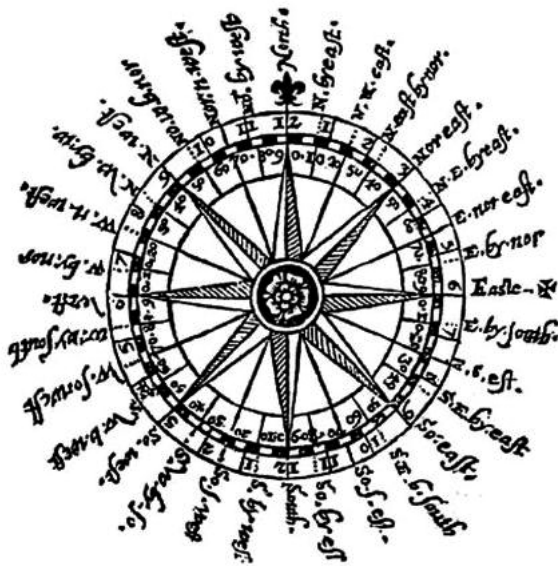


I

Memory, You Savage Triumph



Andrei

A Blueprint for Memory

MEMORY, MOTHER OF THE MUSES, also suckles the Furies. For poets and exiles, memory is both a divine inspiration and a punishing obsession.

Imagine a simple sketch of a house whose foundation has been laid out. Now the artist begins to raise the building from the ground, putting up the supporting walls. The horizontal line suggests a ceiling. As he toils away at the upper section, the house's foundation begins to blur, slowly being erased until it disappears, and the artist must go back and fill it in again, obsessively retracing his steps. As he moves back and forth between beginning and forward progress ad infinitum, we must ask ourselves, will he ever finish?

This paradox is impossible in a world of brick and mortar, but not necessarily in memory, where the present is not experienced as a discrete series of linear events. Instead, it exists as a mirror image of the past, each moment forming a parallel history of itself, just as subway passengers will catch their reflections in the windows of a passing train going in the opposite direction. A life, doubly exposed.

The realization that such moments appear and disappear in that same impossible-to-picture instant we call the *now* could be maddening. And so we are left with our only option, to rescue it from the catacombs of abstraction, if such a reality should have any meaning. In other words, we need something to ground ourselves, a space in which we might find our bearings. We must give shape to memory while acknowledging its power to shape us.

Alain de Botton, the Jewish Swiss philosopher, demonstrates how physical place defines our very existence, in *The Architecture of Happiness*:

The house has grown into a knowledgeable witness. It has been party to early seductions, it has watched homework being written,

it has observed swaddled babies freshly arrived from the hospital, it has been surprised in the middle of the night by whispered conferences in the kitchen. It has experienced winter evenings when its windows were as cold as bags of frozen peas and midsummer dusks when its brick walls held the warmth of freshly baked bread.

It has provided not only physical but psychological sanctuary. It has been a guardian of identity. Over the years, its owners have returned from periods away and, on looking around them, remembered who they were.

Place, I would add, not only helps us remember who we *were*, but also who we *are*. The acts of shaping and being shaped by place also happen simultaneously. Likewise, memory always comes to us in the shape of place, having both tangible and imagined coordinates. We put faces, events, and emotions in coordinates of space that provide a certain logical grammar to remembrance. There can be no other way. As Martin Heidegger observed, “poetically man dwells.” Metaphor houses consciousness. Whether real or fabricated, memory takes place *inside* space and therefore takes the shape of that space so that it might be called up by the imagination.

Or as Gaston Bachelard puts it in *The Poetics of Space*:

All really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home. . . . [T]he imagination functions in this direction whenever the human being has found the slightest shelter: we shall see the imagination build walls of impalpable shadows, comfort itself with the illusion of protection—or, just the contrary, tremble behind thick walls, mistrust the staunchest ramparts. In short, in the most interminable of dialectics, the sheltered being gives perceptible limits to his shelter.

Bachelard’s connection between *home* and *imagination* suggests how and why exiles use words and images to construct an interior country. After all, de Botton’s house (if it still exists) provides only

a physical sanctuary. The uprooted man, expelled from his literal home, must find shelter in the imaginary cloister of memory—where contradictions and conflicts are met, reckoned with, and reconciled. Whether stumbling through actual tunnels or bumping our heads against imaginary ceilings, he is then contained and guided at all times by imagination, the slippery notion of memory and its limitations.

