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Places and Meanings of Memory

Abstract: George Bondor discussed some aspects of memory in his study "Augustine and the Problem of Memory". Commenting primarily on Augustine, he asks whether memory "highlights more than simply bringing to mind things experienced in the past." In the margins of these pages, I have reflected on a few places or experiences of memory and, likewise, on some of the meanings or orientations they provide. In Augustine's text, the emphasis falls especially on memory's power to open us towards elevated or edifying experiences. Yet, lately, the discussion has centered particularly on what memory suffers, on certain blockages or distortions of it, as we learn from the legacy of Ludwig Binswanger. Those elevated experiences that memory can make possible seem forgotten. Some Christian philosophers seem to be more receptive to the edifying meaning of memory. And some prose writers, such as Yasunari Kawabata and José Saramago, speak to us of its unexpectedly free play. As George Bondor so insightfully observed, memory can also make room for "something else," for "more" than merely bringing the past back into the present or simply restricting itself to deficient experiences. It is no wonder that certain places of memory—and certain meanings within it—can appear truly fabulous to us.

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I would say, to begin with, that when loved ones gather to commemorate and honor the memory of a friend, as we are doing now, it means that a living space of memory is already taking shape. That is, a sensitive and natural way in which loved ones can come together, symbolically speaking, with the friend who has already passed away. After all, memory reflects not only the flow of time, but also the way we inhabit a certain world of life and relate to ourselves and others.

George Bondor himself spoke about certain places of memory years ago, as in the pages titled *Augustine and the Problem of Memory* (Bondor 2015, 191-206). I recall, in fact, that after he had written a first draft, he sent it to me so I could read the text and discuss it together for a bit. A few days ago, I rediscovered that message from George and his pages on memory.

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He begins by citing Aristotle, with a passage from the treatise *On Memory and Recollection* (449 b 15), in which the Greek philosopher states that "memory has the past as its sole object" (Aristotle 1996, 191; this "only," in the statement that "memory has as its object only the past," has puzzled me every time I have revisited the Greek philosopher's pages). It is important to note what George Bondor adds in his commentary: "Although the past is its 'object,' memory is in fact a form of the present, for it consists in bringing the past into the present." Therefore, one should naturally add to Aristotle's thesis: the past exists only because of memory, for it is memory alone that makes the past something in the present life. It is by no means coincidental that the problem of memory has always been linked to that of time." He then turns to the writings of Augustine and notes, to begin with, the idea that time is experienced "as a present memory of the past, as a present vision of the present, and as a present expectation of the future."Augustine 1994, 346). One might think, adds George Bondor, "that each of the three modes of the soul brings into the present something that is not here and now. But is bringing something into the present also a presentification of that thing?".

It is precisely this question that he reflects upon in these pages. He immediately restates it in clearer terms. "According to Augustine, memory is inscribed in human nature. It is a force of the human soul. But is it one that simply brings all its contents to the present? Or, on the contrary, does 'seeing' within one's own self—for this is in fact memory [for Augustine]—reveal more than the mere bringing to the present of things experienced in the past?" We realize that this question is truly important. For, indeed, through memory, there is not merely a "simple bringing to mind of things experienced in the past." And the bringing to mind of experienced things does not mean their mere objectification. Through this, they are not transformed into objects already mastered by us and fully available. On the contrary, there always remains something that is not objectified and remains unavailable as such. For example, to return to our meeting today, along with a certain "temporal closeness" to the image of a good friend, there is also an inevitable "temporal distancing," which seems to protect what we remember.

To answer the question above, George Bondor seeks to reexamine several issues in Augustine's text. He focuses, for instance, on how memories are formed according to Augustine (as the Christian scholar explains, perceptions are typically transformed into images and preserved in memory, only to be revived as memories on certain occasions). Or certain relevant distinctions that were glimpsed by Augustine, some of which can be found much later, as far as the last century. Husserl, for example, will distinguish between the recollection

of something from the immediate past in connection with something present (in which case there is a continuity between the two) and the recollection of something unrelated to the present; in the latter case, a "rupture" occurs between the past and the present, a radical form of forgetting. The first situation describes, says George Bondor, "figures of temporal proximity, while the second brings into play several figures of temporal distance." Another distinction, recognizable in Augustine's analyses, is that between actual consciousness and potential consciousness, the latter being "the zone of latency where images gather." We have some access to this zone, but it "is not entirely at our disposal." George Bondor's conclusion here is memorable: "We cannot encompass everything that is inscribed within us, nor everything that we are."

It thus becomes clear what guides George's interpretation. He pays particular attention to those memories that speak of a certain discontinuity — indeed, a real rupture — between the past and the present. In other words, he focuses especially on potential ("non-actual") memory, the kind that points to a realm of latency or depth to which we have only partial access.

