

Introduction

It is well past midnight. He lies awake in bed propped up by pillows, under several blankets and wrapped in fine woolen vests. It is very cold, but he cannot stop writing. He must write, even under such adverse conditions: fighting off the cold in a room where the windows are always closed and the walls are insulated with cork. Discarded pens lie on the floor, and sheets of papers are scattered all over the bed, until his maid and helper gathers them carefully into bundles. Now it is already dawn, and he has fallen asleep, exhausted. The breathing comes harder, and he has already suffered a few episodes of aphasia. The labor of remembering a life is monumental, and death seems very close.

But he has what he needs: pens, ink, paper, and silence. Much silence, because only in silence can the voice that beckons him to writing be heard. The voice is his own childish voice, the voice of a child who first understood that he was doomed to want what would always be behind him. The voice calls to him like Eurydice to her Orpheus; though when he turns toward the past, it seems irrecoverably lost, receding into the abyss of time. But suddenly, miraculously, a taste, a smell, the texture of an object, the cadence of a sound, or an image beckons him—and he remembers. As the old sensation is revived, the past comes back to life, for a time. But, he concludes, the only true paradises are those that we have lost—pleasure is always a thing of the past. There is so much sadness in this truth that it is not a voice that he hears, but actually the prescient sobs of the child that he was. There is a sentimental, or call it a nostalgic, streak in this rememberer.

But nostalgic or not, he knows his true vocation, knows what calls him back to life, what keeps him awake at night: the need to go back to the beginning. Writing will make a clearing in the darkness of time, enabling him to build the set of receding arches that shapes a path, an avenue into memory. It leads, this avenue, to the point where the two lines, of the past and of the present, appear to meet. Then he, the grown, celebrated, secluded Parisian writer, will encounter the child that he was. This is the hardest, but most exhilarating aspect of his journey into writing: for when it comes to childhood, the shadow of forgetfulness is incommensurably larger. What we

keep from our childhood—besides the photographs, a few objects, and the stories that others have told us—is so little. This stunning record of times past would never have been born were it not for an unexpected discovery, which revealed that sensory cues can, miraculously, open the way toward recollection. In the absence of this extensive document, our understanding of the phenomenon of autobiographical memory would have been greatly impoverished.

The emblematic story of Proust's discovery is so famous as to barely need recounting. Another boring, unfruitful day has almost elapsed, and the quest for the past seems more than ever doomed to failure. One is offered a cup of lime-blossom tea, accompanied by a plump little cake, a *petite madeleine*. And, as the weary researcher dips the cake into this aromatic beverage, it suddenly happens: an uncanny sensation of pleasure, the question ("where does it come from?"), and the answer, given as the mind is flooded with images of a long gone past. The elixir has transported him back to the village of his childhood, providing the evidence for the solution to the question of how the personal past emerges into consciousness. The particular chemistry of a *tilleul* mixed with a morsel of madeleine has transformed him into a rememberer: he has become someone for whom, to use the psychologist Endel Tulving's description, "remembering . . . is mental time travel, a sort of reliving of something that happened in the past." This experiment, it turns out, can be repeated in varying conditions. Other sensations can similarly produce the phenomenon of recall: the unevenness of a pavement stone, the starched feel of a napkin, a spoon's singing tone, the unexpected hissing of a pipe, the particular slant of a sunset. None of them will be as decisive as that first revelation—which is when the true remembering began, and from which the work unfolded.

The Rememberer's World

Involuntary memory is Marcel Proust's legacy to our experience of remembering. The story of this discovery, recounted in *A la Recherche du temps perdu*, or *Remembrance of Things Past* (as it was until recently titled in English), has largely modeled our representations and conceptions of what autobiographical memory is, of what it can do. Its author, Marcel Proust, has acquired mythical stature. For our culture, Proust is the arch-rememberer, just as the blind Homer is our first storyteller, Shakespeare the supreme dramatist of the human soul, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau the

model for modern autobiographers. In his monumental work devoted to memory and human time, Proust presents, in the guise of its hero, a striking embodiment of the “person who does the remembering” whom scientists now call the “rememberer.” He represents, in other words, a histrionic, artistically crafted version of the human figure who has come into prominence in studies of autobiographical memory.

