futures), is dependent upon the ability to consciously recall past events we have personally experienced (Conway 614; Gallo and Wheeler 191; Lou et al 6830). This ability, known as ‘episodic memory’, enables us to recall information about our past self; to perceive our past selves and our

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current self as a coherent, continuous being; and to imagine possible futures for our present self (Gallo and Wheeler 189). It is distinguished from 'semantic memory', the recollection of facts rather than subjective experiences.

Unlike Bergson's two spools, episodic memories are not constrained to run in a unidirectional, linear fashion. Rather, as experiences are added to one's store of conscious memories, one is able to leap between portions of time – preserved fragments – in a type of 'mental time travel' (Conway 614). However, these fragments are not necessarily accurately preserved: episodic memory can be distorted by error or forgetfulness (Gallo and Wheeler 195) and we see in 'Autoptes' how two people can remember, or misremember, a shared event differently. Nor is episodic memory immutable: it is subject to fabrication and reinterpretation as the individual strives to make her memories coherent with her current beliefs and perceptions about her Self (Conway 595). Indeed, David Rapaport suggests memory be viewed 'not as an ability to revive accurately impressions once obtained, but as the integration of impressions into the whole personality and their revival according to the needs of the whole personality' (112–113). Similarly, Conway and Loveday assert that 'One of the main functions of memories is to generate meanings, personal meanings, that allow us to make sense of the world and operate on it adaptively' (580). Thus, as she leaps between past events, the 'rememberer' is continually and actively involved in the construction of her episodic memory, inferring details, synthesising and re-synthesising an understanding of what 'really happened'. Past events take on a new meaning and importance when influenced, retrospectively, by subsequent ones. Occurrences separated by years in our linear chronology, and seemingly unconnected in terms of causation, become intimately linked in our interpretations of our experiences and our Selves as we look back and reflect, drawing connections and making links.

In this way, the 'rememberer' is involved in a hermeneutic exercise not so different from the work of the reader of a text: it might be said that the individual 'reads' her Self into existence through the continual interpretation of her episodic memories. Just as, per Wolfgang Iser, the literary work is a virtual entity, a product of the synergy enacted in the space between the text and the active reader (106), so, too, is the Self an artful construction, inferred from – and rising spectrally out of – the source material of memory. But memory, too, is a kind of text, crafted by the 'rememberer' under the influence of the Self – or rather, under the influence of what she would like that Self to be. Thus 'rememberer', memory, and Self are engaged in a hermeneutic circle, constant and dynamic.

'Autoptes' explores the intersection between remembering and reading. In presenting a non-chronological and ostensibly random arrangement of episodic memories belonging to two characters (He and She), I invite my reader to be co-author with me in synthesising from the fragments a coherent whole. While in the section entitled 'Ω', He and She are engaged in counselling, a type of therapy that relies heavily on reflecting and making sense out of episodic memory, the reader is encouraged to undertake the same process.

Moreover, as the opening lines of the piece suggest, the juxtaposed fragments of memory can be rearranged and read in any order, allowing the reader to enter and exit the text playfully and experimentally. Indeed, I encourage you to do so and see how, by beginning and ending at different points in the text, you might construct a different narrative and shed new light on previous interpretations you might have had.

Pay attention, also, to the gaps between the memories presented. The overwhelming majority of our daily lives is not recorded in conscious, episodic memory but rather falls away into the subconscious. Rapaport has explored the 'selective forces' that influence what is remembered – forces such as emotions, attitudes and interests (114-122). In contrast, it is the banal, the quotidian, the unremarkable that generally goes unremembered. I find in this thought – in the loss of the daily lived experience that slips away unnoticed as we slide from moment to moment – a mournfulness. I have striven to evoke this mournfulness in the sparseness of the piece: I present the reader with only a handful of snippets – what has happened to the rest of His and Her lives? Can the lost moments ever be retrieved?