Naturally, we often resist its limiting tendencies and attempt to work our way out of its claws—that obsessive “grip of memory” that would drag us down or backward through the cobwebbed alleys of the past. Such a rebellion nonetheless, and necessarily, takes on similar characteristics as the original structure—we need foundation, stability, we need a space within which we can act. And since the future does not yet exist, we must not only rely on the walls that hold up our storefront of memory, but also actively participate in their construction (as the perpetually frustrated house artist). Otherwise we risk their deterioration and subsequent collapse at our feet—and we’ll have nothing to stand on, not even an illusion.

Return through a Gap in Time

To the school of ruins and acquired gravitas. Past fish with blackened eyelids swimming through the crumble of districts. Memory, you savage triumph, I followed you through secret tunnels, under false ceilings, wearing only sorrow's wrinkled shirt, one lonely black sock. Like a fool I thought I could pass for native here. We kept bumping into each other in the rat's nest of alleys, in seedy bars where the music was slow and old fashioned and the players too much into the wine. The glow of each face clung to me like a superstition. Names became constellations on the black sky of my mouth. I fled toward water, the perfectly aligned blue margins where penciled in stars were suffocating on the urban summertime. Forgive me what I cannot, I said to them in their dying hour, I am preoccupied with the worst of my successes. I am connecting dots. I am building a dam. And after that, if they haven't carted off every last block, maybe one of the four walls.

Propaganda of the Self

And we will, as a lesson in what constitutes aesthetics, feed on paintings of bread, secured to the village walls with a knot of spit and casual indifference. We will pass the night with the old tea drinkers on the terrace overlooking crowds below fast-forwarding through moments of eternal beauty. Mere animals of convalescent passion throwing pennies at the clairvoyant blind man selling numbers for the lotto on an everyday street corner. Where the little girl by his side does not fold easily beneath the weight of night—that is until the belly bites the feverish tongue and trees begin to show their black horns gilded in a string of light.



At the crux of first and last vision of solitude, one of us will break with the solemn circus, another will be claimed by some voluptuous breach of time. All of them commonplace funerals that make for a good excuse to keep your head down and your hand in your overcoat pocket. The little girl's hand orphaned from itself reaching for your own, for what it might hold inside, for what it doesn't know that it wants.

And all that she asks, aiming her caged voice like a dagger, is whether you are happy and if your heart has ever been broken—for that she assigns a number that dangles at the gate of your own mortality like an umbilical noose. . . . The wind snatches it and buries it in the night and before you can argue she pulls out another number, another chance, sober with the weight of business and self-pity. The wind snatches it and buries it in the night.



If only I could turn back to retrieve it, to pry it from her un-kissed mouth!
But there is always someone standing between me. Even more between

me and that Eastern harbor of creation—the crowd surging along as if mad, rubbing against the walls, stumbling every now and then over the occasional shiny premonition, dangling like a cheap pearl from a roadside stand.

From All Points East

If you get a postcard from here it will bear a rose at the height of its bloom, possibly a snapshot of the village chapel on a sunny afternoon. Note that its high windows signify compartments of the soul, the heart turned inside out, poured out, the single mind in a moment of space.

In a slanted scrawl someone will have written *wish you were here*, which, of course, is nothing more than a figure of speech meaning come on over, take a long hard look around you, see the high water marks on every home, the boards rotten but somehow holding by a thread. Meaning please do not forget us as soon as you turn your back—

we, of all people, know what it's like because we've cried wolf so many times before that we can't even tell at times where the old story ends and where the new one begins; you know the one, it's been in all the papers, flower girls on street corners, so fragile they appear capable of being wounded by the moon. How they sell their perfect cellophane bouquets, masks for any occasion, the wink and smile that says *Thank you* or *I'm sorry*, for whatever you will—

while off to the side old women nod away on wooden boxes, legs sprawled over trampled petals of yesterday's unwanted blossoms. See them sitting there, sleep-praying what remains of their days into salvation. Notice the elbow patches on worn sweaters, the stockings fraying at the knees—

how typical, how kitsch this photograph would look next to the other ones you keep inside an old cigar box for posterity, so that when you pull it out after too many years have passed it will be 1985 all over again, the same old communists still feeding on sausage and cheese.

And what's that in the corner, you ask, barely a blur of skin and bones? Just a lame dog, chained to the walnut tree, young boys walking by picking up sticks, learning to ration out fear.

Antonio

Laughing in the Ruins (Pt. 1)

“THE STRUGGLE OF MAN AGAINST POWER,” said the Czech writer Milan Kundera, “is the struggle of memory against forgetting.” But the drive for power springs from man’s inability to accept impermanence. This is part of “the propaganda of the self.” We construct tombstones, cairns, pyramids to defy time, knowing full well that they are doomed to crumble. All monuments collapse under the weight of futility. All regimes deny this fact. The results are inevitably laughable.