In giving pride of place to the rememberer’s work of imagination and construction, this book makes a philosophical case about the relation between memory and subjectivity: it argues that our ability to create a record of past experiences provides the foundations of human individuality. When, because of amnesia or dementia, memory disappears, a person’s life dissolves into an immediate, purposeless present. Unable to grasp the organizing shapes of her existence, this person will lead an increasingly centerless life, with fits of erratic activity giving way to inertia. For indeed our thoughts, emotions, pleasures, and intentions only acquire an existential relevance when our remembrance casts them in a narrative pattern and creates a self. Adrift in a sea of perceptions and sensations, the amnesiac is reduced to following, mindlessly, the vagaries of her biological fate. The “rememberer,” by contrast, who knows how to craft autobiographical memories, is ever ready to grasp and shape a history made of pleasures and pains, as well as of ideas, actions, and projects. Rememberers thus emerge as the heroic figures of this story because of the remarkable feat they accomplish daily, often thoughtlessly and effortlessly: with every memory they construct, they keep the biographical thread that defines their existence and assert their agency as subjects against the force of biological determinism.

“Our memory is like a diary that writes itself,” the psychiatrist Jean Delay comments, hinting that for each of us, life is bound up with the creation of a mnemonic diary. In imagining, constructing, scripting our memories, we give a shape and an identity to an existence that otherwise would be no more than a welter of disorganized physiological and perceptual events. Despite all we now know—with our increasingly refined grasp of the brain’s neurology and biochemistry—about the somatic underpinnings of mental processes, remembrance is a triumph of the mind. As Jonathan Franzen adduces in conclusion of his essay “My Father’s Brain,” “the will to record indelibly, to set down stories in permanent words seems to me akin to the conviction that we are larger than our biologics” (107).

While my argument is ultimately philosophical, it emerges from the context of current scientific thinking about memory: the first inspiration for this book comes from rereading Proust in light of the recent debates in memory

studies and from sharing his own curiosity and wonder about personal remembrance. His *Recherche* tells us that the creation of an autobiographical memory is nothing short of an amazing feat—a dazzling performance involving wonderfully elaborate mental and verbal skills. To respond to the promptings of involuntary cues is to discover a world in which we are alive with sensations, feelings, and human bonds. Remembrance, he shows, is the best care one can give to a self and the means of our psychic survival. It is also a miracle of engineering: the remembering mind stitches together, in a unique fashion, from a simple image to a scene, the most complex combination of thought, emotion, and words.

It should come as no surprise, then, that even as talented a writer as Proust needed to be schooled in the art of remembrance, by other authors such as George Eliot and Gérard de Nerval. Their mnemonic experiments, in *The Mill on the Floss* and in “Sylvie,” help us see how in the mysterious process of verbal articulation and imaginative creation, new memories emerge into consciousness from the depth of a somatic, bodily unconscious. With Nerval in particular, we learn about the emotional aura that defines our most cherished memories. While the Proustian conception of memory has a literary genealogy that I trace in this book, it also finds its match, as it were, in the work of two authors who belong to the same era as Proust, Virginia Woolf and Sigmund Freud.

Woolf felt deep admiration for Proust’s work, and indirectly and perhaps even unconsciously, set out to rival him (albeit on a very modest scale) with her experimental autobiographical text written close to her death, “A Sketch of the Past.” Her comments highlight the crucial role writing plays in the creation and fashioning of personal memories. Thus she explains, after a particularly successful retrieval of a childhood memory: “my memory supplies what I had forgotten, so that it seems as if it were happening independently, although *I make it happen*. In certain favourable moods, memories—what one has forgotten—come to the top.” “I make it happen”: these words indirectly acknowledge the rhetorical performance that creates the memory, and insist that writing is the instrument of mnemonic construction. An emphasis on forgetting, which we see in Proust as well, is another important feature of Woolf’s description, connecting the projects of both authors to Freud’s theories of memory. It has been suggested that Freud reinvented psychiatry in light of forgetting.¹ But this is surely too restrictive a claim: on par with Proust, Freud’s conception of memory as the overcoming of forgetting signaled a revolution in the overall conception of personal remembrance, as I show in highlighting the phenomenological aspects of his theory. It is indeed from a phenome-

nological rather than purely psychoanalytical perspective that my study invokes the notion of the unconscious, and that of deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*).