Iser has suggested that it is primarily the blanks in a text that prompt the reader to participate actively such that 'the reader is not simply called upon to "internalize" the positions given in the text, but he is induced to make them act upon and so transform each other, as a result of which the aesthetic object begins to emerge' (119). Because in 'Autoptes' the blanks are so expansive – a central rather than incidental part of its form – and because the fragmentary episodes are so deregulated and susceptible to reordering and experimentation, the reader is given a distinctly authorly position in crafting the work. The characters of He and She – their relationship, their past, present and future – are *yours* to craft, as are the form and structure of the text itself, which I invite you to *order and reorder until you find a harmony you can abide*.

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Autoptes

or

An Eyewitness

Turn it over. Rotate and probe: it will not yield new answers. It is an empty beehive, silent and brittle – a honeycomb lattice, full of holes. Those dark apertures – prod and examine, again and again. Scrutinise: try to find order and reorder until you find a harmony you can abide.

Ω

He and She sit at an acute angle, two points on a pair of compasses. Across from them, a bespectacled woman in grey tweed, clipboard balanced on her knee, pen poised. Her name is something herbal, like Rosemary or Myrtle, and she observes Him and Her over her glasses, intermittently humming to show that she is Listening. Sometimes Rosemary does this when neither She nor He have spoken in some minutes. In the corner, on an oak sideboard, is a ceramic bowl of stale potpourri that once smelled like lavender or cedar wood. And there is the ticking of the clock by which life in this room is measured in fifty minute increments.

She and He have come here because they have forgotten how to speak. Have descended into silence. Their attempts to talk – their words and sentences – are threads cast across a chasm. They do not reach the other side but fall, glowing white filaments in tragic arcs, into the abyss.

b

Every morning, She rises first to make the breakfast. She has learnt how to make the pancakes just as He likes them and He has learnt to brush His teeth before coming downstairs to kiss Her on the neck while She mixes the batter. Her hands move expertly; Her wrist is lithe and delicate. He wraps His arms around Her waist and admires the way the morning sun illuminates the down on Her cheek. She has not told Him yet that She does not like to be touched on Her stomach. Maybe She will; maybe She won't.

Under their feet, in the flat below, the neighbour-couple are screaming at each other. It is a familiar rigmarole, punctuated by the slamming of cupboards and end-stopped by the crashing of the front door as the neighbour-man leaves for work. Then the neighbour-woman cries in the shower, and He and She can hear her guttural sobbing through the sibilance of water. He and She feel grateful – a little smug – that they will never be like the neighbours.

I

It was the way She held the red plastic cup above Her head as She danced. The way She rolled Her eyes up to the sky and bit Her lower lip and how vulnerable Her bare navel looked under Her knotted wet white cotton t-shirt.

He watched Her from the steps of the cabana and let the image of Her fill His empty spaces. She was nameless for Him still, at this moment: a stranger who, hours before, had not existed – not for Him, at least – and She was still only a vision, without taste or sound.

In an hour or so, a little before midnight, He would touch Her for the first time, His fingers on Her bare hip just above the low-slung denim. But, for now, it was enough simply to see Her dancing there in the crowd, red cup held aloft.

B

Cold cups of coffee line the kitchen counter like an ellipsis. They are an experiment She is conducting in Observation – specifically, His. Query: how long will it take for Him to notice that She feels ignored? Hypothesis: She will run out of coffee cups.

II

She has knitted a pair of tiny boots, green, because He does not want to know the sex. Spread across the kitchen table are gift boxes and pastel wrapping paper and tangles of silk ribbon in all the appropriate patterns. She will fold the little boots into the tissue paper next to the sonogram and, later today, they will drive north to see Her parents. On the faded paisley sofa, He and She will nestle together and

He will put His hand on Her belly while, across the coffee table, the older couple, in separate armchairs, hesitate over which of them will open the package.

O

It was orange, is what He says, and She throws Her hands up in despair. *You don't even remember That*, She says, and He rifles desperately through His memories. *Red?*

Forget it, She says and gets up from the table, taking the baby with Her. In the kitchen, child on Her hip, She unloads the dishwasher, making too much noise, throwing the cutlery into the drawer, clattering the crockery. Tentative, He brings the dinner plates in. *I hadn't finished*, She tells Him drily, but only after He has tipped away the leftover food. He apologises, looks down at the remains of Her dinner nestled among the garbage and stands by the bin with the two empty plates in His hands.

