Mythremembering
Memory and its Fictions

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"That's usually where I begin. Some memory I wish I could forget."

— Sandra Cisneros[1]

The human mind has been described as designed for and, less positively, "addicted to" stories.[2] We spend an extraordinary amount of time and energy reading, thinking, and even arguing about fictional events and imaginary people. We also tell stories describing and attempting to make sense of experiences that we remember from the near or distant past. Some of those memories we wish that we could forget. Why would anyone want to dredge bad memories from the recesses of the mind and share them? I propose to explore this question through five stories, all related to that most productive of inventions for creating bad memories—war.

1 "Sandra Cisneros: Close to the bull's eye." *The Writer,* Sept. 16, 2016, online at writermag.com. The longer quote follows: "I tell my younger writers not to write about the things that you remember, but the things that you wish you could forget."

2 See Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* for the first view, and Rosenberg, *How History Gets Things Wrong* for the second.

Memories and Stories

Science and Humanities are "twin berries on one stem," the physician Sir William Osler declared in 1919. Thinking of them as anything other than complementary forces, he argued, inflicts "grievous damage" on both.[3] Although I always slightly misremember the exact wording, I cite this passage often—partly because of its wisdom, partly because of its prophetic, if unintended warning against the modern obsession with STEM education at the expense of the humanities. The psychologist Jerome Bruner expresses a similar view in the book *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Bruner proposes that we make sense of the world and our lives through the interaction of two complementary modes of thinking: the logical, analytic mode that we associate with scientific investigation, and the imaginative, interpretive mode that we associate with storytelling and other forms of artistic expression. The two modes, in Bruner's view, are concerned with different questions: Science is concerned with the question of how we can reach the truth, while the creative arts and the humanities are primarily concerned with how we endow our lives with meaning. The vibrant energy of human thought emerges in no small part from the dynamic interaction of these complementary modes—each vital and each incomplete without the other. What they share is the conviction that all knowledge and all interpretations are partial and provisional.

3 Osler, "Old Humanities:" p. 36.

Remembering and storytelling are also "two berries on one stem," that is, complementary aspects of the way we make sense of things. A considerable body of research in psychology and neuroscience has shown that remembering is a dynamic process of continuous connecting and constructing: we revise as we recall. The scientific perspective has focused attention on factors affecting the accuracy of recall—since at every stage, the tendency of our brain to blend memories creates opportunities to distort the accuracy of the recollection. We "fuse and erase facts, misplace events in time, and even generate false memories from scratch."[4] Since they have been "reshaped by the mind at each of its three main stages: encoding, storage and retrieval," memories are never exact recollections but partial reconstructions.[5] I think of remembering as analogous to the process of translating from one language to another. Both require the interplay of logical analysis and imaginative reconstruction. The result will always be, at best, partially successful, and each successive translation will always differ—slightly or significantly—from the others, depending in part on the purpose and the perspective of the translator at the time. The dictum of translating—while it is impossible to be completely "correct," it is possible to be completely wrong—holds true also for remembering.

4 *Brain Bugs*, p. 69.

5 *Boyd, On the Origin of Stories*, p. 153.

The process of revision continues when we transform memories into stories. A story weaves an alternate reality out of words.

It invites us to enter a place where we can exercise our intellect and imagination among possible interpretations and responses. The power of stories derives from what I call "collaborative enchantment." If the story has sufficiently interesting characters and events, it will maintain the interest of the audience. If it offers layers of enjoyment and interpretation that are seductive enough, and if the audience brings enough imagination and intellectual intensity, those listeners/readers will actively absorb themselves into the alternate reality—becoming essentially co-creators of that world.

Part of the enchantment of stories derives from their resistance to a definitive interpretation. Given the fallible—or creative—nature of remembering, every story based on memories will inevitably depart from a superficially accurate description of "what happened," that is, portray an alternate reality. Shaping the memory into a story exerts pressure to change and augment it. Stories have conventions of structure and content. A story, once begun, will guide the selection of events that fit; moreover, the need to attract and maintain the attention of the audience will require emphasizing some events at the expense of others. When we tell stories based on memories, therefore, there is a difference between accidental and purposeful changes. The former is "misremembering." The latter changes are an essential aspect of all creative thinking. I call them examples of "mythremembering," that is, departures from a superficial portrayal of a memory to create a more attractive and meaningful story.

Here are five stories, briefly told, at the center of each of which is a bad memory. Like other acts involving judgement and interpretation, selecting one set of representative stories suggests others. The five stories here paraphrased reflect two subjects that fascinate me: one is long-standing (epic poetry) and the other is more recent (Chinese culture). Since stories create opportunities to explore possibilities, I chose these to discover what thoughts reading them together would provoke.