This perspective accounts for my claim that writers are the exemplary architects of mnemonic scenes. Through their detailed descriptions of mnemonic processes, they reveal the artifices of imagination and rhetoric that bring the past to life. Their intricate sketches thus provide us with scripts for such processes that are especially relevant at a time of a major epistemic and philosophical shift in memory research. In this new conception, the remembering mind or brain is no longer imagined as a library or a storehouse of information; it is, rather, a site of continuous activity, where “neurons that fire together, wire together.” This dynamic model of mental processing, influenced by phenomenology and often built around clinical cases, has sparked new interest in the form of remembrance explored by Proust, namely episodic memory.² Israel Rosenfield’s description is doubly revealing: “When I form an image of some event in my childhood for example, I don’t go into an archive and find a preexisting image, I have to consciously form an image” (184). Rosenfield’s words illustrate that neuroscientists are now interested in forms of remembrance that used to be the purview of psychologists or writers as well as poets; they also tell us, in the insistent presence of a first-person singular pronoun, that research on memory must now, out of choice or necessity, make room for the subject who does the remembering.³

The writers who have a vocation for remembrance have long known about its subtle complexities. In trying to shape mnemonic scenes, they have learned that memories are constructions, that they depend on mood and context, and above all that there is no ready-made template to be found somewhere in the brain that reproduces an initial impress or trace. These writers see best what is always true for us, namely that remembrance is an act of imagination. With its focus on the figure of the rememberer, this book offers its own cases for study: examples of mnemonic experiments that help us figure out how the remembering “I” featured in Rosenfield’s description performs the highly complex function that we identify with the phrase “I remember.” But these individuals do more than identify the remembering subject; in Woolf’s words, they help us imagine “the person to whom things happen.” In other words, they offer us evidence for and insight into aspects of human experience that tend to elude scientific description.⁴ The rememberers of this book find their mirror image in this person to whom things happen, which is to say that a major theme of this study is that of a human subject in search of consciousness and experience.

Experiencing the Past

Proustian memory is the instrument of this search for consciousness and experience and thus provides a way into a historical as well as philosophical question—a question that Walter Benjamin, in his reading of Proust, identified with the word *Erlebnis*, or “lived experience.” Benjamin identified in Proustian memory the symptom of a shift of sensibility in our perception of the world and in the meaning of history. A few preliminary remarks are called for, however, to establish the premises of this investigation into this new meaning of experience undertaken in Benjamin’s footsteps.⁵ First we need a quick demonstration of what may seem only too obvious, namely that the Proustian moment of involuntary remembrance represents an ordinary human experience—even though in its fullest form it may occur only rarely and sporadically. (Commenting on its contingent nature, Adam Phillips wittily suggests that if one had to choose between psychoanalysis or involuntary memories, the former might be a more reliable aid to recovering a buried personal past.) Proustian memory is simultaneously banal and extraordinary—to the point that a mere reference to it, for example in the first pages of the manuscript for this book, can elicit instant recognition. For not only does Proust provide us with an archetypal story of private recollection, he also invites us to share our own stories, to dwell on the way they flash up, seize us, unfold before us, and, in the process, demand a narrative: I remember that *this* happened, that I was not alone, that the air was warm and fragrant with the scent of roses, that my heart almost ached from love and the surfeit of color and fragrance . . . Proust, ever the arch-rememberer, encourages us to emulate him, to sustain, for as long as is possible, the discoveries and pleasures of an intricate, intimate recollection. Taking him at his word, I argue in this book, partly for heuristic reasons, that Proust has made of this free, self-indulgent exercise of recollection the work of a lifetime, so that the whole architecture of his *Recherche* rests on an involuntary memory, and is built around a few drops of his famous elixir for remembrance, the tilleul and madeleine.

