The Spotted Snake of the Past: Time and Memory in "The Refugees" and "The Back Room"

by Robert Phillips
University of Wisconsin–Madison

In the stories "The Refugees" by Abdullah Hussein[1] and "The Back Room" by Intizar Husain,[2] both authors explore the effects of time and memory on the individual. Abdullah Hussein treats the interplay of memory and its mediation as essential components of the individual's identity. The narrative element is crucial, for it allows the individual to integrate separate moments of time into a coherent self-awareness. When the narrative is disrupted or denied, the individual suffers from a sense of discontinuity, since memories themselves exist only as fragments locked within an internal prison. Intizar Husain portrays remembrance as an awareness of lost moments that can never be recovered except through imagination. This imagination is itself a form of narrative which recaptures discrete, finite memories that exist only in that particular form for that particular individual. Many of these insights also find echoes within Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. Together these authors illuminate the individual's ambivalent relationship with his or her memory.

In "The Refugees" Abdullah Hussein relates the defining moments of Aftab's life in two episodes, each lasting only a day but separated in time by thirty years. In the first episode, Aftab, as a young child, accompanies his father to their fields. Along the way he asks his father about the time he spent in Bombay as a movie actor. His father, Shaikh Umar Daraz,

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[1]In Muhammad Umar Memon, ed. *Domains of Fear and Desire* (Toronto: TSAR Publications, 1992), pp. 50–78. Hereafter cited in the text.

[2]In *ibid.*, pp. 23–34. Hereafter cited in the text.

grows animated as he relives that exciting period in his life: "It was as if his son had pierced the thin, invisible membrane on the other side of which he lived in his world of terrible solitude.... [I]t betrayed a distant emotion that had surprised him with its sudden, inexorable closeness" (p. 55). That half-forgotten emotion, that exhilaration buried twenty years in the past, reveals itself with such impact perhaps because it expresses the longing closest to his heart. Perhaps that period in Bombay brought Umar the nearest he would ever come to fulfilling his inner aspirations and potentialities—those fundamental conceptions we have of ourselves, which often are not fully articulated in our consciousness but may frequently find expression as inexplicit longings or impulses.

Umar describes the movie for Aftab and exuberantly praises his cavalry horse: "The white charger I was given was a real thoroughbred. I never saw a nobler animal.... For a full thirty days I alone owned that animal" (p. 56). Inspired by the memory, he reenacts the battle scene next to a dead acacia tree. For that brief moment Umar, "flushed with the heat of some uncontrollable inner excitement," revels in his dream; then the present reasserts itself, and they continue on their walk to the fields (p. 57). Umar soon regains his normal composure while listening disinterestedly to the report of his sharecropper.

Under the cool shade of the trees, Aftab gains a sense of time's pervasive imprint upon the human consciousness and the objects it perceives. He leans over an old well from which "the peculiar smell of the water—musty, cool, aged, but above all permeated by a sense of a certain past time (his grandfather had built this well)—began to rise up to his nostrils" (p. 59). This reaction is provoked directly through his senses. Whether by taste, smell, sight, or sound, the senses have an ability to spark a hidden awareness that otherwise would remain submerged beneath a usually intense preoccupation with the present moment. Marcel Proust elaborates on this idea in *Remembrance of Things Past.* The whole narrative develops from a moment of sensory-inspired recollection (the taste of tea-soaked cake), causing the narrator to reflect that "The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) which we do not suspect."[3]

In "The Refugees" that particular smell from the well evokes for

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[3]Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past,* tr. C.K. Scott Moncrief, vol. 1 (New York: Random House, 1934), p. 34. Hereafter cited in the text.

Aftab a glimpse of the continuity that binds distant moments to the present: "For the first time, the boy, barely ten years old, felt the passage of ancestral time through his being. And it filled his heart with a certain uncanny satisfaction" (*ibid.*). Perhaps that satisfaction arises from an emerging sense of rootedness, an affinity for the places and things which carry with them the memories of his forebears. In such places where the residue of past moments permeates our consciousness, where there exists "a fragment of time which clings to a fragment of space," we often feel ourselves to be part of a larger entity, a greater existence that not only encompasses our own single lifetime but also radiates beyond ourselves into the depths of the past and the potentialities of the future.[4] The poet R.H. Blyth characterizes this uncanny sensation as "the apprehension of a thing by a realization of our own essential unity with it. … The joy of the (apparent) re-union of ourselves with things, with all things, is thus the happiness of our being our true selves."[5] Aftab barely has time to ponder the significance of his insight; his newly discovered sense of continuity is abruptly shattered only a short while later.