War Remembered
The Tale of Goujian (1st century BCE)
...and tasting bitter gall

Goujian, king of Yue, foolishly declared war on the neighboring and much stronger kingdom of Wu. Facing defeat in battle, he surrendered and agreed to become the slave of Fuchai., the king of Wu. Goujian labored as a servant in the king's stables for years. Eventually, having impressed Fuchai with his humility and apparent acquiescence to his situation, Goujian received permission to return home and regain his throne. Once back in Yue, Goujian still gave the appearance of serving Fuchai loyally, but he was intent on avenging his humiliation. Each night he slept on brushwood to remember the discomfort of captivity. Each morning upon rising (and in some versions, each time he entered or left his residence), he forced himself to lick a gall bladder that was suspended above him to remember the bitterness of defeat. He strengthened his

kingdom and worked tirelessly through gifts, bribery, and diplomatic intrigue to weaken Wu. When conditions were right, he attacked and defeated the king who had conquered him. Fuchai committed suicide, and Goujian put Wu's leading nobles to death—perhaps to show that, unlike Fuchai, he was too smart to allow an enemy to live and nurture bitter memories.

Vergil, *Aeneid* (19 BCE): Perhaps it will help to remember even this…

The bitter memory of defeat and displacement is at the heart of Vergil's *Aeneid*, the epic of Rome's founding that has profoundly influenced western literature and culture. When the refugees who escaped the destruction of Troy have reached the shores of Africa, exhausted and discouraged, Aeneas seeks to lift their spirits with words (*forsan et haec meminisse iuvabit*) that have a double meaning: "Perhaps it will be *pleasing/helpful* to remember these things." Even memories of failure and flight can eventually bring pleasure. Looking back indicates that we have survived; moreover, sharing sadness can have strategic advantages. Aeneas reaches the city of Carthage. He enters a temple, where he finds a sequence of paintings depicting the Trojan War. He is saddened but also encouraged by the sight. Perhaps knowledge of their story will evoke sympathy for their plight. He is correct. Dido, queen of Carthage, welcomes the strangers and, at a banquet honoring them, asks Aeneas to recount his memories of the war and wandering. Aeneas replies that remembering and recounting those events will cause him to "renew inexpressible pain." Although remembering makes him "shudder and recoil from sorrow," he tells of Troy's destruction, his unwilling escape, and subsequent wanderings in search of a new home. Although the telling gives Aeneas no pleasure, it does help his cause. The queen listens, enchanted, and (albeit with secret assistance from the goddess Venus, Aeneas' significant mother) falls desperately in love with him. For now, at least, the Trojans are safe. For Dido, however, Aeneas' account sets in motion a chain of events that will end in her death.

Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* (1869): He was a truthful young man…

Fear and bumbling, rather than the courage he anticipated displaying, characterize Count Nikolai Rostov's first experience of battle. On his way to combat, he falls off his horse, dislocating his shoulder. When a French soldier approaches, he throws (as opposed to shoots) his pistol at him, and then runs away into a thicket where he happens upon a squadron of Russian riflemen and safety. Later, his comrades ask him to describe the circumstances of his injury. "Rostov was a truthful young man," Tolstoy writes, and so he began "with the intention of telling the story exactly as it had been, but imperceptibly, involuntarily and

inevitably for himself, he went over into untruth." Stories, especially accounts of battle, have traditional elements that the listeners are expecting to hear. Having convinced (deluded?) himself that describing what actually happened would disappoint his audience, Rostov tells the story not as it happened but "in the way they would like it to have been, the way they have heard others tell it, the way it could be told more beautifully, but not at all the way it had been." Rostov transforms his memory into a heroic story—one in which he rushed into the fray unafraid, "hacking right and left, how his saber tasted flesh, how he fell exhausted."

The Tale of Brian Williams (2003-2013): Hit by ground fire and forced to land…

In 2003, during the Iraq War, a rocket-launched explosive device struck a helicopter carrying American soldiers, injuring one of them. The helicopter managed to fly away until it encountered a sandstorm and made a forced landing. About an hour later, another helicopter, carrying news reporter Brian Williams, arrived at the scene and landed near the damaged helicopter. The sandstorm worsened, and stranded the crews of the helicopters, including Williams, in the desert for several days. At first, Williams reported the event accurately, but over time and telling, the account grew increasingly vivid and inventive. He began saying that his helicopter was flying just behind the other, which he saw almost blown out of the sky. Soon his version added that the ground fire almost hit his helicopter. Eventually, he said on national television that the explosive damaged the helicopter carrying him, forcing a dangerous emergency landing. When others challenged the truth of his exaggerated accounts, the subsequent metaphoric firestorm badly damaged his credibility and career. Williams denied consciously fabricating his adventure but apologized for misremembering and unintentionally conflating the experiences of the two helicopters.