Meanwhile, because it is so ordinary, Proustian memory has become a concept familiar to thousands of people who have probably not read past the first pages of Proust’s work or perhaps have never even set eyes on it. What has made him so popular? Perhaps it is his implicit invitation to create, amid the incessant bustle of modern life, moments of much-desired aesthetic stasis. Proust tells us to make allowances for nostalgia, to leave time for introspection and reminiscence, and to think (perhaps all too unabashedly and feelingly) about just ourselves. Proustian memory—or a

little solipsistic, hedonistic dreaming for literate metropolitan culture: I offer for proof a bit of ethnographic sampling I undertook over a few months, in the middle of writing this book. A casual glance at the *Boston Phoenix* revealed a publicity item in the food pages on “lemon madeleines” ominously titled “Remember!” It claimed that “a single bite” would send me “spiraling into a Proustian reverie, a temporal trip back through faded memories.” My local bookstore sponsored a talk by the famed Alain de Botton, author of *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, in which I learned that his American publisher had asked for a change of title (out of concern that the initial *How Proust Will Change Your Life* promised more than it could deliver). MIT invited André Aciman to lecture on autobiography; he delivered a talk redolent with Proustian moments (something to be expected perhaps from the author of *New Yorker* reportage on his visit to the Proustian shrine of Illiers/Combray). Once a week or so, a jaded, overworked undergraduate would eagerly tell me that he or she knew exactly what Proust had in mind with the story of the tilleul and madeleine and, with just a little prodding, would describe with obvious pleasure a personal experience of *mémoire involontaire*.

With his model of remembrance, Proust has found his way into ordinary life, perhaps not for the best reasons—to warrant a nostalgic streak and a craving for autobiographical confessions in a culture that has sometime been defined as pleasure-driven and inherently narcissistic.⁶ Proustian memory is indeed about “me”—about the many individuals or human beings, rather, who must have personal memories and inner lives that are, for them, as rich and significant as the memories treasured by Proust or his forerunners (Nerval and Eliot) or his “rivals” (Woolf and Freud). This book does not, however, document Proust’s influence on ordinary rememberers—sociology or cultural criticism lies outside its confines. If I evoke here the popularity of Proustian memory, it is to find validation, in Proust’s fashionable success, for the real and very concrete nature of the phenomenon he describes. The world of science provides another form of validation: in their search for a compelling description or illustration of human remembrance, scientists often invoke Proust. One can imagine that researchers steeped in the analysis of complex mechanisms are naturally drawn toward the writer’s beautifully crafted descriptions: even a cursory reference to Proust, in an article or book, will open up a space of aesthetic pleasure, of renewed wonder and excitement. Just as a biologist will sometimes stop in wonder at the perfect symmetry of a leaf or the unfolding shape of a shell, the neuroscientist cannot but be struck by the rich details of Proust’s descriptions, which can hardly be matched in neural and physiological accounts.

This book shows, however, that scientists do not merely respond to the aesthetic appeal of Proustian memory; they are also attracted to his analysis of how autobiographical memories emerge. Proust pays unusually close attention to the physical and mental mechanisms that define the phenomenon of involuntary memory. He also provides a compelling script for the intellectual as well as emotional underpinnings of a strong mnemonic experience. In a field where numbers are so often the measure of all things, this author stands out with a strong claim for the qualitative nature of mnemonic experience, echoing or adumbrating perhaps, the interest in qualia that scientists such as Oliver Sacks, Gerald Edelman, and Antonio Damasio have shown. Psychologists, too, are drawn to Proust's work. Daniel Schacter, for example, announces that Proust has "foreshadowed scientific research by more than a half-century" and singles out for study the case of the tea and madeleine to highlight the notion of memory cues. He also relies on Proust to argue that personal recollection—this time voluntary—is linked to self-definition and to an enhanced sense of identity (*Searching for Memory*, 28). A recent account in *Scientific American* shows the relevance of the "Proustian phenomenon" for a study conducted by the psychologist Rachel S. Herz on smell, memory, and emotion.⁷ Meanwhile, Ulric Neisser, famous for his innovative approaches in cognitive psychology, presents two texts, by Esther Salaman and by Ernest Schachtel, that highlight Proust's exemplary grasp of childhood memories.⁸ Reporting on recent advances in research on memory, Stephen Hall compares Tim Tully's fruit flies—the subject of experiments in the creation and inhibition of long-term memory in a neuroscience center at Cold Spring Harbor—with "Marcel Proust's famous narrator."⁹

