The Rites of Memory:

Orwell, Pynchon, DeLillo, and the American Millennium

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As one of the sovereign powers of the soul or psyche, memory has a long and illustrious history in the philosophy, religion, and literature of the West. In ancient Greek myth, the Titaness Mnemosyne gave birth to the muses, all of whom are associated in some way with time and memory. According to the *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, “They [the muses] themselves ... had the gift of prophecy: ‘they said that which is, what will be, and what has been’” (119). Centuries after the gods packed up and abandoned Mt. Olympus for all time, Augustine of Hippo argued that the soul has three parts: memory, will, and understanding.

Of the three engines that drive the robust Augustinian soul, memory is by far the most important. Without memory there can be no understanding, for the growth of understanding depends on, or is nurtured by, reflection, meditation, and/or learning from one’s own mistakes committed in the past. In some persons at least, this in turn leads to the growth of empathy for the shortcomings and mistakes of others. Similarly, without memory there can be no will. Even though the essence of will is the desire to shape the future, this desire can have no meaning without memory as a guide or rudder. In the absence of the counsel of memory, the will founders, and its decisions are likely to be disastrous ones.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, historical memory is a stream of newspaper clippings dropped down Winston Smith’s memory hole in the Ministry of Truth:
He, Winston Smith, knew that Oceania had been in alliance with Eurasia as short a time as four years ago. But where did that knowledge exist? Only in his own consciousness, which in any case must soon be annihilated. And if all others accepted the lie which the Party imposed—if all records told the same tale—then the lie passed into history and become truth.... It was quite simple. All that was needed was an unending series of victories over your own memory. (24-25)

But Winston Smith is a man with two pasts. For him, history is also a very personal recollection of a child, the little sister from whom Winston stole a bit of chocolate years ago:

His mother drew her arm round the child and pressed its face against her breast. Something in the gesture told him that his sister was dying. He turned and fled down the stairs, with the chocolate growing sticky in his hand. (109)

Winston experiences bad dreams of his mother and sister because—true to the spirit of his job at the Ministry of Truth—he has repressed bittersweet memories such as this one.

Later in the novel, Winston has also been affected by the joyous singing of a prole woman in the courtyard below his hide-away apartment where he and Julia meet. Significantly, the subject of the sentimental song is remembrance:

‘They say that time ‘eals all things,
They say you can always forget;
But the smiles an’ the tears across the years
They twist my ‘eartstrings yet!’ (94)

In the end, Big Brother robs Winston of his ability to cherish and uphold, not only his own personal store of memories, but the actual meaning of memory. This results in the loss of his soul, and the novel’s famous final line: *He loved Big Brother:*

I

When human beings experience mental or physical anguish, we often say to ourselves, *Will this never end?* When we experience unbounded joy, the opposite happens; we say, *I’d better enjoy this while it lasts.* Suffering seems to stretch, pleasure to shrink time. When these experiences of agony
and ecstasy twist time, we’re also experiencing the birth pangs—both pleasurable and painful, as birth pangs are—of memory. For we know that memory, too, is supple and elastic: we cherish and preserve some memories, abhor and repress others. Like an artist (seven of the nine muses were also associated with the arts), memory alters the raw materials of experience: pleasant times may be made to last longer while painful times may be shrunk to insignificance, even erased altogether.

This is what psychologists call nootemporality. According to James T. Fraser, noetic time and human sense of self are intimately related:

Noetic time is the human brain’s way of minding the affairs of the body. It does so with the help of the symbol we know as the self. . . . The changing speed of experienced time, the feeling of free will, the use of human creativity and destructiveness in the name of distant goals: all these manifestations of being human may be interpreted as the efforts of the self to maintain and expand its control over behavior. (357)

Inevitably, the changing speed of experienced time is transubstantiated into the very stuff of human memory. Perhaps the formation of memory and the formation of sense of self are really one and the same process. If this is the case for individuals, may it not also be the case for societies?

