**Literature Ahead of Memory (Full Speed A-Home!)**

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A foreword stands at the head of the text, and in the academic world it’s normal to lead with the head – especially with the kind of distinctness associated with the left hemisphere of the brain. Criticism can offer this ‘very focused kind of attention, looking at detail, analysing, taking things apart and observing components.’[[1]](#endnote-1) Critical argument cuts into the text, and cuts to the chase, exempting itself from the delayed effects of literature, its condensations and displacements, to produce, in a timely fashion, the clarity of images, figures, structures and ideas. But this need not be the only or the main gesture of literary criticism. This collection of essays is an example of the way that criticism may also take on literature’s liberating tendency to orient itself in terms of forces that are uncontrollable, invisible or otherwise ‘out of the picture.’ This would be a kind of reading that works precisely to open and diversify, that responds with, and evokes, more open and uncertain states of body and mind. In Caravaggio’s painting *Judith and Holofernes* (c.1599) we get to observe the difference between painting decapitation – which turns out to have a more curious and inventive relation to sight than one might expect – and those rather cut-off notions of psychology and sexual opposition that were for a time attached to the story of how the beautiful Israelite widow Judith seduced and killed the Assyrian general in order to save her people (Judith, 13:7-8). Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit read Caravaggio’s picture in terms of the gaze of Holofernes, whose ‘eyes are directing us to spaces outside the scene in which he is on the point of no longer being able to see anything.’[[2]](#endnote-2) As they put it, narrative violence in *Judith and Holofernes* ‘releases an uncontrollable energy’ that takes the cutting off of a head as an opportunity not to become absorbed by but ‘to whirl *away* from the scene of violence’ (my emphasis). This kind of displacement of looking, Bersani and Dutoit argue, helps retrain us to see the world, its violence included, less violently, in a way that is less absolutely enthralled by the fascination of images that routinely solicit, provoke, baffle and invade us.

For a time it was possible to read on a wall near Canterbury West Station a piece of graffiti: ‘The essential things in life are seen not with the eyes but with the heart.’ Poetry is from the heart and goes directly to the heart - and the heart is not limited to its anatomical location. It is not here, or there, but everywhere. This is what circulation means, and colour, and fluidity. The youth of the contributors to this issue makes it possible to refer to them, in a rather vampiric institutional cliché, as ‘new blood,’ but blood is always new when it is flowing and moving, when the heart is beating, when poetry is there. (Does one not speak of an ‘issue of blood’?) Poetry is a word for what connects fragments, not into structural totalities, but into life. Shakespeare tells us that memory runs in the blood and belongs in the living body (*Coriolanus* 1, 1, 132). Derrida distinguishes between the archive and living memory: ‘the archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory. ... *There is no archive without outside*.’[[3]](#endnote-3) What poetic marks can do, whether in the form of literature or painting or less official genres of experience, is exist - mysteriously and resonantly - both in us and outside us, in mortal and in more enduring forms. Thus the depiction of bloody scenes in art can be about more than cruelty, injury and catharsis.

It would seem that this theme of literature and memory has to do with the various modes of disjunction and relation between what is outside and what is inside – therefore with wounds and other troubling, painful or strange displacements. It naturally finds itself in the realm of the uncanny, where, as Freud says, quoting Schelling, what ‘ought to have remained . . . hidden and secret [...] has become visible.’[[4]](#endnote-4) Blood tells, truth will out. But still there will also be a struggle against prohibitions, inhibitions and other forms of secret-keeping that always want to separate an inside from an outside. Part of the critical and deconstructive work on memory is to bear the internal struggle with oneself, not to lie, not to re-cover in the act of uncovering or erase in the act of remembering. Those who bear wounds bear them alone. Those with an interest in letting wounds speak have to risk not-knowing, have to guess and surrender expectation in order to hear. Not only literature but the critic interested in memory, will be put to the question, interrogated in the act of bearing witness. It’s not easy. We need the help of joy and love, joy in reading and writing, love for language, to carry out this memory work.

But it is easy to forget. We can do it, like Romeo, without being taught to (*Romeo and Juliet* 1, 1, 237). Until one day I can’t, and I’m alone with, subjected to repetition. This experience takes all sorts of names and forms: hysteria, post-traumatic stress, prodigious memory. Peter Brook and Marie-Hélène Estienne’s recent piece of theatre *The Valley of Astonishment* takes on the task of exploring ‘the mountains and valleys of the brain.’[[5]](#endnote-5) One character, Sammy, played by Kathryn Hunter, has a miraculously fertile synaesthetic memory. She becomes a stage performer with a memory act and does brilliantly until the streets and buildings of her mind become so crowded with memory cues that there is no room left for more. She suffers from lack of space. She can’t get back to home, where the memory-journeys always start and end. Watching, we suffer with her but we know, because we feel its freedom, that the space of Brook and Estienne’s theatrical work is fundamentally an empty space. Theatre such as this moves confidently ahead, even when it shows blocks and impasses. Repetition, thought spaciously enough, lovingly enough, takes us somewhere beyond. In Derrida’s words it is ‘as if the future were entrusted to us.’[[6]](#endnote-6) Or in Brook’s words: ‘As we go forward with our feet firmly on the ground, each step takes us further into the unknown.’ The essays that follow know something of the joy in that experience of discovery, which is also an experience of satisfaction and return.

1. Graham Music, *The Good Life: Wellbeing and the New Science of Altruism, Selfishness and Immorality* (Routledge, 2014) 177. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Caravaggio’s Secrets* (MIT Press, 1998) 94. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, tr. Eric Prenowitz (University of Chicago Press, 1995) 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Sigmund Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”,’ tr. James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917-1919):* *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works* (Vintage, 2002) 223. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Peter Brook, ‘The Valley of Astonishment,’ theatre programme for Peter Brook and Marie-Hélène Estienne, *The Valley of Astonishment* (Young Vic, June-July 2014) 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Derrida, ‘Unsealing (“the old new language”),’ *Points ...: Interviews, 1974-1994,* ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford University Press, 1995) 130. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)