The connections between Proustian remembrance and science are even more striking in the clinical field. Proust's name appears frequently, for example, in Oliver Sacks's "neurology of identity," a research field primarily concerned with disturbances in cognition, consciousness, and memory. There, the writer seems to have provided the psychological, at times almost physiological, script for reminiscence—for the sudden, miraculous recovery of the past that Sacks witnesses among his amnesiac patients. For Sacks, the vivid memories called forth by L-Dopa, during some seizures, or when the frontal lobes are stimulated electrically are examples of Proustian recollection. As Sacks demonstrates in his "clinical tales," the study of autobiographical memory must occur at the cusp between the physical and the phenomenal world.¹⁰ Yet while Proust's main share in our conception of memory naturally lies on the side of its phenomenology, his experiments seem to have had a clinical impact. For instance, as I discuss in chapter 6,

therapeutic gardens are now being designed with the specific purpose of providing olfactory and visual stimuli to ailing rememberers in the hope that a whiff of lilac or the unexpected sight of a rosebush might, just like the aroma of a tilleul, miraculously jolt the ailing mind of an Alzheimer's patient out of oblivion.

But an even more provocative reminder of the presence of Proustian memory in our current clinical discourse came to my attention only recently—this time not as part of therapy, but in what seemed like an analysis of post-traumatic stress disorder. An article in my daily newspaper recounted the flashbacks experienced by a former general after his experience in Rwanda:

One day, while driving to the beach, Dallaire, a retired lieutenant general in the Canadian Army, saw road workers clearing trees and his mind filled with images of corpses stacked up like cordwood. The memories so overpowered him that he had to stop the car and describe them to his horrified wife and children. Coming across homeless people sleeping on the street, his first instinct is to make sure they are still alive—(because in Rwanda victims of machete attacks are sometimes left half-dead). Smelling fruit in a Montreal supermarket one afternoon, he fainted; in the markets of Kigali, Rwanda's capital, the odor of rotting flesh and rotting fruit mingled in the open air during the slaughter.¹¹

The mechanism of involuntary recollection that Proust describes in his *Recherche*—strong, overwhelming reminiscences provoked by sensory cues—is at work here (perhaps even unbeknownst to the author of this description). Instead of being elated by his Proustian experiences, a man who witnessed a terrible war is haunted by them: this is not a rememberer's *paradise*, but his *hell*.

I owe this stark formulation of the underside of personal remembrance to Lou Andreas-Salomé, the philosopher and psychoanalyst whose work on memory and narcissism helped me chart a challenging transition in this book—from Proustian memory as a pleasure to its symptomatic presence as trauma. To say that there are good and bad personal memories may seem like a truism, and to argue that recalling bad memories can work for one's good or even, as psychoanalysts and therapists know, toward healing has become a commonplace. However, the phenomenological descriptions that Proustian memory encourages raise new questions, which bear on the formal features of remembrance that constitute good or bad *mnemonic experiences*. Virginia Woolf helps us see that the same form of remembrance that brings a “happy” past to life might ultimately promote the recovery from the over-

whelming shocks of existence. Indeed, as Adam Phillips suggests, what ultimately matters for the rememberer is that a “symbolic transformation” take place that transforms “the irruption” of what has been forgotten and had thus seemed unrepresentable “into a pattern” (“Childhood Again,” 153). In the last chapters of this book, I dwell extensively on what Woolf calls her “philosophy”—namely her postulation that, as rememberers, we can “work through” the most overwhelming of shocks through our ability to find a “pattern” and create mnemonic scenes.¹² Remembering, for Woolf, constitutes a source as well as a validation of our subjective experience.

Although this book was conceived in full awareness of the rapidly growing body of work in trauma studies, it was written to displace some of the issues fundamental to this field—issues as rich and broad as history, subjectivities, therapy, and ethical responsibility.¹³ For while the questions and debates surrounding trauma have yielded a rich body of work, there is nonetheless a crucial need for a more precise understanding of how personal memory works. The “imperative of memory” that ultimately justifies and defines trauma studies depends on the validation of personal recollection as a mode of access to histories.¹⁴ An implied belief in memory represents the cornerstone, the very premise of the testimonies that speak to traumatic experiences. Yet there is a sense that this belief has turned memory into something of a commonplace: as a necessary feature in the recollection of trauma that warrants no further examination on its own terms.¹⁵ This book responds to the “commonplace” of memory, then, by placing the foundational moment of remembering at the heart of the matter. For if we are to truly understand the work that memory does, it is particularly important to enrich our comprehension of the now familiar concept of memories as constructions. As the first five chapters of this book show, pressing on this metaphor will take us right to the heart of crucially important assumptions or questions about our reliance on private testimonies—assumptions about the truth-value of personal remembrance and questions about the dividing line between truth and fiction.