Anyone who has first-hand knowledge of Alzheimer’s disease knows the terrible consequences of memory dysfunction in persons. Many will empathize with Lawrence Biemiller’s account of his grandmother’s descent into cognitive darkness:

[W]hen I arrive at her room, she smiles and says, ‘There you are!’ She’s been waiting for me. She squeezes my hand as I kiss her on the cheek. The aides have dressed her nicely, and she’s thrilled to be going out, so it takes me a minute to realize what’s not quite right: She has always greeted us by name. In my head I can hear her clearly, hear her voice back when it wasn’t small and timid. I realize that there you are is a circumlocution, one more way of working around what her memory can no longer provide. Nanny has forgotten my name. (B2)

On a personal basis, such a shock of recognition is infinitely saddening. But what happens when memory as a cultural mandate—e.g., a collective value—also threatens to become dysfunctional? As I’ve suggested, this is a central theme in Nineteen Eighty-Four, where, in the synecdochic portrait of Winston Smith, George Orwell diagnoses the condition of
mnemonophobia in modern Western man (Winston is, of course, Smith-Everyman). In their satirical critiques of the contemporary American experience, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *White Noise*, Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo extend Orwell’s vision by sounding the rites of memory for postmodern man.

In *The Crying of Lot 49*, the two main men in the life of protagonist Oedipa Maas both suffer from mnemonophobia. Oedipa’s disc jockey husband, Mucho Maas, tormented by memories of his unhappy past incarnation as a car salesman, locks himself into a state of eternal adolescence by pandering to a teenage radio audience. And Oedipa’s lover Metzger is addicted to the memory of his child actor-self, a neurotic hang-up that keeps him in a state of perpetual puberty.

In contrast to these mnemonically challenged men—both of whom eventually fall by the wayside—Oedipa herself is charged with the novel’s most important task: “*She was meant to remember*” (118). On the steps of a run-down boarding house in nighttown San Francisco, Oedipa meditates on a filthy mattress slept on by a dying sailor:

What voices overheard, flinders of luminescent gods glimpsed among the wallpaper’s stained foliage, candlestubs lit to rotate in the air over him, prefiguring the cigarette he or a friend must fall asleep someday smoking, thus to end among the flaming, secret salts held all those years by the insatiable stuffing of a mattress that could keep vestiges of every nightmare sweat, helpless over-flowing bladder, viciously, tearfully consummated wet dream, like the memory bank to a computer of the lost? She was overcome all at once by a need to touch him . . . (126)

Here, Oedipa’s compassion is aroused in the consummate act—not of remembering, for the sailor’s past is unknown to her—but of bearing witness to memory as the strongest link in what Nathaniel Hawthorne called the magnetic chain of humanity.

In the nineteen twenties, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s darkest metaphor for America was *The Great Gatsby’s* famous Valley of Ashes. Sixty years later, Don DeLillo gives us the shopping mall:

I kept seeing myself unexpectedly in some reflecting surface.... Our images appeared on mirrored columns, in glassware and chrome, on TV monitors.... I traded money for goods. The more money I spent, the less important it seemed. I was bigger than these sums. These sums poured off my skin like so much rain. These sums in fact came back to me in the form of existential credit. I felt expansive,
inclined to be sweepingly generous, and told the kids to pick out their Christmas gifts here and now. (84)

The secret of the mall’s power to enchant the narrator Jack Gladney is a threefold one: its timelessness (Christmas is now), its reflecting surfaces, and its putative gift of renewed selfhood. When the Gladneys leave the mall, however, everything changes:

[We] drove home in silence. We went to our respective rooms, wishing to be alone. A little later I watched Steffie in front of the TV set. She moved her lips, attempting to match the words as they were spoken. (84)

In a twinkling, Jack’s existential credit rating drops to zero.

When Babette Gladney starts taking Dylar, a pill designed to alleviate the fear of death she shares with her husband, she experiences a curious side effect: episodes of déjá vu. Déjà vu also appears as a side effect of exposure to the deadly Nyodene airborne toxic event that dominates the second part of White Noise. At one point Jack calls Dylar “the benign counterpart of the Nyodene menace” (211). What’s the connection between déjá vu and the Gladneys’s unwillingness to face death?

Déjà vu is a real-world phenomenon, of course, something everyone experiences at one time or another. The American Heritage Dictionary defines it as “the illusion of having already experienced something actually being experienced for the first time”. In other words: artificial memory. For Jack Gladney, the function of déjá vu is to freeze time and obviate the process of memory by substituting a perpetual present for the past. As a symptom of moral paralysis, déjá vu transforms Gladney into the human equivalent of a CD-ROM:

Here is my plan. Drive past the scene several times, park some distance from the scene, go back on foot, locate Mr. Gray under his real name or an alias, shoot him three times in the viscera for maximum pain ... slip back to the car, proceed to the expressway entrance, head east toward Blacksmith, get off at the old river road, park Stover’s car in Old Man Treadwell’s garage, shut the garage door, walk home in the rain and the fog. (304)

