

Erindringens poetik

*William Wordsworth, S. T. Coleridge,
Thomas De Quincey*

By Lis Møller. Aarhus:

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In her doctoral dissertation *Erindringens poetik: William Wordsworth, S. T. Coleridge, Thomas De Quincey*, Lis Møller finds a new, personal way into her authors through a study of 'the poetics of memory'. The Danish word 'erindring' corresponds to 'memory', but also to 'recollection', 'remembrance' and 'reminiscence'. Møller concentrates on the Romantic conception of personal memory and the representation of the faculty of memory in the poetic texts, including metaphors and other poetic images. Secondly, she studies memory as 'a rhetorical, structural, and narrative device' (585) – memory is understood as a principle of form and not only as a theme. Thirdly, she reflects upon the role memory is assigned in the aesthetic texts of her three authors.

The book starts with Georges Poulet's observation that the phenomenon of subjective individual memory is a discovery of the 18th century. She connects this new conception of memory with the English empirical tradition, starting with John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1700). Locke is, according to Paul Ricoeur, the inventor of the complex 'identity-consciousness-self' (70).

Locke founds his theory of the *tabula rasa* on an Aristotelian approach: sense perceptions are the prerequisites of memory. He rejects any notion of 'innate ideas'.

Focusing on infinity and the eternal, the Romantics revive Platonic theories that emphasizes innate ideas and the ontological priority of memory over sensation. In spite of their Platonic turn, however, the English Romantics try to amalgamate Platonic thought and empirical epistemology.

There are two main traditions of conceptualizing memory: the spatial metaphor, which represents memory in the form of a 'container' with a 'content', and the graphical metaphor, which views memory as a stamp, a mark or an inscription. The Romantics tend to merge spatial and graphic metaphors.

The Romantic conception of the child is different from Rousseau's, as it emphasizes both the experience of continuity and that of discontinuity concerning the adult's relation to his childhood. Wordsworth distinguishes them as 'two consciousnesses' in *The Prelude*; the Romantic child is above all a remembered child, an inner child.

In the chapter 'William Words-

worth: *The Landscape of Memory*’, Møller concentrates on Wordsworth’s poetry between 1798 and 1806, above all *The Prelude*. She counters William Blake’s statement that Wordsworth’s faithfulness to memory prevented him from becoming a great poet. Geoffrey H. Hartman also declared that an ‘unresolved opposition between Imagination and Nature prevents him [Wordsworth] from becoming a visionary poet’ (110). In contrast, Møller sympathizes with the position of Charles Altieri and argues that Wordsworth uses the idea of memory to construct a bridge between associationism and idealism. Wordsworth’s conception of the child seems to differ from text to text. Sometimes, as in ‘Tintern Abbey’, we can trace the humanizing of the pre-symbolic animalistic child of nature, and sometimes – especially in ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Reflections of Early Childhood’ – the child’s proximity to divinity is underlined. Møller is right in criticizing M. H. Abrams and emphasizing the difference between the two poems.

According to Møller, Wordsworth’s poetics of memory – he evolves from a descriptive poet in the 1790s to a poet of memory in *The Prelude* – is most distinctly expressed in his depiction of landscape. Especially interesting is Møller’s passage about landscape and sign inscription (177–179).

Møller is an extremely well-read scholar and her knowledge of Kierkegaard and Freud gives her a route into Romanticism that sometimes differs from the more biographical approach common among British scholars. She finds Kierkegaard’s definition of

memory as a means of enhancement (‘Forøgelses-Middel’) fruitful, together with his description of forgetting as a pair of scissors cutting off what is not essential.

James Heffernan has compared Wordsworth’s poetry to the paintings of Constable and Turner, but Møller considers Wordsworth’s poetic method as more strikingly similar to the work of Caspar David Friedrich, especially his painting *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* (1828). In both cases the natural object depicted is simultaneously a realistic thing and a sign with hieroglyphic qualities, pointing beyond itself; in both cases, too, perception is mediated through memory. According to Friedrich, landscape paintings should not depict the natural scene but the reminiscence of it. Møller discusses several famous works of Friedrich but curiously enough not *Blick aus dem Atelier des Künstlers*, in which you see the painter’s eye in a mirror – a consideration of this painting would have strengthened her argument.