As my project was already well under way, a scandal and controversy emerged around the book *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*, written by Binjamin Wilkomirski and presented as an autobiography.¹⁶ Wilkomirski’s groundbreaking and moving account of children’s experiences in Nazi camps was rewarded with several prizes given by Jewish associations—until it was demonstrated that the book was only a fictive reconstruction, based on readings. The author had never himself been part of the events he described, nor had he witnessed them. How could so many readers, including professional historians, have been fooled into believing that

his memories were authentic? While this book does not tackle directly this stunning case of confusion between truth and fiction, its analysis of mnemonic constructions and their reality effect offers an indirect explanation for why readers were so easily won over by Wilkomirski's autobiographical claim. Given the close and complex ties that bind history to private memory, it has become incumbent on us to refine our understanding of personal remembrance, and to assess more accurately the epistemological challenges such an analysis presents—something that can be done more easily when these questions are staged in the more dispassionate, less morally and politically charged domains of literary studies and of science.

Epistemological Challenges

The idea behind this book was born in the second seminar on testimony that Shoshana Felman taught at Yale—from a question raised on the last day of class, in a recapitulation of our responses to Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah*.¹⁷ I remember sharing the strong feelings that were elicited by strains of Yiddish in the film, a language whose tonalities reminded me of my parents' own linguistic exile and of my own yearning for a homeland. I remember above all telling the class that I felt we had overlooked the aesthetics of Lanzmann's film—surely they were part of this documentary's overwhelming power. Both the sentimental power and the reality effect of this film, I argued, depended to a greater degree than we were willing to concede on the cinematic medium, on a discourse that involved shots and camera angles and the recording devices of his sound engineers. I remember not pushing my point. However, these two or three early intuitions about personal memory have stayed with me throughout this project: the intersubjective nature of memory, the importance of nostalgia, and above all, the aesthetic element in remembrance.

It took years, meanwhile, until I found an authoritative statement to summarize my thoughts on the aesthetic aspects of remembrance, but I finally read it in Oliver Sacks's clinical study of reminiscence in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (which I address in my first chapter). Reflecting on the striking reality effect and vivacity of the memories felt by his patients, Sacks turns his attention to their singular phenomenal qualities and concludes: "the final form of cerebral representation must be, or allow 'art'—the artful scenery and melody of experience and action" (148). To say that remembrance, in Claude Lanzmann's documentary, is the product of art, and that there are unexplored "scenic" or "melodic" aspects both to the

film and to the actors', or rememberers', performances may seem irrelevant or, even, irreverent—an ill-chosen way to describe the recurrent nightmares of those who experienced or witnessed the worst atrocities.¹⁸ Surely, at a time of ethical summoning, very little can be gained from “problematizing” the nature of personal memory or from “deconstructing” the old category of art versus experience. In this fraught context, an analysis of memory is only relevant if it helps us comprehend something about the rememberer—namely why remembering constitutes for him or for her a way out of trauma and a means of survival. In reading Virginia Woolf's autobiographical project as a case study in post-traumatic memory in the final chapter of the book, I have gathered elements toward a richer understanding of the beneficial effects of personal remembrance.

Shoah begins with a sad, haunting song—a childhood memory—that seems to express the pain, hope, as well as beauty that can still be found in this world. The rememberer's song speaks of survival, and sings, against all odds, of the courage it takes to be human. I argue in this book that every rememberer carries within himself or herself the mnemonic equivalent of that song. Most often, we look at the “acts of memory” as cultural, historical, and political gestures. But Proustian memory invites to think of the singular and challenging task of the rememberer: the construction of memories endowed with phenomenal qualities that can guarantee their reality and, ultimately, their truth-value. The authors studied in this book teach us that personal remembrance is an aesthetic, as well as a cognitive and emotional, performance.

