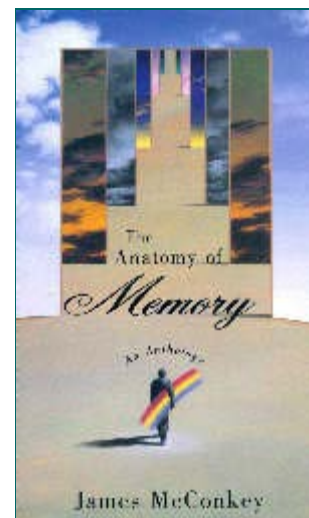




A READER'S JOURNAL:

The Anatomy of Memory
by
James McConkey
An Anthology

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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©1998



Following upon his own autobiographical work *Court of Memory*, McConkey's anthology expands the theme of memory to give it the "sense of special importance of

memory to us today." In the *Preface* he quotes what E. M. Forster, in his *Aspects of the Novel*, says of expansion, that it "is the idea the novelist must cling to. Not completion. Not rounding off but opening out. When the symphony is over we feel that the notes and tune composing it have been liberated, they have found in the rhythm of the whole their individual freedom. Cannot the novel be like That?" With the help of the contributors to *The Anatomy of Memory*, James McConkey has certainly created such a symphony or expansion on the theme of memory.

This is not a book to be rushed through for content, but a multiple course feast to be enjoyed one dish at a time, with breaks in-between courses for digestion and cleansing of the palate before continuing with the next entree. My reading of this five-hundred-page book spanned three months, which time included a break of a month during which period I ordered and read the book [The Night Country](#) by Loren Eiseley, from which the article "The Brown Wasps" on page 115 was taken. This brilliant ten-page excerpt prompted me to interrupt my reading to digest all of Eiseley's book. A good anthology, like a good book review, should occasionally prompt one to acquire and read the book itself, and McConkey has fashioned a great anthology on memory here.

There are six sections in this book, and each one begins with an introductory short poem or brief essay. Emily Dickinson's poem, "The Brain is wider than the sky -" heads section *I. The Nature of Memory*. Walt Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" heads *II. The Memory of Nature*. In section *V. Perspectives of Memory* there are three groupings of essays: *Childhood and the Middle Years*, *Other Dimensions*, and *Insights of Old Age*, the last of which is headed by a stanza from William Butler Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium."

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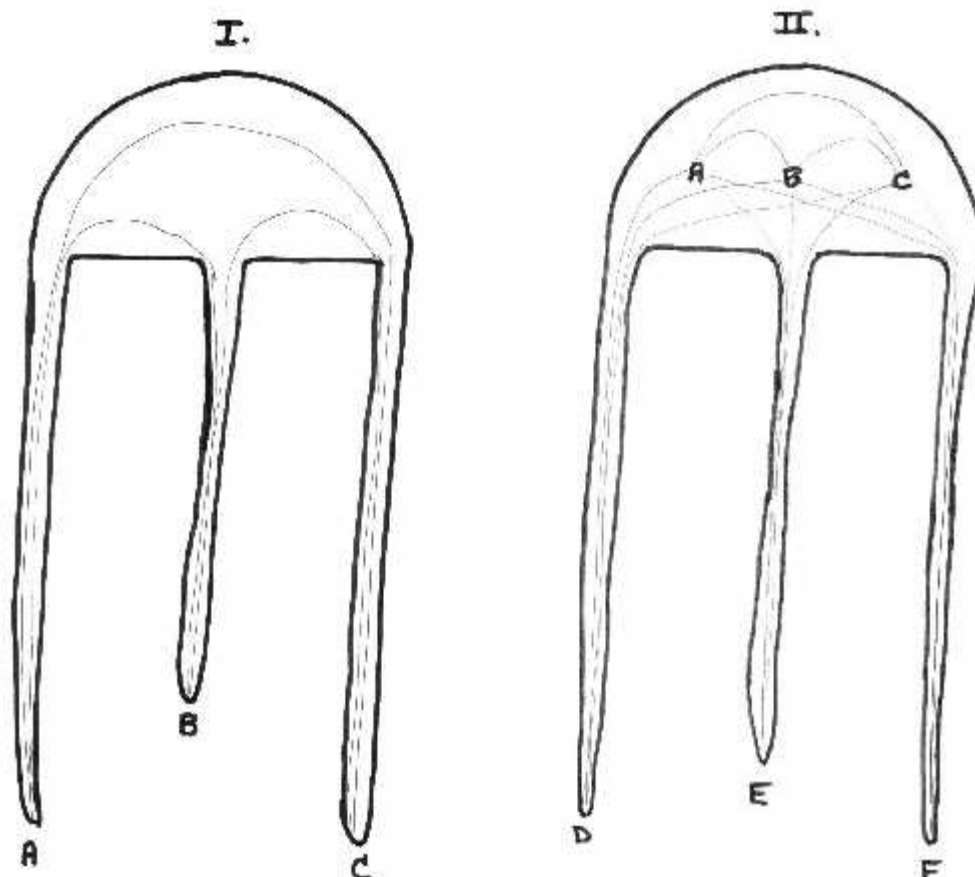
**An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hand and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress . . .**

If an anthology is like a tour of a city where each house shows us a unique architecture, McConkey plays the part of the informed and voluble guide who explains the salient and interesting features as we pause in front of each house. He does this with his insightful introductory essays to each section and to each author's work. In a musical sense McConkey conducts his orchestra of virtuoso performers in a grand symphony, playing prefatory solos himself before each orchestral piece.