The next morning, talking with His desk mate at work, He will ask, *Does your husband remember what you were wearing the day you first met?*

α

She wore white – a backless dress that did not hide the tattoos of wings on each of Her shoulder blades. Her bouquet was made of tropical flowers – hibiscuses, heliconias – and Her shoes were silver plimsolls because She was Young and Zany. Their wedding cake was a tower of doughnuts, and their university friends played the live music for the dancing until they were too drunk to continue.

X

In the letter rack, a copy of the Decree Nisi. In a corner of the hallway, a stack of cardboard boxes. On the walls, empty shelves where, until this morning, His records and books stood. There is more space now: in the wardrobe, in the garage – plenty of space for Her to expand herself. Since the son left for Cambridge, Her friends keep telling Her to take up new hobbies. Take some art classes. Try a new look. Travel. This is the second spring of Her life.

Instead, She spends the evenings organising the family albums, taking out the photographs, arranging them into piles, reflecting on which ones should be duplicated so that He can take a copy.

CC

The linea nigra splits Her in two. It runs unnaturally straight from Her rib cage to Her crotch – a brown axis drawn across Her abdomen. Watching the bisected mound of Her bare belly undulate as She sleeps, a feeling of revulsion accumulates in His mouth. He misses Her old body: the neat little concave of the navel, the dip between jutting hip bones, the small breasts, manageable and pert. He turns aside and sleeps curving away from Her under the weight of a traitor's guilt.

#

With His back against the bedroom door, He leans. In His hands, a tray – glass of orange juice, single red rose, plate of pancakes criss-crossed with honey. For days, She has been lying in bed, foetal, moaning – because of cramps. Or grief. He cannot tell. She does not speak to Him. Except, just now, She spoke to Him – *chided* Him – scowled and said She was Not Hungry.

Just a mouthful? He said. *For me?*

He helped Her up, propped the pillows behind Her back, nestled the tray into the duvet. She parted Her lips for the fork held tremulously between His fingers and took a small bite with the edges of Her teeth.

I don't like sugar in my pancakes, She said and turned away.

Down in the kitchen, He places both hands on the counter and hangs His head. Piled up in the sink are His earlier attempts – pancakes that tore, that charred, that folded in two and could not be parted again. Scattered across the worktop are the hollowed halves of the two dozen eggs He cracked and the splashes of milk that He spilled.

V

Orange. It was all orange. The crabs scuttling just out of reach of the waves. The sky across which the sun bled, citrus. The harem trousers of tie-dyed hemp and the bikini top She wore (though She would call the colour – what was it? – coral). The melon rinds, discarded in the sand; the bridge of Her nose, peeling; the hibiscus behind Her ear and Her hair, bleached by the sun, falling across His chest – all orange in the glow of that sunrise.

This was the moment that He loved Her first. Two days before, two hundred miles south of here, back at the hostel where their friends still were – then and there, He told Her, but it was not until this moment that it was true.

650c

Behind the polished glass, against the padded velvet, precious metals, forged into circles, glint. She has dressed well today, in a skirt and blouse, not the usual sweatshirt and jeans. She has even washed Her hair. The glossy woman behind the counter smiles plastically as she poses her hand around each piece, reciting sales patter by rote. Behind her, the name of the shop is engraved in gold into the black lacquered signage.

The salesgirl is showing Her pieces of inappropriate price for She is interested only in pieces that cost £650 precisely.

22

A train carriage full of couples. At one end, a pair of adolescents in Doc Martins and sleeves pulled over their hands have stopped tonguing and are looking over, laughing. At the other, a pair of pensioners murmur sympathetically.

In the middle, He and She are yelling at each other across the buggy where the son is screaming, a viscous orange froth quivering on his chin. He is dithering, holding back retches; She is on Her hands and knees, mopping up vomit from the carriage floor with wet wipes. He holds the dog back by the collar so it won't try to eat the chunks of fish and chips in the puddle. There is sick under Her fingernails and down the front of Her shirt.