Pat Barker, *The Silence of the Girls* (2018): "We need a new song…"

Homer's Briseis was silent, a prize of war given to Achilles and then claimed by Agamemnon. Barker's novel gives her a voice to express her memory of events that she wishes did not exist. For her and the other enslaved women in the Greek encampment, Achilles was not the "brilliant" nor "shining" nor "godlike" warrior of Homer's *Iliad:* "We called him the Butcher." She remembers seeing Achilles murder her husband and youngest brother. She recalls enduring sex with the man who slaughtered her family. She recalls enduring nights of humiliation and fearing worse ("I knew that as soon as Agamemnon got tired of me… he'd hand me over to his men for common use"). Her account focuses on life at the unheroic margins and the flea-ridden camp. Beneath the

surface of her words is anger at the thought that future generations will know only stories told by and about the victors. She recalls the day when Andromache, the wife of Hector was given as a slave to Achilles' son Pyrrhus. "I looked at Andromache, who'd have to live the rest of her amputated life as a slave, and I thought: *We need a new song.*" She knows that that stories will shape the memory of the future. "What will they make of us," she wonders about readers like me. "One thing I do know: they won't want the brutal reality of conquest and slavery. They won't want to be told about the massacres of men and boys, the enslavement of women and girls…No, they'll go for something altogether softer."

Mythremembering and Five Fictions

"We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be."
— Kurt Vonnegut: *Mother Night*

Mythremembering involves a pattern of departures from accuracy or evidence to enhance the power of a story, usually to the advantage of the person telling the story. Rostov and Williams are obvious examples. Rostov, discomforted by his cowardice, and Williams, distressed perhaps by having nothing dramatic to remember, both respond by inventing and recounting the memory of more courageous behavior or a more harrowing experience. The fictional Rostov uses the excuse of his listeners' expectations to erase the memory of his embarrassing behavior and replace it with one of courageous action. While trying to enchant his listeners, he enchants himself. When Prince Andrei interrupts with the comment that there are "many stories" about the battle he is describing, Rostov replies with rising anger, that "our stories—the stories of those who were there, right under enemy fire—our stories have weight." In like matter, Williams also seems to have enchanted himself. He apologized for having misremembered. A more sympathetic view would be that he joined Tolstoy's fictional Rostov in the process of mythremembering.

The stories of Rostov and Williams, read in association with those of Aeneas and Briseis, illustrate the persisting influence of Homer's *Iliad* and the concept of "heroic excellence" that it portrays. Essential to the Homeric ethos is achieving glory through combat. The Homeric warrior sought that glory for himself (or, on occasion, herself). The *Aeneid* transforms the Homeric ethos into the pursuit of glory for a larger cause—in this case the founding of Rome—rather than the individual. Tolstoy's fascination with the *Iliad* is well documented—included his own assertion that he intended his narrative as a modern version of it.[6] The soldiers of *War and Peace*, at least early in the narrative, embrace a version of the Roman transformation of the heroic. This notion of heroism "called for the surrender of personal happiness to the service

6 *Griffiths and Rabinowitz*, "Tolstoy and Homer," pp. 97-8 and *passim*.

of the nation. The pursuit of glory in such service was a worthy motive."[7] We find the clearest presentation of this ideal in the character Prince Andrei Bolkonsky. He dreams of his service to Russia as a "path to glory" and anticipates battle "vividly imagining gray greatcoats, wounds, gunsmoke, the sounds of shooting, and the glory that awaited him." Like Andrei, Rostov burns with a desire to win glory for himself, for the Tsar, and for Russia. He enters battle with deceptive confidence based on other soldiers' memories that led him to think that he was "at last about to experience the delight of an attack, *of which he had heard so much from his Hussar comrades*" (italics mine). In his mythremembered account to his fellow soldiers, fidelity to the narrative that he has chosen to tell overrides the facts.

7 Carden, "Career in War and Peace," p. 30.

Williams was not a soldier but a professional reporter who wrote stories about soldiers in war and danger. We can only speculate about his motives or perhaps underlying reasons of which he was unaware, that led to the progressive elaboration of was originally a relatively unexceptional experience. Was he embarrassed by the absence of something personally dangerous to recount to friends or report to viewers? Tolstoy's description of the fictional Rostov can be adapted reasonably to Williams. He was a truthful man whose profession was to report accurately events and experiences. As a storyteller, he filled the vacuum of "nothing having happened" by creating Brian Williams 2.0, a fictional version of himself with more interesting experiences and memories. Barker's Briseis offers the imagined memories of—to borrow a Spanish phrase—*los de abajo* (those from below) rather than the warriors and kings whose memories Homer and Vergil preserve. From this perspective and stripped of ennobling rhetoric, Achilles and the Greeks invite comparison to gang members more than royal models of heroic valor.[8]

