

Preface

At my grandma's house, we have a small stage made out of cardboard and red tempera paint, and a set of scary looking puppets that my cousins and I used to play with. We would each put on different shows that I now realize revealed something very unique about each of us. Every time my grandpa played along with us, he would get too violent with the puppets, making them fight, knocking the rubbery princess puppet against the creepy witch puppet. I would get extremely upset. I didn't understand why the puppets, or anyone for that matter, would physically hurt each other. Naturally, everybody else thought Bapa's show was hilarious. This, in turn, made me even more upset. What didn't I understand? And more important, what didn't they understand? Maybe I was too young, or maybe I just felt bad for them. For one reason or another, I took the puppets very seriously. What was once a small memory living in the back of my mind has now transformed into a lens through which I view myself and all of the people around me.

Introduction

Every choice you make is influenced directly by your past, by both conscious and subconscious thoughts. In this sense, we are all puppets, responding in accordance to our memories and traumas as they are pulled like strings. I am constantly looking for the why, trying to understand how other peoples' strings are pulled, searching for what makes them live. Why are they afraid? Why are they sad? Why are they happy? Why did they do that? I dig for the answer, for the memories to explain why people are the way that they are in the present. I want to make it clear that this is not a formulaic concept. It is not as if one memory directly informs a person's identity. While some fundamental elements of a person will stay more or less the same, it would be a lie to say that people do not change. Time is not going to stop passing, and because of that, our identities cannot stop shifting ever so slightly. You can learn to control your own strings, but you can never eliminate them completely. A puppet without its strings isn't really a puppet, but is instead an inanimate doll or dummy. So long as you remain human, your memories will stay attached to you like strings, and you will not be free of their influence.

I. Origin of the Strings: Your Conscious and Unconscious Self

When you ask people to tell you about themselves, it is implied that you're really asking them to tell you about their life up until that point. They will tell you their story, which is likely composed of many other stories, which they use to define themselves. As individuals, we are shaped by our varying experiences. "When one speaks of a man, one speaks of him along with the summation of his cultural experiences" (Winnicott 99). The ways that we respond to and reflect on our experiences help to define our morals and values, which we can use to create a more solidified identity.

Just as our personal history is the story of *our* past, history in general is the story of *the* past. In addition to the experiences that make up my identity, I also identify with stories of those to whom I am related. Running through my veins are the stories of my parents, my grandparents, my great grandparents, and so on. Culturally, there is a similar phenomenon. History's stories seem to repeat and reinvent themselves, revisiting themes like love, war, and friendship that

seem to have been around since the beginning of time. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a story as “an account of incidents or events,” but for me, stories add depth to life. Stories aren’t just a simple “account,” as they can exist in memories, in solitude, in conversation, in anything. They can control and sway our emotions, because in every story we may find a bit of ourselves. In *The Power of Myth*, Joseph Campbell explains how “imagination is grounded in the energy of the organs of the body, [which] are the same in all human beings. Since imagination comes out of one biological ground, it is bound to produce certain themes” (49). The stories we create are fundamental to our awareness of the present. Due to the subjective nature of reality, at times we may feel alone or isolated. We must remember that though we have all had completely different experiences, on a base level, it is likely that we are encountering similar themes. We all experience happiness, pain, satisfaction, frustration, confusion; each of these may feel different to the individual, but still the themes are shared. As Campbell writes, “The myth is the public dream and the dream is the private myth.” Stories seep into our public and private lives. We can learn from history, and learn from the stories we already know. Our individuality should not be daunting, as it is deeply rooted in the story of society.

Sometimes, we may be unaware of our strings, processing our stories on a subconscious level. There is a preverbal, rhythmic, motor place in the self, where broken down memories and stories reside (Merleau-Ponty as cited by Husvedt 39). There are fragments of memory scattered through your brain. It is impossible to remember a complete linear history of your self. Memories are forgotten, as if they’ve been lost in the past, but every so often you will be reminded of something that triggers one of these subconscious fragments and you will feel a tug at a string you may have forgotten. Your mind will compose and recreate a story out of many little pieces, reminding you of a long lost memory. Proust writes of how eating a madeleine cookie triggers a memory about the cookies his aunt used to give him when he was younger, which triggers memories about the old grey house she lived in, the whole town of Combray, the water-lilies on the Vivionne, the country roads, and the errands he used to run.¹ This memory takes him by surprise, seeming to have come out of nowhere, and makes him extremely happy. Memory has a power over us. A memory can impose happiness on you, but it is as fleeting as the memory itself.²

Memories from early childhood are often forgotten. When you are a baby, incapable of speaking or writing, it is impossible to have control over your strings. You may be tugged in ways that your later self wouldn’t have let happen. While most people will identify their first memories around age four or five, there is a large portion of your subconscious memory left over from your early childhood. The presence of fragmental stored memories can be supported by psychoanalysis, which demonstrates that “much of what we are is hidden from us, not only our automatic biological process, but also memories, thoughts and ideas” (Hustvedt 37). When a child is between six and twelve months old, they begin to experience and differentiate fear from