C

He holds Her hand as She lies back, not breathing, Her eyes wide and desperate and fixed on the grainy screen while the sonographer searches for a heartbeat. Down Her cheeks, the tears have painted two silvery lines like crescent moons. In a minute, the sonographer will leave them, and She will hide Her face from Him. Through the gaps between Her fingers, He will search for answers on Her skin.

3

He met her at work: she sat across the desk from him. Not His usual Type, but she listened when He talked about Her and the miscarriage and all the rest. She learned the coffee He liked from the pop-up shop at the station and bought it for Him most mornings. He noticed first the way she tucked her black hair behind her ear when she was writing, head down, bent earnestly over her notepad. Then it was the way she pursed her lips when she was thinking. He caught himself observing her, sometimes, when He should have been working. When she gave Him her number, He saved it in His phone as just 'M'.

650b

Black ciphers on white paper. Numbers and letters and pound sign symbols – familiar and legible and cryptic because between the lines they tell a story, but that story is hidden from Her. At the top of the paper, the name of His bank. On the right hand side, the date. Phrases repeated: *Balance brought forward, Arranged overdraft, Withdrawn*. Then columns of figures and abbreviated place names of businesses, train station coffee shops and various eateries She does not recognise. Mostly the values are small: £2.99, £35.67, £22.50.

But then there is one:

£650

Aspen & Co.

7.05

Every morning, a little before 7am, He comes downstairs, tying His tie as He goes. She is preparing food for the adolescent son, buttering his toast, slicing a

banana over porridge. On the stove the kettle whistles. He brushes His teeth in the guest bathroom while She, in the kitchen, measures out coffee granules, sugar, milk. In His pocket, His mobile phone buzzes; He checks who is calling but does not answer. In the garden, the dog limps among the lavender until, at the creak of the garden gate and the crunch of postman's boots on gravel, it pricks up its ears and barks.

At five minutes past the hour, He will dash out the door, ruffling the son's hair as He goes, letting Her graze His cheek with a kiss. On the kitchen counter, His mug of coffee will remain untouched.

π

He and She follow a suited man around the house. Detached. Double garage. Characterful stone with inglenook fireplace. Plenty of space for a growing family. In the garden, evergreens and perennials grow. There is a patch of lavender below the kitchen window, delphiniums and foxgloves along the borders with glistening white spider webs suspended between their stems.

She and He will buy this house. They will get a family car – a large 4x4 with in-built satellite navigation they will hardly ever use – and an AGA stove.

650d

With a flick of the wrist, He casts the box towards Her across the table. It skims across the polished wood and skids to a halt a little way from Her hand. It is a black cube, printed with a large, elegant A couched in curlicues.

The hinge mechanism is stiff. It resists then creaks and then snaps open. Inside, against the black velvet, a circle of pearls.

It was for you, He says. Are you happy now?

Δ

Brighton Pier against cerulean sky. Seagulls circling overhead. Plinky carousel music carries on the breeze. She, with Her jeans rolled up to Her calves, sits on the shingle, props Her head in Her palm and smiles. She is watching Him at the

water's edge as He holds the boy under the arms and helps him jump the waves that break against the shore. Overexcited, the dog runs in a loop around them, yapping and yapping.

Soon She will call to them. She has bought lunch: fish and chips and orange slushies from a café on the promenade. But for a little while longer, She lets them play. Tries to catch the image, like a photograph, in Her memory.

M1

Driving south in His father's Ford Fiesta, He sings along to 'Tiny Dancer' on the radio. Now and then, He scratches His right shoulder where the sunburn is beginning to peel. On the passenger seat, a bag of crisps and a plastic cup of orangeade He bought at the services. It will take another three hours, but then He will see Her and spend the weekend dancing in Her living room, drinking rum and cokes, holding Her at the waist.

His friends have told Him not to hope. The distance between His hometown and Hers is long. Things are different on island paradises where hummingbirds buzz between the fruit trees and the sand is soft and white underfoot. But here, back at home, they tell Him, holiday romances are just a tender anecdote (a parenthesis to real life). They never last.