These claims raise a number of epistemological questions and paradoxes that must be mentioned here, for not only are they central to my argument, they have also determined the shape and the interdisciplinary scope of this book. First, despite our awareness that personal memories are constructed, we naturally assume that they closely correspond to something (an object, an event) that existed (or happened) at some point in time. (When the facts can be checked, and the memory does not correspond to them, we often call the rememberer a liar.) Furthermore, we tend to think of truth and fiction in terms of opposition. However, close examination of the phenomenon of personal remembrance invites us to see these values—truth and fiction—along a continuum. (Personal memories are, then, more or less true.) Finally, the arguments in this study emerge from the claim that personal memories are a highly subjective phenomenon (no one can remember what I remember). How can they be shared, and what is there, in the mnemonic scene's description, that makes us trust the rememberer?

Proustian memory, as can be shown briefly, raises all of these questions,

especially once we consider, as we must with Proust, that what we took to be real memories are in fact the products of a fictional, of a fictive, construct. We may accept that personal memories look like “marvelous constructions,” brilliant works of architecture born from the depths of our minds (a number of scientists would, I believe, currently endorse this description), but the fact that we are bound to know them, to recognize them only as they emerge from the rememberer’s description, is surely more problematic.

Through his ability to create verbal representations of objects and of inner emotional states, Proust provides us in his *Recherche* with invaluable information about autobiographical remembrance; as we know, scientists and ordinary people alike believe in the validity of his descriptions. What if, however, the persuasive power of Proust’s memory were not merely *connected* to his art and craft, but *were* his art and craft? Could it be that the construction of memory is predominantly, or perhaps even inherently, of a narrative and scenic nature, and that we respond to its representation as to a text? This issue stares us in the face when we examine the nature of Proust’s experiment and consider how true and how convincing we find it—not only as we think about it scientifically, but in our instinctive response to the text.

Thus, although we are well aware of the fictional nature of the story Proust recounts, we respond to his literary representations in every way as if they were true memories. It takes a philosopher and a phenomenological view to unpack this cognitive dissonance: Edmund Husserl would say that our spontaneous, natural belief in the reality of memory images is so strong that it overrides our awareness that we are reading fiction. This is why, no doubt, all budding students of Proust need to be reminded every now and again that the hero of this adventure of the mind is a fictive construct; unlike Sacks’s patients, he is not a real person but an imagined figure. Yet we trust Proust’s rememberer—even if we know that there is no Combray, but only a village lost on the map of France called Illiers, or that there was never a cup of tilleul, but possibly just tea (as earlier versions of his text suggest)—or perhaps no tea at all. We believe him all the more because the exploration of memory’s contents is underwritten by ample and precise phenomenological descriptions. It turns out then that our belief in Proustian memory depends exclusively on the quality of the representations provided by the writer. This simple truth—that we are inveigled, lured into a rememberer’s inner world through the elaborate prose of a great fiction writer—gives a new resonance to Sacks’s comment about the aesthetic dimensions of reminiscence. If “art” or a certain “scenic” or “melodic” quality of the repre-

sensation is a defining trait of our memories, then we owe the impression of a life remembered to Proust's remarkable literary talent: it is the *quality* of his recollections, rather than the mere fact of memory, that turns readers into believers.

This book argues that the mnemonic presentations in other writers (Woolf, Eliot) must similarly be taken as true, insofar as they abide by structures and codes that we normally associate with remembrance. Indeed, fictional memories not only *seem* real, they *are* real once we accept that literary representations can present good, convincing analogues for ordinary remembrance. As the masters of make-believe and the supreme creators of imagined worlds, writers no doubt know more about the workings of memory than most of us; as deft manipulators of images, they know how to create a reality effect and how to draw us into a fabled world of their own making. Psychiatrists and psychologists must have intuited this when they gave the name of *confabulation* to the imagined stories that certain amnesiacs instinctively put together when they fail to properly remember an event. The rememberer's art resembles that of the fabulist. With our sophisticated understanding of mnemonic constructions, how can we relinquish our skepticism and still uphold the notion that there might be a kernel of truth in a rememberer's depiction? I explore this question in the chapter "Screen Memories," which traces Sigmund Freud's complex investigation into the truth status of his own childhood memories. Freud, it turns out, puts the sum of his clinical flair in the service of an exercise in discrimination between memory and fantasy only to be reminded that in the end, the rememberer's own sense of conviction offers the only guarantee of a memory's unadulterated authenticity.