A few moments later:
My plan was this. Swivel my head to look into rooms, put him at his ease, wait for an unguarded moment, blast him in the gut three times for maximum efficiency of pain, take his Dylar, get off at the river road, shut the garage door, walk home in the rain and the fog. (307)

A few moments later:

My plan was elegant. Advance gradually, gain his confidence, take out the Zumwalt, fire three bullets at his midsection for maximum visceral agony ... slip back into the car, drive to the expressway entrance, head east toward Blacksmith, leave Stover’s car in Treadwell’s garage, walk home in the rain and the fog. (309)

Now, even though Gladney divides his existential errand into two parts—kill his enemy Willie Mink and steal his supply of Dylar—the two acts are really one and the same. And here DeLillo reveals the perverse psychology of déjà vu in its true complexity.

Training the Zumwalt on Willie Mink, Jack suddenly recalls something his friend Murray once said: “Imagine the visceral jolt, watching your opponent bleed in the dust. He dies, you live” (308). What Jack is really doing, then, is exorcising his all-consuming fear of death by killing Willie Mink and by appropriating Mink’s supply of Dylar. In the process, however, Jack unwittingly consigns himself to a state of death-in-life, a perpetual present thinly disguised as déjà vu. For even in the act of pulling the trigger, Jack is still frozen on the treadmill of artificial memory: “I fired the gun, the weapon, the pistol, the firearm, the automatic” (312). But then, as the bullets rip into Willie Mink’s body, Jack is shockingly reintroduced to real time—to the same irreversible process experienced by Pynchon’s Oedipa Maas as she holds the dying sailor in her arms.

When, according to his oft-repeated plan, Jack places the pistol in Willie Mink’s limp hand, Willie suddenly comes to and fires, shooting Jack in the wrist. Now both men are bleeding badly from arterial wounds; both may die. And an extraordinary thing happens. Jack reports,

I felt I was seeing him for the first time as a person. The old human muddles and quirks were set flowing again. Compassion, remorse, mercy ... (313)

Face to face with real mortality, Jack bundles Willie into the car and heads for a convent hospital, where he encounters a postmodern delight: a Jewish-accented atheist nun named Sister Hermann Marie. Listening to
Sister Marie’s dispiriting litany of disbelief, Jack makes an ironic discovery: his desire for transcendence has been resurrected along with Willie Mink:

“There must be some of you who aren’t pretending, who truly believe. I know there are. Centuries of belief don’t just peter out in a few years. There were whole fields of study devoted to these subjects. Angelology. A branch of theology just for angels. A science of angels. Great minds debated these things . . .” (320)

Jack, who just a few hours ago was a prisoner caught in the loop of *déjà vu*, now makes his escape to freedom in a transcendent leap of faith *and* of memory. Even as the shooting of Willie Mink and the theft of his Dylar constitutes for all intents and purposes an identical act, this twofold act of bearing witness really amounts to one and the same gesture as well. For at least one fleeting moment, Jack’s humanity is restored. *Au fond*, Willie Mink is to *White Noise* what the dying sailor is to *The Crying of Lot 49*.

II

In much the same way that a virus imitates a “healthy” organism, *déjà vu* invade the contemporary American body politic disguised as the nostalgia and triva crazes of the seventies, eighties, and nineties.

In 1973, the classic film *American Graffiti* ushered in the era of fifties nostalgia, to be followed by *Grease, Back to the Future*, and *Peggy Sue Got Married*. The immediate and enduring popularity of *American Graffiti*—and its spinoff TV series “Happy Days” and “The Wonder Years”—suggested that an identity crisis of unprecedented proportions had begun to take root in the American popular soul. Rather than squarely face up to the horrors of the actual and immediate past—the humiliation of Vietnam, say, the agony of race riots and assassinations, the countercultural revolution—America simply skipped a decade and substituted—*déjà vu*—a pleasanter, artificialized past.

This is a far cry from the nostalgia-psychology as articulated by Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

The room had awakened in [Winston] a sort of nostalgia, a sort of ancestral memory. It seemed to him that he knew exactly what it felt to sit in a room like this, in
an armchair beside an open fire with your feet in the fender and a kettle on the hob, utterly alone, utterly secure, with nobody watching you, no voice pursuing you, no sound except the singing of the kettle and the friendly ticking of the clock. (65)

In America’s pop culture of nostalgia, and in contrast to Orwell’s synecdochic scenario, clocks aren’t user-friendly. What’s truly significant about the fifties craze is that its never-never land iconography was, and is, *an iconography of still-lifes*. In the timeless universe of Elvis Presley, Beaver Cleaver and James Dean, Elvis is always already innocent of obesity, drugs, and degeneracy, Beaver is forever ten years old, and Dean never climbs into his silver Porsche Spyder on September 30, 1955. All three now stand as frozen statues in the frozen eternity of our collective memory.