He makes other important points when considering the multitude of images or impressions that, for Augustine, can be found in the vast "repository" of memory. For instance, the images of sounds that make up words, the images of numbers and dimensions, colors and shapes. But also those of feelings or states of mind. In order to bring certain feelings back to the present, memory alters them, so that they are experienced differently than before. "Augustine argues that memory makes these things present in a different way than the soul experiences them at the moment they occur. Memory alters them, an idea we will also encounter in Husserl's phenomenological analyses. Augustine also gives some beautiful examples here: «I remember that [once] I was joyful, without being joyful now, and I remember that I was afraid, without being afraid now, and I remember an old desire, without desiring it now. Sometimes, on the contrary, I remember a past sadness of mine when I am happy, and, likewise, when I am sad, I remember happiness» (Augustine 1994, 292–293)". In many ways, memory alters certain feelings and moods. Sometimes it changes their intensity; other times it flattens or neutralizes them. Thanks to memory, completely opposite states of mind, such as joy and sadness, can be experienced or relived. This means that, for Augustine, memory is not an ordinary power of the soul, but, in a sense, represents the soul itself. As he says, it "gathers together scattered images" and gives man the possibility of uniting with himself. This is precisely what George Bondor notes here: "Augustine is compelled to conclude that the soul is one and the same with memory and [even] with life. By remembering something, I

remember myself." This is by no means a common perspective; on the contrary, it differs greatly both from what we find in earlier authors and from what is usually said about memory.

How might this unique perspective be explained? In other words, what is the question — or perhaps the expectation — behind these statements?

Drawing on the pages of *Confessions*, George Bondor offers a clear answer. "Augustine comes to discuss memory by starting with the problem of the search for God." And the idea from which he begins is almost strange, namely that "I must go beyond memory to find God." The idea contains something radical since, for Augustine, memory signifies, in a sense, the soul itself, the very life of man. Yet to go beyond memory means to go — at least in one respect — beyond this soul and this world of life. At the same time, "seeking God is possible only if I first remember Him. We thus find ourselves in a veritable paradox: «If I find You beyond my memory, I do not remember You. And how will I find You, if I do not remember You?» The search for a happy life is possible only for those who are already moving within its horizon." With these remarks, George Bondor rightly observes that the Augustinian approach moves from paradox to paradox, without shying away from the difficult or even obscure aspects of the discussion. I will now set aside other points that George Bondor raises with great care. For example, when he returns to the text *De magistro* and, subsequently, to Plato (particularly the *Phaedrus*, which discusses the pleasures that arise through memory). Or when he discusses the "objective nature of memories" — those memories that retain images of things — referring in this regard to various passages from Husserl, Heidegger, Ricoeur, and others.

I will now turn, without straying from George's pages, to a few possible meanings of memory. Meanings, not as definitions of memory, but rather as possible openings or orientations of the human spirit that it provides. Such openings actually bring to the fore distinct levels of memory, as George Bondor rightly intuits here. Commenting on the Christian philosopher's writings, he observes that the latter distinguishes between ordinary memory (seen as a repository that retains only the images of things, which can completely consume us) and deep memory, which he says represents the soul itself. Now, it is precisely the latter, for Augustine, that "preserves and reawakens the trace of the divine in our soul." For instance, if "we have learned to know God, we have not forgotten Him, [and] this teaching is deeply imprinted in our soul." Which means that what is at stake is the very power of deep memory. The same applies to the "happy life" that man desires so much. Thus, memory takes on radically different meanings or orientations. And if he is attentive to such things, man could orient his own life either

differently or as it ought to be. For instance, one might realize that, even through ordinary memory, images of certain things take hold of him and dominate him, to the point that they become his greatest temptations. In this ordinary sense, "memory must be transcended in order to attain a happy life," that is, true communion with God. And transcending it means setting out on the path of deep memory, a path necessary for seeking God. Regarding this memory, Augustine no longer uses spatial metaphors ("pantry," "storehouse"," etc.), or, if he does, he completely transforms them.

However, George Bondor takes it a step further, suggesting that we might distinguish three levels of memory in Augustine's text. One of these levels preserves precisely "the images of things perceived in the past." At another level, "not only images of objects, but also the feelings of the soul" can be evoked. And distinct from these two is that level of memory which opens us up to the eternal. Contrary to what we usually think and imagine, Augustine speaks of a memory of the eternal. That is, a memory of that which transcends the ever-mentioned temporal ecstasies—the past, the present, and the future. "The memory of the eternal moves [for Augustine] exclusively within the horizon of man's deepest interiority, that which is not a mere human construct, but is the inner word, God within us, or, in other words, the 'inner man.' And this memory is not subject to forgetting and is devoid of spatiality." Yet the three levels do not appear separate. The desire to withdraw from the memory of images of things, but also from the memory of the traces of feelings, in order to make possible an opening toward the eternal Word — this desire follows the path along which various concrete configurations of memory can be glimpsed.

In addition to what has been presented above, I will now make a few somewhat more informal remarks. I will again begin with an observation by George Bondor. Namely, with each level of memory, insofar as it opens up beyond itself, there occurs "more than the mere bringing to mind of things experienced in the past." Essentially, less common dimensions of the human being are rediscovered, some truly elevated, such as the ethical or the religious. This would imply a twofold reorientation of the gaze, first toward the self ("the inner self") and then toward the otherness that transcends the self itself, if we accept these old expressions. What exactly do I want to convey?