¹ “Will it ultimately reach the clear surface of my consciousness, this memory, this old, dead moment which the magnetism of an identical moment has traveled so far to importune, to disturb, to raise up out of the very depths of my being? I cannot tell. Now I feel nothing; it has stopped, has perhaps sunk back into its darkness, from which who can say whether it will ever rise again?...And suddenly the memory revealed itself...But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.” (Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*)

² This is probably why nostalgia is so bittersweet. At first you may experience a sweet feeling of happiness, but soon the feeling, along with the memory will be gone.

their other emotions and strings begin to form. These strings may get pulled in the form of stranger anxiety, or fears of monsters or the dark (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child). Though we may try to ignore these fears, it is impossible to deny the fact they are woven into your story, also helping to define and move you.

II. Puppeteer: On the Inescapable Nature of Change

Change is the only thing that we cannot change. We cannot stop ourselves from reacting to the environment we're in, processing the outside world through the inner world of our mind. This understanding of change as constant and inevitable greatly impacts the way we look at memory. In Radiolab's episode "Memory and Forgetting," the hosts discuss how each time you remember something, it is an act of creation, and in that sense, we are all constantly the artists of our own identity. As we change, our memories change with us. For example, you might see someone wearing the same dress that your sister wore to your wedding and remember the day you got married, where it happened, or who was invited. But the more that you revisit this memory, and as it is influenced by your present, the more it will be altered. Furthermore, these memories will be different from another person's memory of the same event. From the moment we are born, humans have an inclination towards creativity. "For the baby (if the mother can supply the right conditions), every detail of the baby's life is an example of creative living. Every object is a 'found' object. Given the chance, the baby begins to live creatively, and to use actual objects to be creative into and with" (Winnicott 88). Imagination and memory cannot be separated.³ Every memory is an act of your imagination, making the most unaltered or "truest" memories the ones that you never remember. Though this may seem like a sad fate, the fictionalization and embellishment of memories is both universal and inevitable, and in that sense, it can unite us.⁴

When comparing memories to stories, it is worth noting that the oral tradition of storytelling resembles the same way that personal memories are revisited. In the past, before stories could be written down, they might be slightly altered, changing each time the story was retold. Though the stories were altered, they allowed for the storytellers to create a more honest and relevant underlying truth for the listener. Stories evolve right along with the people who are telling them. Memories work in the same way.

Because memories are reconstructions of the past, it is much easier for us to live in the present. Louise Bourgeois writes, "If the past is not negated in the present, you do not live. You go through the emotions like a zombie, and life passes you by." In other words, as we learn new things, and experience new things, we will reinvent our past to help make sense of our present. This is an unavoidable phenomenon, but this constant change should be embraced⁵. It is easy to

³ "When we recall [a memory], we don't queue up a videotape; we recall bits of data from all around the brain. This data is then sent forward to the storytelling mind - our little storytelling Holmes - who stitches and pastes the scraps and fragments into a coherent and plausible re-creation of what might have occurred, taking his usual poetic license. *Put differently, the past, like the future, does not really exist.*" (The Storytelling Animal, Jonathan Gottschall)

⁴ In terms of both storytelling and memories, it is necessary to articulate the line between lying and natural fictionalizing. To lie is to consciously choose a false statement. Sometimes we say something false, but honestly think that it is a truth. In that case, we are unaware that we are fictionalizing, and it is a natural occurrence. This can be excused, as the statement is inherently emotionally valid.

⁵ "Tout passe, yesterday's truth is today's deception. And yesterday's false interference may be today's revelation." (Memories, Dreams, Reflections, C.G. Jung)

feel controlled by the past, but in reality the past is gone as it is pulled into the present. With this awareness, you may realize that you do not have to allow yourself to be “puppeted” by your history, that you actually control your history. What remains in memory is a mere reconstruction of an experience. Without the reconstruction, we would be lost in a past that has already left us. With each recollection, as you edit and revise, you gain more and more command over your strings. It follows that the more we utilize our memories and allow ourselves to have access to our strings, the more we are able to feel self-control.

III. Becoming Puppeteer as well as Puppet: Liberation

We shouldn't feel controlled by our memories, because they come from within ourselves. So long as the retellings of our memories aren't active lies, they can be trusted as the most true form of us in the present moment. We can be, and we are, both the puppet and the puppeteer if we learn to acknowledge and accept this fact. In *Remembrance of Things Past: Swann's Way*, Proust says that, “The memory, not yet of the place in which I was, but of various other places where I had lived, and might now very possibly be, would come like a rope down from heaven to draw me up out of the abyss of not-being, from which I could never have escaped by myself” (3). Here, Proust treats the “rope from heaven” like a force outside of himself, but it is important not to pull ourselves apart this way. The “rope from heaven” that is our memory is actually found within us. This shows that we have the power to pull ourselves out of the “abyss of not-being.” So long as we are willing to practice pulling our strings deliberately, the only thing stopping us from feeling alive is our own resistance to the present.