In an excerpt from Diane Ackerman's *A Natural History of the Senses*, we find short pieces devoted to our sense of smell:

[page 23] Smell was the first of our senses, and it was so successful that in time the small lump of olfactory tissue atop the nerve cord grew into a brain. Our cerebral hemispheres were originally buds from the olfactory stalks. We think because we smelled.

I encountered this quote from Ackerman just a day after I'd drawn two diagrams of an early jellyfish showing only the top or head, the tentacles, and the long neurons extending down the length of the tentacles to sense or smell the environment surrounding this primitive creature. This sense of smell was crucial to distinguish food from non-food and was essential to its survival - the better it smelled, the better its chance of living long enough to evolve. See Early Jellyfish in the left side of the Drawing at right.



I drew this primitive jellyfish because I had just finished reading *The Riddle of Humanity* by Rudolf Steiner and was pondering an unanswered question that I generated from a statement in his book. The question, which is discussed in my review, is: "How is it possible that the body of our previous incarnation would be embodied in the head of our present incarnation?" In my review I gave some mechanical analogies using automobiles, as it is easy to track the evolution of successive generations of automobile design in the span of the twentieth century, but the jellyfish was intriguing to me for the very possibility that Ackerman states: "We think because we smelled." In other words, if we take the body of the jellyfish and incorporate the neuronal structure of its body from this stage of evolution [Early Jellyfish, Left side] into its head in the next stage of evolution [Later Jellyfish, right side], we have performed the operation that Rudolf Steiner specified when he said, in effect, "embody the body of this incarnation into the head of the next incarnation." The new jellyfish [Right Side] has in its head the neuronal interconnections of its simpler ancestor's body [Left Side] . The neurons are connected to each other and to the smell sensors of the tentacles. Repeat this process of evolution over countless aeons and evolutionary stages, and the first brain evolves from the buds on the top of the olfactory stalks just as Ackerman states. Since the early earth was covered with water, such primitive jellyfish were the early ancestors of the human race.

In his introduction to an essay on memory by Freud, McConkey says:

[page 41] Memory is crucial to his [Freud's] investigation - memory as instinct, as part of what he calls, in the essay that follows, our "primitive, ungovernable nature" and memory of actual experiences and desires, particularly from early childhood, that we distort or repress.

In the very next essay "Bright Air, Brilliant Fire: On the Matter of Mind", Gerald Edelman says of emotions:

[page 52] This is not the place to discuss emotions, the most complex of mental objects, nor can I dedicate much space to thinking itself. I consider them in the next chapter. But it is useful to mention them here in connection with our discussion of free will and meaning. As philosophers and psychologists have often remarked, *the range of human freedom is restricted by the inability of an individual to separate the consequences of thought and emotions.*

I have added the italics above in order to emphasize that when one understands that emotions are memories of actual experiences from early childhood (before five-years-old), one must add the limitation eraser phrase "up until now" to the end of the italicized remarks. [See ARJ: [*The Remembered Present*](#) by Gerald Edelman.]

While reading Thoreau's essay "Walking" I decided to place his book *Maine Woods* on my bedside reading stand so that I might accompany Thoreau on his perambulations among the mountains and rivers of the East - what better companion for such jaunts than one who thinks of our walks thus:

[page 81] So we saunter toward the Holy Land, till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than he has ever done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, as warm and serene and golden as on a bankside in autumn.

Or I may choose to walk alone with Kim R. Stafford who writes in her "A Walk in Early May" essay, "Solitude is the scientific method of the human spirit." [page 83]

Or to examine those waste spaces that form the "archaeology of the stranded" of the solitary hitchhiker who spends his days amidst an "archipelago of cross-roads and on-ramps" as John Landretti writes in "On Waste Lonely Places." Who can forget his metaphor on page 101, "that old trilobite of the highway, the fallen muffler"?

In "The Brown Wasps" Loren Eiseley tells us of the abandoning and razing of an elevated train station that he reckoned in its heyday to be a "food-bearing river" to the pigeons who were fed by the passengers as they entered and left the station. "I saw the river stop," he says, and the pigeons left - but one denizen remained behind.

[page 120] Even the blind man clung to it. Someone had provided him with a chair, and he sat at the same corner staring sightlessly at an invisible stairway where, so far as he was concerned, the crowds were still ascending to the trains.