Møller makes much of the well-known ‘spots of time’, i.e. poignant early memories with a visionary quality to the adult mind. Representing the indestructible memory traces as inscribed on the landscape itself, Wordsworth’s metaphors are endowed with a graphic quality.

In the chapter ‘S. T. Coleridge: The Book of Memory’, Møller looks for fragments of a theory of memory in Coleridge’s prose works. With the publication of his notebooks the impressive character of Coleridge’s non-literary work became clear to most scholars. The distinction in *Biographia Literaria* between primary and second-

ary imagination on the one hand and fancy on the other is basic. The imagination concept is founded on Schelling's definition of 'Einbildungskraft', but the concept of fancy corresponds to Kant's 'reproductive imagination', which is subject to the law of association. Concerning the importance of Hartley, scholars are unanimous: some, however, have asserted that Coleridge denounces Hartley in the early 19th century, but according to Møller, revised and modified versions of Hartley's psychology are still important in the exposition of fancy, dream and delirium in *Biographia Literaria* and other late texts.

Although Coleridge discusses the creative potential of the dream in the preface to 'Kubla Khan' he seems skeptical and maintains that 'artistic Dreams form a *distinct* Kind – and ought not to have been confounded with those of proper Sleep' (600). A poem may be considered as a dream, but only a waking dream. Coleridge believes in a memory independent of the will and the conscious mind. A fundamental thought concerns the existence of a latent memory: 'the dread book of judgement, in whose mysterious hieroglyphics every idle word is recorded!' (601). In her classic work *Coleridge, Opium and Kubla Khan* (1953), Elizabeth Schneider relates Coleridge's theory of dreaming particularly to Erasmus Darwin. Møller proposes other possible frameworks for Coleridge's hypothesis of this full recording in memory: Leibnitz, animal magnetism and Swedenborg.

The most daring hypothesis in Møller's dissertation is that Wordsworth's memory as an act of giving meaning as well as reminiscing and

Coleridge's idea about a complete recording in memory merge into one in Thomas De Quincey's autobiographical writings *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821), *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845) and *The English Mail-Coach* (1849).

To De Quincey, the memories of the child, which are also the objects of memory to the narrator, are enigmatic signs. The adult is an interpreter and retrospection is an act of reading. Møller also explains how the memories of De Quincey's reaction as a child to the death of his sister remained latent until he started to take opium as a student at Oxford.

Møller's reading of De Quincey centers on three crucial figures: the hieroglyph, the arabesque and the palimpsest. The hieroglyph is the nodal point in a network of signs, but this network is not static. It is 'open to altered valuations' (605). The hieroglyph is 'involute', a De Quincey term, i.e. it contains a juxtaposition of antagonist qualities. Møller's argument for using the concept of the arabesque is that De Quincey tried to imitate the structure of memory itself in his writings and that he emphasizes the dynamic aspect of memory. The graphic metaphor of the palimpsest, used by De Quincey himself when writing about 'the deep memorial palimpsest of the brain' (607), is the perfect image of how memory traces appear and disappear in the mind.

To Møller, the autobiographical work of De Quincey may be seen as the culmination of the Romantic conception of memory. But is there not a difference between, for instance, the calm resignation of Wordsworth's reflective protagonist in 'The Two April

Mornings' and De Quincey's autobiographical subject being harassed by the dead?

Does Møller succeed in her project of bringing the three authors together? On the surface, the chapters might seem disparate and in the De Quincey chapter purely literary analysis dominates. Møller refers to Georges Poulet before beginning her study, however, and after an attentive reading it is clear that just as Poulet – always considering both aesthetics and the history of ideas in *Études sur le temps humain* – studies aspects of the treatment of memory in important passages in the works of different authors, Møller succeeds using the same method.

In her concluding remarks, Møller compares William James, Sigmund Freud and Henri Bergson to the Romantics. I would add that there are also affinities with the phenomenological tradition from Husserl and onwards and when reading Møller's dissertation one constantly thinks of related (but strangely different) passages in the works of Rilke, Proust and Virginia Woolf.

Thanks to her concentration on selected texts and crucial questions in literary criticism about the Romantics, as well as her eminent talent for elucidating complicated issues, Møller can be proud of having written a dissertation which stands out as a magnificent work on three English Romantic authors.

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