If a memory is a rope from heaven, this must contribute to the reason why writing is such a therapeutic activity. It is easier to grow if you have tried to rework some element of your past on paper. Writing can solidify your memories, while still allowing you to revisit and revise. Like the art of puppetry, this type of writing will not be easy at first, but with practice you can hone in on your skills. You cannot learn to prevent memories from rising up, but you can learn to accept them. Having this command over your past can allow for a new sense of freedom. Without you, the words on the paper are dead, waiting to be read or rewritten, for life to be breathed into them. Through recollection in writing, you can breathe life into your past, and come to terms with the memories you may have pushed away. The puppet is waiting for you to breathe life into it, to pick it up, and control it.

Stories have an inescapable presence in our world. “The universe is made of stories, not of atoms” (Murie Rukeyser). Though atoms are the most basic building blocks of an element on a scientific level, emotionally, stories are equally omnipresent. We are all making choices, we are all speaking, remembering, we are all forming relationships with those around us, or choosing not to form any, and this is all okay. Even if you're sitting in a room by yourself, you are still composing and participating in a story. With every approaching moment you are adding a string that can later be pulled intentionally, or be called upon by a sound, a smell or a taste.

When considering a written story, there are numerous accounts of “rules to write by,” but I would argue that they really are rules to live by.⁶ The impulse to live fully will always find a

⁶ Kerouac's *Rules for Spontaneous Prose*: 15. Telling the true story of the world in interior monolog, 18. Work from pithy middle eye out, swimming in language sea, 24. No fear or shame in the dignity of your experience, language & knowledge; E.B. White on the role of the Writer: “Writers do not merely reflect and interpret life, they inform and shape life...A writer must reflect and interpret his society, his world; he must also provide inspiration and guidance and challenge.” Kurt Vonnegut's rules for a great story: “Give your readers as much information as possible as soon

way to bubble up, and we should allow ourselves to give into this, and to let our memories rise in the same way. Just because a string has been triggered doesn't mean we aren't in control. There are external forces, like our five senses, with the power to pull on all sorts of strings. The memory itself is not preventable, but once it has risen, it can be controlled or swayed. You can pull your strings to recall a memory that you want, and live the life that you want to live. It can be easy to feel as if time is flying past you, as if the present is being absorbed by the past and the future. "Living fully" will mean something different for each individual, but whatever the meaning, this is what we must strive for. Joy Williams said, "The significant story is always greater than the writer writing it." I disagree. If our lives are stories, than the story can only be equal to the writer writing it.

IV. The Permanence of the Puppet: Some Stories

If you were given the opportunity to completely erase the past, would you really want to?⁷ And if you did want to do that, would that even be possible? Even for Clive Wearing, a man with the most severe case of amnesia ever recorded, two things transcended his memory loss. Clive remembers his love for his wife, though he can't even remember her name. He also remembers how to sing and read music (Radiolab, "Memory and Forgetting"). Memories of great joy or pain live in the deepest oldest parts of our brains. They are as permanent as a memory can be. These are the memories that matter.

In Jonathan Franzen's essay *My Father's Brain*, he deals with his father's loss of memory. Part of his struggle is accepting the fact that his father has lost his identity to Alzheimer's—that some of the symptoms he exhibited weren't unique to his story, but were instead shared by other Alzheimer's patients. There is a selfishness in memory. They are yours, and they define you, and when you lose them, what happens to your identity? He writes: "I was inclined to interpolate across my father's silences and mental absences and to persist in seeing him as the same old wholly whole Earl Franzen. I still needed my him to be an actor in my story of myself." You can't escape the influence of other people, of the stories in your memory that you might have heard, but did not tell. I would be lying to say that I remember every detail from the many stories my grandma told me. Still, I wouldn't be the same person without them. Our lives are connected like patchwork, each special on their own, but together, they make something much more complete.

At my grandma's house, we have a stage made out of cardboard and red tempera paint, and a set of scary looking puppets that my cousins and I used to play with. What am I but a puppet held up by strings of stories and memories? What do I have besides these memories? Besides myself? Without the past, my present wouldn't exist. Without the present, I wouldn't be able to remember the past. We shouldn't be afraid of our past because though it cannot be undone, it can be reevaluated, and accepted. This acceptance is a learned skill, like puppetry. We

as possible. To hell with suspense. Readers should have complete understanding of what is going on, where and why, that they could finish the story themselves, should cockroaches eat the last few pages."

⁷ In *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, a film by Michel Gondry, this exact idea is addressed. After their relationship falls apart, Clementine wipes Joel from her memory. After Joel figures this out, he precedes to do the exact same thing. As his memories disappear, he is reminded of all the times they had together before it went bad, and he tries to escape his self decided fate, he doesn't want really want to forget Clementine. To escape this, he starts altering his memories and hiding her in places she doesn't belong (i.e. childhood memories).

shouldn't be afraid of our future, because our present self has the power to make it whatever we want it to be in retrospect. We decide how our own strings will move us. Above all, we shouldn't worry about living in the present, because we already are—acting in perpetual plays on a stage much larger than the one at my grandma's house.

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