In the section *Memory and Creativity* we learn from William James that all words were once metaphors when he says, "Men, taken historically, reason by analogy long before they have learned to reason by abstract characters." [page 140] Thus we are led to understand that the origin of language lies in reference to concrete objects and physical actions.

[page 141] The first words were probably always names of entire things and entire

actions, of extensive coherent groups. A new experience in the primitive man can only be talked about by him in terms of the old experiences that received names.

The describing of new experiences in terms of old names is equivalent to discussing a new paradigm in terms of the old. On a brain structure level, it is equivalent to the change from one evolutionary stage to the next of the jellyfish structure that is our brain.

But we must not flatten all words into simple analogies or else we lose the power of the symbol - Carl Gustav Jung carefully warns us:

[page 161] And what is *Faust* but a symbol? By this I do not mean an allegory that points to something too familiar, but an expression that stands for something not clearly known and yet profoundly alive.

Nor must we forget that the mother of the Muses was *Mnemosyne, Memory*. As Clara Claiborne Park writes:

[page 175] It is my antique conviction that the Greeks knew what they were talking about, that to make the Muses the daughters of Memory is to express a fundamental perception of the way in which Creativity works.

But she notes that Homer says nothing of a connection between the Muses and Inspiration, and that Homer, in her opinion, must certainly know of the connection. I think not - the knowledge of that connection for the early Greek writers like Homer would have required a meta-step, an evolution of consciousness, that was hundreds of years in the future. In the beginning of his *Iliad* Homer says, "Sing, O Goddess, the anger of Achilles . . ." and he begins his *Odyssey* with, "Tell me, O Muse, of that ingenious hero who traveled far and wide." Part of that evolution of consciousness has brought us our english word "odyssey" which means "a long wandering journey". [Webster's Third] Like with the evolution of the jellyfish, where the entire body of the jellyfish's previous stage of evolution is subsumed in the brain structure of the present stage, so also the entire body of Homer's epic, *The Odyssey*, is subsumed in our definition of the common noun "odyssey".

The process that leads from a complex concept to its usage in abstract description can take place in the course of thousands of years or mere decades. Take the newly coined word "galaxy" which describes a complex myriad of interacting stars in a centralized region of distant space. Notice how Toni Morrison presses this new word into service to describe her process of writing a novel:

[page 216] The novel turned out to be a composition of parts encircling each other, like the galaxy accompanying memory.

The galaxy, as a confluence of stars, sets the theme for Eudora Welty's contribution:

[page 225] Of course the greatest confluence of all is that which makes up the human memory - the individual human memory. My own is the treasure most dearly regarded by me, in my life and in my work as a writer. Here time, also, is subject to confluence. The memory is a living thing - it too is in transit. But during its moment, all that is remembered joins, and lives - the old and the young, the past and the present, the living and the dead.

As you have seen, I am a writer who came of a sheltered life. A sheltered life can be a daring life as well. For all serious daring starts from within.

To Virginia Woolf all human beings are connected - "the whole world is a work of art."

[page 323] And this conception affects me every day. I prove this, now, by spending the

morning writing, when I might be walking, running a shop, or learning to do something that will be useful if war comes. I feel that by writing I am doing what is far more necessary than anything else . . .

Vladimir Nabokov searches in vain for the connections from his past that bubble up in his memoirs and novels.

[page 333] But even so, the individual mystery remains to tantalize the memoirist. Neither in environment nor in heredity can I find the exact instrument that fashioned me, the anonymous roller that pressed upon my life a certain intricate watermark whose unique design becomes visible when the lamp of art is made to shine through life's foolscap.

Every nook and cranny of this anthology is filled with wonderful descriptive prose and poetry, and some of the prose borders on poetry as this piece from Paul West's "The Girls and Ghouls of Memory". My dictionary suffered new signs of wear by the time I had come to terms with his essay.

[page 364-365] Extremes, not streams, of consciousness I envisioned as I ploughed into *Beowulf*, the poem with the Great Divide down its middle. All those half-lines evoked half-lives, contrapuntal opposites, Pisces (which folk jubilantly told me I was) swimming in two directions at once, purgatorial igloos whose under-halves accommodate no one at all. I was so glad to lift head above the pubertal compost that I almost forgot to strike up conversations with the nervous, industrious scholarship girls, whose mitigated simpers came straight out of Jane Austen's novels and their brains from the mint of heaven itself. Unbeautiful they may have been: box-jawed, myopic, mat-haired, stone-gaited, and nailbiters all, they nonetheless gave the morbid me a glimpse of self's yellowish rough diamond, just a touch lustrous in its blue kimberlite matrix.

Anne Dillard writes in "Teaching a Stone to Talk" that, "We as a people have moved from pantheism to pan-atheism." She claims that if we were not here, the passage of the seasons would "play to an empty house. That is why I take walks: to keep an eye on things."

In a sense that is why the writers of these works on memory have written of their walks through life, so that others may learn, by their example, to "keep an eye on things" or else "the show of life will play to an empty house."

See also [Memory's Ghost](#) by Philip J. Hilts.