Upon returning from their walk and without saying a word to anyone, Umar retires to his room and pulls the trigger of a shotgun to end his life. The shock of this act troubles Aftab for the next thirty years (even though he manages to dismiss it from his day-to-day consciousness), until he suddenly decides to return to his hometown with his own young son Faruq. Unresolved questions compel Aftab to reexamine "that frozen instant of time" (p. 69).[6] His father's suicide is a moment from which he

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[4]Georges Poulet, *Studies in Human Time,* tr. Elliot Coleman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), p. 301. Hereafter cited in the text.

[5]R.H. Blyth, *Haiku,* vol. 1 (Tokyo: Hokuseido, 1949), pp. vii–viii.

[6]Compare Aftab's "frozen instant in time" with the "stranded railroad car" of Manzur Husain: " 'The whole thing has gone off my mind,' he mumbled. The bright spots in his mind had again sunk deep into darkness. The railroad car had become unhitched from the train and stood alone and stranded in the middle of nowhere, while the train had steamed far, far away. … [B]y the time he reached home the dim spots brightened once again and he felt the same nagging urge to tell his story—to rescue that dazzling ray from the darkness and expose it to the world in its full glory." In Intizar Husain, "A Stranded Railroad Car," *An Unwritten Epic and Other Stories,* ed. Muhammad Umar Memon (Sang-e-Meel Publications: Lahore, 1987), pp. 114–15. Both characters struggle to form a narrative expression capable of rescuing a past moment and reintegrating it with their self-identity. Manzur Husain's effort ultimately fails.

has never been able to escape; he admits to himself that the act has paralyzed part of his mind.

A sense of alienation from his hometown with its extensive changes greets him upon his return: "Nothing, absolutely nothing in the city, now belonged to him" (p. 68). Aftab leaves the transfigured city for the fields and the dead acacia tree that strike him as "ancient and familiar" (p. 72). Only then does his feeling of discontinuity begin to dissolve. The essential unity has been rediscovered:

> To recognize is to identify; and to identify is to find an equivalent between what is there, outside, and on the other hand what is here, inside, within ourselves, since it is our memory. … Now to recognize oneself in a place, in a piece of music, in a sensation, is more than to regain this sensation; it is to rediscover there one's own being. (Poulet, pp. 309, 313)

The act of telling the story of that day thirty years ago to Faruq finally releases Aftab from his paralysis. The transmission of this incident to his son allows Aftab to merge that "frozen instant" into the continuous flow of time. Aftab concludes that memory and its narration alone confer meaning to both life and time: "It felt as though the past thirty years had been suddenly divested of meaning—that not only time and life but even man's own body had no significance at all before his inexorable memory—a memory that integrated one generation into the other and gave the world its sole meaning" (p. 74). Without the narrative—the coherent conjoining of discrete remembered moments—the individual suffers from a fragmented, incomplete sense of identity, because he lacks the ability to perceive an underlying continuity in existence.

Although Aftab has come to terms with Umar's death, he still hasn't understood his father's motive. He asks Faruq why he thinks the man (identified as a neighbor rather than his grandfather) killed himself. The child offers a succinct, penetrating reply: "Perhaps he loved horses" (p. 76). Faruq insightfully grasps that the man grieved for a dream, a longing which his present existence could never fulfill. Umar, like Aftab, seems to have felt alienated from his past, but only when that memory from his youth returned to him with its full force and vitality did he realize the extent of his loss. Proust diagnoses this inner malady:

> [T]he heart changes, and that is our worst misfortune; but we learn of it only from reading or by imagination; for in reality its alteration,

> like that of certain natural phenomena, is so gradual that, even if we are able to distinguish, successively, each of its different states, we are still spared the actual sensation of change. (p. 65)

Delving further into this melancholy aspect of memory, "The Back Room" by Intizar Husain interweaves past and present in a magical, brooding story of an individual's irrevocable decay. When thoughts of the back room rekindle her memories, Safia's imagination drifts between her faded present and her lively childhood. The back room, a "boundary to a dark land," symbolizes the lost realm of her childhood (p. 23). The room seems to be inhabited by a large, black snake endowed with supernatural qualities, but Safia never sees the actual snake, only its "coiling tracklike line in the dark soil" (p. 24). The snake represents several interrelated ideas within the story, functioning most notably as a symbolic embodiment of the elusiveness of time. The implied presence of the snake also links the various episodes of Safia's memory with her present condition.