Nowhere is this truer than Rome, my second home. Cat ladies feed strays amid the Forum’s broken columns. A hag operates a beauty parlor inside the Arch of Gallienus. Prostitutes fellate clients beneath Nero’s Aqueduct. Sponsors project ads on the Coliseum. Antiquity is powerless against the cunning of appetite. Foragers pick capers on the Aurelian Wall between Porta San Lorenzo and the Ministry of Aeronautics. Beside the Colossus of Constantine, vendors sell *suppli*: fried rice balls stuffed with mincemeat, tomato sauce, and mozzarella. Customers raise a single finger and imitate the emperor’s shattered hand.

Left alone, fragments can be beautiful. Giovanni Piranesi, the eighteenth-century artist, celebrated Rome’s ruins in a series of breathtaking etchings. He wed decay and design, chaos and order, transience and endurance. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century nationalists wanted more. Revolutionaries such as Giuseppe Mazzini and poets such as Giosuè Carducci were convinced that they could rescue the shards of the past from the bulldozer of foreign oppression and the piledriver of the Industrial Revolution. Like Amphion, they would sing the stones into place and form an Eternal City of the imagination. Benito Mussolini exploited this cult of antiquity. Palazzo Braschi, home of the Museo di Roma, would become the Fascist Party’s headquarters.

All dictatorships rely on ambitious restoration and preservation projects. While planning the 1936 Summer Olympics, Albert Speer designed a building that would leave behind aesthetically pleasing ruins, if it eventually collapsed. These ruins, he claimed, would last far longer than the original structure, without any subsequent maintenance. Speer called his concept *Ruinenwert* (Ruin Value), but the idea actually dates back to Goethe's *Italian Journey*. German Romanticism valued classical ruins. Nazism ruined classical values. Posing as a Master Builder, Hitler reduced Europe to rubble. After *götterdämmerung*, a Berlin cabaret comic joked: "Even the ruins have been ruined."

The catastrophe of World War II birthed the postmodern world, a postapocalyptic culture in which all memory fragments and all words fail. Nothing remains but the shimmering play of colored lights on a vista of shattered glass. Collectively suffering from post-traumatic stress condition, we seem incapable of rebuilding our world, caught between frenetic denial and paralyzing despair. How can we value the ruins of our civilization when we continue to ruin its values?

Americans respond to this crisis by turning the past into a theme park and by investing their energy in the posthuman future. They imagine building a chain of Holiday Inns on Mars or downloading their brains onto a computer. Determined to preserve a mythical innocence at all cost, they turn their back on an appalling record of slavery, genocide, war, and economic and ecological carnage. By necessity, therefore, they denigrate and bulldoze their ruins, calling this destruction "urban renewal."

Europeans, both victims and perpetrators of centuries of bloodshed, know this strategy is self-defeating. They know that they will never recover from history unless they acknowledge and atone for past atrocities. But they also have learned, at an appalling cost, that fixating on guilt and horror turns life into a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Fortunately, their genius for ironic endurance best expresses itself through surreal humor.

Andrei

Echoes of a Remembered Sentiment

Instant coffee for the old times.

The aftertaste of a full moon in the mouth.

I stand again between two mirrors because I like to see every side of myself. When I walk out the door I take my aloneness with me like a kerchief at the breast. A freshly pressed flower. On the fugitive highway angels pluck their feathers passing as familiar others. Only they do not speak like me. And because they cannot fly they stagger. Fall forward. Something about that feels like the memory I commit every night in my dreams. I bend down, lift up an angel by his skeleton arm and I say *Come back with me, rest in my home for a while, I have some lunchmeat and homemade jam, we can buy some dark bread on the way, a spoonful of coffee for the old times.* Without changing course he says in the language of a needle's eye, *Thanks friend, but everything is impossible yesterday. Go back and cover your mirrors. There's nothing left for you there. I meant to tell you but it happened so long ago and I've had much on my mind.* And with that he tears off the last of his feathers, slips on a hat, and disappears into the crowd.

Truth and Tangents (or What Becomes Art)

All day there were celebrations, street protests and celebrations. They seemed to belong together—graduation songs and banners, tears of a last embrace that stretched from *Cișmigiu* to *Piața Universității*. I saw mothers before they were mothers and they looked just like the pictures. I walked among the street cleaners and dropouts, runaways and dissidents, every color of a crooked deal.