In *White Noise*, Don DeLillo casts the American obsession with trivia in the mold of cultural *déjà vu*. At The College on the Hill, where Jack Gladney teaches, members of the trivia-obsessed Popular Culture Department convert their own personal histories into a ludicrous game of trivial pursuit:

[Grappa]: “Did you ever brush your teeth with your finger?”
[Lasher]: “I brushed my teeth with my finger the first time I stayed overnight at my wife’s parents’ house, before we were married, when her parents spent a weekend at Asbury Park . . .”
[Cotsakis]: “I brushed my teeth with my finger at Woodstock, Altamont, Monterey, about a dozen other seminal events . . .” (67)

In the parallel universe of contemporary American society, trivia impugns the integrity of memory, as it were, by turning the act of remembrance into a connect-the-dots game. Here’s a random selection of sports trivia items from CNN:

—How many times did Miami Dolphins’s running back Larry Csonka fumble in his eleven-year career?

—Who is the first American male to win two Alpine medals in the same winter Olympic Games?

—When did ice dancing become an event in the winter Olympic Games?
Compare with these snippets from the Trivia Time department of the *Los Angeles Times*s sports section:

—Who was the coach of the Oakland Raiders before Al Davis took over in 1963?

—Who is the second all-time shot blocker in the history of UCLA basketball?

—How many Utah Jazz centers have averaged ten or more points per game since 1985?

Everyday American trivia also consists of factoids and flashbacks sandwiched between stories on CNN Headline News. A single morning’s sampling:

—Factoid: Among whites, blacks, and Asians, the median wait for a liver transplant is 76 days.

—Factoid: About 30% of all 911 calls are made from cellular phones.

—Flashback: March 5, 1982: John Belushi is found dead of a drug overdose in Hollywood.

—Flashback: March 4th, 1984: The Television Hall of Fame is founded.

Like the tape on the old *Mission Impossible* TV series, these items self-destruct in the memory a split second after they appear on the screen. To paraphrase a remark attributed to Milan Kundera, mere remembering is after all just a form of forgetting.

CNN also enhances its broadcasts by providing up-to-the-minute information from all fifty states. Closely resembling factoids, these news minutiae appear in written form on the bottom of the screen:

—Idaho: Boise State University to consider raising tuition $90 dollars per semester.

—Vermont: Burlington residents sue to prevent new skateboard park near waterfront.

—Rhode Island: Monet Group to lay off about 90 workers at state jewelry plants.
Actually, the mass appeal of this sort of thing constitutes a symptom of a symptom—mnemonophobia itself being symptomatic of the pandemic disease of modern life first diagnosed by Charles Baudelaire in the nineteenth century as ennui. Baudelaire personifies this condition in his famous poem, “To the Reader”, from Fleurs du Mal:

Boredom! He smokes his hookah, while he dreams
Of gibbets, weeping tears he cannot smother.
You know this dainty monster, too, it seems—
Hypocrite reader! —You! —My twin! —My brother! (5)

Empty mnemonic exercises such as the above deflate the meaning—defeat the purpose—of memory as a process. Even by answering trivia questions correctly, persons are automatically relieved of the need to think—indeed to feel—about the past voluntarily and on their own. If they get the answer wrong, no problem: it’s always provided later on the news or below on the same page of the newspaper. Either way, correct or incorrect, what matters is that the act of remembering is performed not by us, but for us.

In everyday American life, trivia also strips individual memories of their intrinsic meaning(s) by assigning identical value to every petty shred of information. All trivia are created equal. What’s the qualitative value—difference involved in recalling a Pac-10 free-throw record, as opposed to a Pac-10 overall scoring record, as opposed to a UCLA shot-blocking record? Answer: there isn’t any. By transforming the past into a game of trivial pursuit, we threaten to strip noetemporality of the quality of affect: collective memories are no longer good or bad, painful or pleasurable; instead, they’re merely right or wrong.

III

In Nineteen Eighty-Four, Winston Smith also remembers a dream of the distant past:

Suddenly he was standing on short springy turf, on a summer evening when the slanting rays of the sun gilded the ground. The landscape that he was looking at recurred so often in his dreams that he was never fully certain whether or not he had seen it in the real world. In his waking thoughts he called it the Golden
Country. It was an old, rabbit-bitten pasture, with a foot track wandering across it and a molehill here and there.