8 Nicolson, pp. 185-6.

Briseis' account of the war has a connection as well to the stories of Aeneas and Goujian. Each focuses narrowly and emphatically on the horrific aspects of their past. Aeneas, haunted by the fall of Troy and his failure either to protect the city or die in the attempt, emphasizes those aspects in telling his story to Queen Dido. By sleeping on brushwood and licking bile from a gall bladder each morning (or in some accounts, whenever he entered and departed his room), Goujian daily reinforces his memory of the humiliation of captivity and servitude as he ponders revenge. For Aeneas and Goujian, the bitter memory serves to harden his resolve to war again. The sweetness of victory that each will savor will, of course, require others to taste the bitterness of defeat. Briseis cannot dream of victory, like Aeneas, or revenge, like Goujian. She can only wish for a "new story" from a different perspective.

The story of Goujian is as much a part of Chinese popular culture as the story of George Washington and the cherry tree is in America—with the exception that the Chinese story has a basis in historical fact. Numerous versions exist, but all contain the episode leading to the popular expression *woxin changdan* (sleeping on brushwood and tasting bitter gall).

As Paul Cohen states, the impact of the tale comes not from its accuracy as history but from its power as narrative.[9] It also reflects a different cultural history. Although war is a constant theme of China's early literature, there is no Chinese equivalent of Achilles and his successors obsessed with glory in recognition of their individual greatness.[10] The popularity of the story, Cohen suggests, rests in part on the implication that China will not forget the bitterness of its "century of humiliation." That interpretation, however, rests within in a larger theme: the importance of self-discipline and perseverance for success. The tale contrasts Goujian's earlier impetuous behavior with his later willingness to endure humiliation for the sake of a larger, long-term success.[11]

9 Cohen, *Speaking to History*, p. 1.

10 Keightley, "Early Civilization in China," pp. 20ff.

11 Cohen, pp. 34-6 and *passim*.

Concluding Thoughts

Memories and stories are a constant of human experience—as is mythremembering, altering the memory to fit the story that we have decided to tell. The transformation of memories emerges from the creativity of the human mind and our indomitable dissatisfaction with limits. The same convergence of drives underlies our desire to understand the world, invest it with meaning, and make the ordinary wondrous. Like so many aspects of our humanity, mythremembering has interwoven capacities for good and evil. It can strengthen our resolve to overcome future challenges; it can also nurture bitterness and harden a heart bent on revenge; told well, accounts of loss can evoke sympathy and aid; or we can respond by expunging from memory those actions that we wish had never happened, remembering in their place actions tinged with nobility that never happened. In sum, the personal stories and re-imagined pasts to which it gives birth can project ideals of more admirable behavior. They can also delude us into believing that we as individuals behaved more justly or forgivably than we did.

On the national level, the remembered past can link us in celebration or divide us in rancor. The historian William McNeill labeled historical accounts that maneuver or distort evidence to fit a desired interpretation "mythistory." Every historical narrative, like every memory, is to some extent a projection of ourselves, even if only in the choice of what to emphasize and what to diminish. Such mythistory can be dangerous, especially self-serving and self-congratulating accounts that focus relentlessly on bitter memories. Johann Chapoutot describes the virulent form of this process that arose in Nazi Germany as a "discourse of historical mythology placed in the service of ideology [in which] Greco-Roman antiquity was reread and rewritten [to become] a site or screen for the transfer or projection of all the dreams, obsessions, and fears of National Socialism itself."[12]

12 Johann Chapoutet, *Greeks, Romans, Germans*, pp. 12-13.

One sentence from the five stories remains most powerfully in my memory: "*We need a new song.*" Briseis' cry in turn recalls the unexpected relevance of Goujian's tale for twenty-first century America. We seem fixated on defeating external enemies while suspended in an internal web of bitterness with an abundant supply of bile available to all. We live in a

world, a city, and a nation of competing rather than complementary mythistories, where the bitter memories of some are the "good old days" for others. We need to fashion new narratives that confront the bad memories and are free of purposeful distortions that fly in the face of evidence. Then we must seek to blend the memories of the powerful and the weak, those above and below, the central and the marginal, to create an expanding space for the interaction of possible explanations rather than a narrow space for combat. Bruner reminds us of the power of stories to provide narrative models of reality that shape our everyday experiences.[13] Given the power of stories, we must be very careful what we remember, how we shape our mythremembering into stories, and what stories we allow to enchant us. A

13 Bruner, *Making Stories*, pp. 34-5.

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