On each corner (blind intersection of time), the same old tale: mythos of an archaic city, this all-too-real city, farce of a carnival at twilight. Same characters, generational difference: fallen angels littering the walk, the drunks and hobos, literati, last year's fashion resurrected from the dead, the ordinary marginal as it has always been.

And my mother was there too, wearing heels and lipstick, in a corner of the frame, but the focus is soft, the details are vague, though she looks skinny and happy, as someone who imagines the future, ordinary and marginal, as it has always been.

Lipscani

In the heart of Bucharest, the ghost of happy endings. June biting into cobblestones on restoration row. On either side, moonlit stores with musty, yellow postcards, weather-bitten coins, and memories of the war.

A clock without any feet and an obnoxious grin says I'm looking for dry blood in all the wrong places. I walk until the night reminds me of the cold, the dust how thirsty I have been for all these years.

Inside a dirty, miserable pub, the crooked bartender slides a glass my way and leans in confidence, *There is indeed a resurrection in the streets, and you too, old friend, can buy redemption at the court of thieves and well-mannered impostors.*

What could I do but nod and toast the mirror on the wall? Watch the likeness of myself stare back as if he'd never seen me there before.

Antonio

Laughing in the Ruins (Pt. 2)

THE RUIN PUB (*romkocsmá* in Hungarian) testifies to the power of human laughter. Found all over Budapest, these bars spring up and sometimes disappear overnight in the courtyards of the old Jewish ghetto, emptied and abandoned during the Holocaust, or in the city's derelict neighborhoods, bombed out and never rebuilt after the Revolution of 1956 or allowed to go to ruin under Goulash Communism, when Hungary was called "the happiest barrack in the Soviet camp."

Street-smart entrepreneurs have perfected a winning formula: Find an abandoned building, add a bar, a dance floor and outdoor seating, throw in a mix of art and Kádárism nostalgia, and encourage patrons to savor desolation. Rather than cover up the surrounding decay, ruin pubs spotlight, even celebrate it, as evident in a popular toast: "*This property is condemned, but so is the human race.*"

Budapest's trendiest *romkocsmá* is Szimpla Kert, commonly known as Szimpla. Lonely Planet, the globe's largest travel guide publisher, named it "the third best bar in the world." The pub's appearance belies its status. Located at 14 Kazinczy Utca, this crumbling two-story building seems fit only for the wrecking ball. Most of its windows are boarded up and a thick layer of dirt and grime has settled into its leprous façade. Potted plants line a corroded wrought-iron balcony overlooking the street while a jaunty but jaundiced yellow sign hangs in the doorway below.

Push past the splintered front door, however, and grope down the dimly lit hallway and you will come to a large, open-air courtyard. Colored string lights, broken furniture, and a bicycle or two hang suspended above, while scenes from a black and white art-house film flicker on the cracked back wall. Off to the side sits a rusted old Trabant, a compact car made in East Germany during the Cold War. The courtyard opens onto a maze of rooms, each decorated differently. In

one, fossilized computer monitors and television sets are mounted to the walls. In another, a split bathtub serves as a makeshift seating area.

More than a bar, Szimpla is also a café, a salon, a bistro, a town hall, and a theme park. The kitchen serves *lángos*, Hungarian pizza topped with onion, bacon, sausage, and sour cream, and hosts a traditional farmers' market on Sundays. Success, however, may have doomed it. Like other *romkocsmas*, Szimpla has become an unwitting catalyst of gentrification, pulling yuppies into formerly run-down areas of the city and attracting the attention of real estate developers. Old buildings are being torn down and replaced with upscale apartment complexes and glitzy restaurants and boutiques. This trend threatens to remake Budapest into a city where ruin pubs can no longer credibly exist. When that happens, many residents believe, Budapest will lose its soul.

A civic organization called “ÓVÁS!” (“Protest!”) opposes this string of demolitions. Ruin pub owners gladly side with academics and preservationists to maintain the city's bohemian scene, but they will be the first to admit that they never set out to rescue Budapest's old neighborhoods. “We didn't save the historical building on purpose,” admits Titusz Badonics, a technician who works at Instant, a ruin pub that opened in 2008 in the city's sixth district. “We just use it to do something which looks great in these kind of buildings. We make something until it's gone.”

But isn't that true of all of us? We all make something until it's gone, never fully understanding our motives and never able to see the final results. Creation often results from accident, not choice. If we achieve anything worthwhile, it is usually unintentional. “Beauty by mistake,” Milan Kundera muses in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: “the final chapter in the history of beauty.”