Across this field of dreams walks his beloved Julia, tearing off her clothes, “a gesture”, Winston thinks, “belonging to the ancient time” (22). Winston’s erotic dream of the ancient time is rooted in landscape. For him, the cultivation of memory and the cultivation of an old, rabbit-bitten pasture are essentially—e.g., ontologically — synonymous. The same is true, or ought to be true, for us. As Simon Schama has written,

Whether we scramble the slopes or ramble the woods, our Western sensibilities carry a bulging backpack of myth and recollection ... [W]ithin its bag are fruitful gifts—not only things that we have taken from the land but things that we can plant upon it ... The sum of our pasts, generation laid over generation, like the slow mold of the seasons, forms the compost of our future. We live off it. (574)

The relationship between human memory and the natural world is biological as well as cultural. We know, of course, that memory is located in the temporal lobes of the cerebral cortex of the brain. Memory of music, memory of speech, memory of sight are all assigned specific areas in the cerebral cortex. Recent neurophysiological research strongly indicates that emotional events in our lives are committed to memory in the amygdala, an organ adjacent to the hippocampus. All memory formation, needless to say, is intimately bound up with sensory perceptions of the natural world. In and of themselves, these perceptions aren’t simply recorded in or on the brain; they also affect the brain’s complex chemistries.

Of an everyday human pleasure Tim McFadden observes, “Most people like to watch clouds and it causes the lateral geniculate nucleus (LGN) of the brain to be reprogrammed, if nothing else” (337). A cloud is a nonlinear system—e.g., its behavior is unpredictable, random, chaotic. Apparently, visually interacting with the chaos of cloud behavior, along with the chaotic behavior of ocean waves, river-flows and wind patterns in trees, is biologically good for us. It is probable that the reprogramming of the brain’s lateral geniculate nucleus is a physiological reward for accepting the natural world’s invitation to come out of our caves, look around, and get down to the business of survival.

But what happens when we substitute artificial environments for natural ones? According to McFadden,
Current virtual reality systems do not have the resolution to display moving clouds accurately. Call this level of display the cloud barrier. Until our virtual realities pass the cloud barrier, they will not be engaging the human nervous system to the degree that the everyday world does. ... Human experience may be basically tied to some chaotic, molecular, or quantum mechanical phenomena which does not scale up. (337-338)

At present, we don't fully understand how chaos-dependent our brains are, or, on the other hand, how chaotic virtual systems may one day become. But if the LGN can't be fully reprogrammed—e.g., rejuvenated—via virtual systems, it should follow that other forms of cognition—memory-formation, for example—might also atrophy in environments that are predominantly artificial as opposed to natural. Here, too, long-term biological and cultural consequences are impossible to predict.

Two important Hollywood films of recent years, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* and Paul Verhoeven’s *Robocop*, address this issue in interesting and interconnected ways. In both films, the process of human memory is seen as separate from and anathema to the virtual protocols of modern cybernetics.

In *Robocop*, Murphy, a policeman, is transformed into a killing machine—almost. The slender thread that connects the mechanomorphic Robocop to Murphy is memory: this in spite of the attempts of doctors to blank his memory and substitute an artificial, or on-board assisted memory. But Murphy still experiences flashbacks—in a dream he recalls being critically injured in the shoot-out that prompted his corporate retrofitting into Robocop. And when Robocop hits the streets in pursuit of criminals, he encounters one of the same bad guys who originally shot Murphy full of holes. Significantly, the inhuman Robocop is momentarily rendered helpless when the crook appeals to Murphy's human side—e.g., his memory: "You're dead—we killed you". Robocop hesitates, holding his fire. "Who are you?" he demands, struggling to remember. Verhoeven's message here is crystal clear: memory is and must be a natural process, not an artificial system.

The film's most poignant moment comes when Robocop tells his partner about Murphy's family: "I can feel them, but I can't remember them".1
In *Blade Runner*, the android-replicants are essentially human in all but one respect: they have no past, and therefore no memories. Nevertheless: “We began to recognize in them a strange obsession”, the scientist/corporate mogul Tyrell tells the Blade Runner cop Deckard. The obsession Tyrell refers to is the need to remember. “If we gift them with a past”, he goes on, “we create a cushion, a pillow for their emotions, and consequently we can control them better”. “Memories”, Deckard replies. “You’re talking about memories”.