Many of Safia's memories center around her playmate, Battu, a daredevil little boy, who when he grew older enlisted in the army and died in a distant country. She also recalls several of her mother's anecdotes about the snake. In one instance Safia's mother tells her a story about a serpent, who magically transforms an old hag into a beautiful fairy princess on her wedding night. When the child questions the truth of this tale her mother retorts, "[W]hen fate is set in motion, even the physical body can change. … [E]very person lives according to the decrees of his fate" (p. 26). This fable of youthful rejuvenation bitterly contrasts with Safia's own irrecoverable loss. A serious illness has ravaged her body, leaving her with dull, spotted hair. She now uses a hairpiece to enhance the length of her braid. The signs of Safia's physical decline also suggest the withering of her dreams. Battu's death and her own illness are decisive moments in her life. She seems to have a vague, melancholy awareness of these events as significant landmarks; but, for the reader, Safia's wandering imagination clearly dramatizes the disparity between her present and past.

Her memories of happier days provoke a futile wish: "Contemplating these things brought an overwhelming longing for those days to return; that someone might seize the spotted snake of the past and reverse the direction of the meandering procession of names and relics" (p. 31). Proust's narrator also reflects this sentiment when he returns to the Bois de Boulougne and witnesses the vast differences between its present reality and his youthful memories: "The reality I had known no longer existed. … [R]emembrance of a particular form is but regret for a particular

moment" (p. 325). By equating memory with regret, he emphasizes the impermanence of moments that often aren't appreciated until after their present reality has escaped forever. The act of remembrance replays those moments for us, but it also torments us because we must then confront our loss.

The soiled hairpiece in the back room, which Safia considers incorporating into her shortened braid, represents her unsuccessful attempt to reclaim the vitality of her childhood. Visiting the back room arouses intense emotions from her past: "Another wave of delirium rushed her senses. A state of intoxication, a vague fear that some great trial might confront her—the mystery unknown" (p. 34). Perhaps she even holds some frail hope for a magical transformation similar to the fairy princess. But when she enters that illusive realm, the wavy line in the dust has disappeared, and with it her last hope: "As she came out of the back room, the intoxication which had flooded her mind had already vanished. And a dullness like that of her dry pallid hair began settling over her body like a fine mist" (*ibid.*). Safia departs with the crushing understanding that the past remains forever beyond her reach; she realizes "how paradoxical it is to seek in reality for the pictures that are stored in one's memory" (Proust, p. 325).

The two stories by Abdullah Hussein and Intizar Husain delineate some of the ways that time and memory affect the individual. Sense objects can act as landmarks from the past, but whether or not they assume a voice or narrative capability, and even what form that voice takes, depends upon the individual. Memory recovers the past and grants it a subjective reality that can be reclaimed in no other way. Once memory becomes lost amidst the vast sea of time, no amount of intellectual abstraction or scientific archaeology can attain this reconstruction. In the story "The Poor Dears" by Hasan Manzar, the narrator laments the incompleteness of our objective knowledge about the past:

> [T]he accounts of the monuments at Delhi and Agra were … detailed; for instance, it was possible to find out who had designed a particular building, who the architect was; but could they tell me, would I ever know anything about the man who had actually picked a particular stone or slab and carried it there, or about him whose

dexterous hands had wrought such marvel on that stone?[7]

Without recourse to memory (whether at the personal or cultural level), we experience a discontinuity, a sense of rootlessness or alienation, that shrinks our self-awareness and isolates us within a truncated existence.

But memory also exposes the transience of our lives governed by time's irrefutable tyranny. As Ahmed Ali notes in his Introduction to *Twilight in Delhi*, only one constant exists: "[T]he whole wide universe is in a constant state of flux and transformation, and life must obey the law of variation and change."[8] Ahmed Ali chronicles the passing of the old Muslim way of life in Delhi under the pervasive influence of the British Raj. Characters such as Mir Nihal find themselves expressing "regret for a particular moment" that has faded into the past. Like Safia, Mir Nihal's deteriorating physical condition and irreclaimable past remind him of everything that he has lost. Aftab's father, suffering from a similar alienation, opts to end his life rather than continue with an unfulfilling existence. In their own way, all of these characters must confront " 'the memory of facts which tells us: 'You were such,' without allowing us to become such again, which avers the reality of a lost paradise, instead of giving it back to us through remembrance' " (Poulet, p. 298, quoting Proust's *Pastiches et melanges,* p. 197).

"The Refugees" and "The Back Room" dramatize memory's range of ambivalent characteristics: it is indispensable to an individual's sense of self; it can be fulfilling; and it can also become oppressive. These stories enhance our understanding of the diverse ways individuals contend with the passage of time. ❐

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[7]In Muhammad Umar Memon, ed. *The Tale of The Old Fisherman* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1991), p. 136.

[8]Ahmed Ali, *Twilight in Delhi* (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), p. viii.