Unlike the Aristotelian tradition, Augustine highlights certain distinct aspects of memory, following in this regard particularly the "tradition of interior vision" (Paul Ricoeur). He emphasizes that memory which "is nothing other than a deepening into one's own self, into its past, and into what the present retains of that past," as George Bondor puts it. The emphasis falls especially on memory's power to open up radically

different, elevated, or edifying experiences. I say this because, as we know, there has been much discussion lately, especially about what memory suffers from—about certain blockages, disorders, or distortions in its course. This is not without importance, of course, for such phenomena are well known and must be addressed. It's just that, as far as I can see, those elevated or edifying experiences that memory, at a certain level, can make possible seem to have been simply forgotten.

In this regard, I will mention just two names whose work is already well known. Ludwig Binswanger, for example, inspired by phenomenological research in its existential form, observed that heightened subjective states, such as melancholy or depression, can profoundly alter the structure of temporality. Such research, sometimes referred to as *Daseinanalyse*, is taken up by Ludwig Binswanger in several of his works, such as *Introduction to Existential Analysis* (1947), *Dream and Existence* (1954), and *Melancholy and Mania* (1960). They manage to place a person in a situation where they experience only one of these temporal ecstasies more intensely, while the others are, in a sense, eclipsed. In this way, the structure and flow of temporality would become significantly "distorted." Ultimately, memory itself would be profoundly altered in its potential. Of course, as other interpreters will note, this is not always a matter of its alteration in a pathological sense. When returning to certain passages from Augustine's *Confessions*, Yvon Brès focuses particularly on § 39 of Book XI. Here, the confessor expresses his desire to forget his past and the days of old, but not in order to turn toward the present or the future, for these too appear to him as subject to transience. His desire is to rediscover what comes "before all else," as he himself puts it — that is, to free himself from the past, present, or future, in order to move toward that beauty "which neither comes nor passes." Consequently, Augustine would surrender himself to a "tensioned projection toward divine eternity," which would in itself bring about a change in the usual structure of temporality (Brès 1994). When referring to Binswanger's analyses, Yvon Brès also notes certain difficulties inherent in the idea itself. For example, if pathological states can alter the structure of temporality, this implies that it is not a transcendental structure, in the Husserlian sense of the term. The hypothesis that time arises either from the future or from the past also proves debatable. This fact as such could be explained in two ways. On the one hand, it concerns his sincere faith in the revelation of the Word, especially after the spiritual crisis that culminated in the year 386 and led to his religious conversion. On the other hand, the desire to free himself from the past and the present (*nunc fluens*) can be linked to the states of melancholy that marked him from an early age. To support his thesis, the interpreter discusses in particular Augustine's temperament and the motif of "late time" (*sero*), which is frequent in his writings.

Some Christian philosophers, such as Gabriel Marcel or Mircea Vulcănescu, seem to be more attuned to the restorative power of memory. Perhaps also some novelists, such as Yasunari Kawabata (for example, in *Thousand Cranes*) or José Saramago (in his novel *All the Names*). However, what strikes me as relevant now is that, against the backdrop of certain intensely lived experiences, different horizons of the relationship between past, present, and future emerge. With each of these, a distinct meaning of memory becomes evident — that is, its prevailing orientation toward certain states of affairs. For example, as George Bondor observed in his commentary, the orientation toward images of those situated in the past. Possibly, toward the traces of certain states of mind or moods. Or, beyond these, toward what transcends a particular past and the present that corresponds to it. And each time, memory experiences a kind of ambivalence. Namely, it can make perceptible both something more than the presence of what has been lived, and something less.

For example, in Yasunari Kawabata's novel *Thousand Cranes*, memory and anticipation are intertwined at every moment. Although they always bring something into the present, they do not make every aspect of that content present, nor do they do so completely. Usually, the characters' gestures and words seem detached from the given reality, out of step with the times even in their most ordinary expressions. One might think they are gratuitous, simply delivered as ritualistic formulas. They appear foreign to the present as such, to life lived "here and now." More accurately, life itself seems to become foreign to the present moment and, with it, to those who seek its places and signs. A few attempts at a tea ceremony, already reduced to banality, memories of a more carnal and concrete time, vaguely ritualistic gestures accompanying everyday concerns, words that seek either to say nothing or to awaken old sins and desires—this is roughly how the whole story unfolds. Memory always has imagination and free thoughts on its side, which can prolong it indefinitely. What is meant to be real gives way to imaginings born either of memories and daydreams, or of a simple desire. Everything unfolds in a rhythm where the past frequently and unexpectedly appears before us. It descends from who knows where, usually clean and light, reshapes the present, and casts its translucent shadow over the future. This is what makes, for example, any object from the characters' everyday world immediately bring with it a vast and familiar world.

As George Bondor so aptly observed, memory can also make room for "something else," for "more" than simply bringing the past back into the present. It sometimes offers us entirely unexpected images and insights. It is no wonder that certain places in memory — and some of its meanings — may seem fabulous to us, even strange at times.

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