Later on, when the Nexus-6 Rachael visits Deckard’s apartment in an attempt to convince him that she’s not a replicant, she takes out a photograph. “Look”, she says eagerly. “It’s me with my mother”. “Implants”, Deckard says. “Those aren’t your memories. They’re somebody else’s... Tyrell’s niece’s”. Rachael begins to cry. Then she flees the apartment. Depressed and disgusted, Deckard thinks, “Tyrell really did a job on Rachael, right down to a photograph of a mother she never had, a daughter she never was. I didn’t know[other] replicants would collect photographs. Maybe they were like Rachael. They needed memories...”.

At first, Deckard is casually indifferent to Rachael’s plight (“How can it not know what it is?” he asks Tyrell). However, once he recognizes—through her tears—the mixing of simulated memory with real desire, he begins to love her: Blade Runner Deckard, who may be a replicant himself.

IV

*Remembered happiness is agony;*

*So is remembered agony.*

Donald Hall

In the following passages written by three different poets from three very different culture worlds, the pain of remembrance—*I am the man, I suffered, I was there*, wrote Walt Whitman—is interpreted as a kind of manna from hell.

Like Shakespeare’s Prince Hamlet, Homer’s Prince Telemachus in *The Odyssey* is on a mission of remembrance. In order to restore his long-lost father to the rightful place he once occupied on the throne of Ithaca,
the boy must leave home and go to sea. But on encountering the *oikos*—
the household—of red-haired Menelaus and his wife Helen of Troy, he is
introduced to nepenthe, the sweet elixir of forgetfulness:

[N]ow it entered Helen’s mind to drop into the wine that they were drinking, an
anodyne, mild magic of forgetfulness. Whosoever drank this mixture in the wine
bowl would be incapable of tears that day—though he should lose mother and
father both, or see, with his own eyes, a son or brother mauled by weapons of
bronze at his own gate. The opiate of Zeus’s daughter bore this canny power. (59)

But Telemachus came to Lakedaimon not to forget but to remember:
“No, son of Atreus, no, you must not keep me” (70). Obliged to choose
between the pain of remembrance and the pleasure of forgetting,
Telemachus opts for the former—and becomes a man.

In the medieval masterpiece *The Romance of Tristan and Iseult*,
memory serves as the fine measure of a very different love. During one of
their many partings, Tristan sends Iseult a strange gift: a many-colored
magical dog with a fairy bell around its neck. At first, Iseult is delighted:

[S]he had a goldsmith work a little kennel for him, all jeweled, and encrusted with
gold and enamel inlaid; and wherever she went she carried the dog with her in
memory of her friend, and...sadness and anguish and regrets melted out of her
heart. (105-106)

Ring the little fairy bell, and she can forget the painful past, wipe
away the bitter tears of remembrance, and live happily ever after. In the
end, however, Iseult balks:

[T]hen she thought, ‘What have I to do with comfort since he is sorrowing? He
could have kept [the fairy bell] too and have forgotten his sorrow; but with high
courtesy he sent it me to give me his joy and to take up his pain again. But it is
unbecoming that things should be thus; Tristan, while you suffer, so long will I suf-
fer also’. (106)

And she throws the fairy bell out the window.

The fairy bell is to *The Romance of Tristan and Iseult* what nepenthe
is to the *Odyssey*. No matter how much suffering goes along with it, in
Iseult’s world as in Homer’s, memory is infinitely preferable to the oblivi-
ion of forgetting. For the unhappy Iseult, throwing the fairy bell into the sea is an act of high courtesy—an heroic act.

Consider now the following stanzas from a different culture world still:

... At fourteen I married My Lord you.
I never laughed, being bashful.
Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.
Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

At fifteen I stopped scowling,
I desired my dust to be mingled with yours
Forever and forever and forever.
Why should I climb the look out?

At sixteen you departed,
You went into far Ku-to-yen, by the river of swirling eddies,
And you have been gone five months.
The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

You dragged your feet when you went out.
By the gate now, the moss grown, the different mosses
Too deep to clear them away!
The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.
The paired butterflies are already yellow with August,
Over the grass in the West garden;
They hurt me. I grow older.
If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang,
Please let me know beforehand,
And I will come out to meet you
As far as Cho-fu-Sa. (1207)

Even though the speaker is hurt by watching the paired butterflies, she cherishes the pain as she would (say) a precious jade keepsake given to her by her prodigal husband. In Ezra Pound’s exquisite adaptation of Li Po’s Chinese poem, not merely rhythm and imagery but tone are woven from the fine-spun silk of remembrance.