Meanwhile, the reason for the epistemological difficulties we face when trying to ascertain the genuineness of a particular memory is very simple: it lies in the fact that memory, like consciousness, is really, in Gerald Edelman's synoptic phrase, "first person matter." Our personal memories are inextricably bound up in the "grammatical" assumption of a first person and thus inherently subjective. Just as I can't dream another's dream, I cannot remember another person's memories. I can hear about them, share them, translate them, reproduce them even—but they have one author, the figure I call a rememberer, who exists by virtue of a first-person singular. Thus, rememberers in this book have said: "I remember a pink-bluish tulip I saw shiver in the sun on a breezy April morning"; "how I waited apprehensively at the top of the stairs for my mother's good night kiss"; "I remember how she glided, a pink and golden ghost, over the green grass bathed in white vapors"; "I remember those large dipping willows . . . I

remember the stone bridge.” Our private recollections exist by virtue of a grammar and a rhetoric whose combination produces a “memory effect.” Swept off our feet by the power of a rhetorical construction, we can be transported to another place, to suddenly recognize, as rememberers, “something that happened to us in the past.” When this verbal-mental adventure can be shared, because it has been given a recognizable and convincing shape—either out loud for someone to hear, or on the page for a reader, or in the mind just for oneself—then we have witnessed the advent of a memory and become that someone—a rememberer—for whom, in Tulving’s evocative words, “remembering . . . is mental time travel.”

Yet this description of personal memory, written in the spirit of current definitions, does not signal the end of all epistemological quandaries. How can science deal with something as subjective as autobiographical recollection, especially once we acknowledge that the architect of memory is also a storyteller? The challenge articulated here is familiar to scientists working on the mind, and is spelled out by Antonio Damasio:

Multiple individuals confronted with the same body or brain can make the same observations of that body or brain, but no comparable direct third-person observation is possible for anyone’s mind. The body and its brain are public, exposed, and unequivocally objective entities. The mind is a private, hidden, internal, unequivocally subjective entity. (“How the Brain,” 114)

Proustian memory is itself a “private, hidden, internal, unequivocally subjective entity”; it is a scene and melody created by the first-person narrator particularly adept at convincing us of the reality of his past. It is also the singularly persuasive product of a mental and literary exploration—a thought experiment so successful that it acquires scientific credibility. The study of a sampling of modern texts devoted to explorations of personal memory has convinced me that these epistemological challenges are not necessarily impasses or obstacles, but rather, invitations to take a different approach toward the issue of personal remembrance. The approach that literary memory affords highlights the narrative and textual aspects of remembrance, rather than dismissing them as problematic because they undermine its truth-value. This counterintuitive method assumes, however, another theoretical tenet, which proclaims that memories are only accessible through narrative and, ultimately, through language. Given that we naturally want to believe in the historical veracity, in the “reality,” of our memories, this idea may seem too radical, but *Architexts of Memory* insists on this verbal texture, arguing that memories are constructed like a text, and that their

particular definition—their qualia—and their reality are bound up with linguistic performances.

Memory's Verbal Texture

Language—not merely as the expression of our thoughts but as a way of symbolizing our emotions—thus figures at the center of this inquiry. Although recent technical advances in brain imaging have provided unique insights into mental processing, no instrument other than language can give us access to the contents of our memories and to their individual thematic and qualitative differences. That our knowledge of all human, personal, and biographical truths is inseparable from narrative is a vision that psychoanalysis has come to accept and that deconstructive philosophy has promoted. Given my focus on concrete examples—on the rememberer, on the texture of memories, and on clinical tales—a psychoanalytic defense of this position is immediately relevant. As a practitioner who works daily with rememberers, Roy Schafer makes a compelling case for narrative. “Narrative,” he concludes from his experiences, “is not an alternative to truth and reality; rather it is the mode in which, inevitably, truth and reality are presented” (xiv–xv). Indeed, in studying memory for its personal and biographical aspects, we cannot but confront the complicated, complicating fact that human truths are inherently bound up with our ability to represent them and narrate them. Proust’s *Recherche*, as we saw, presents narrative constructions that have such compelling force that they produce the illusion of a biographical truth for even the most astute analysts of memory. This ability is shared by all the writers in this book: they all display, albeit with different strategies, the uncanny persuasive power of the architexture that is the stuff of human recollection. Once we accept that literary texts offer the best examples for the marvelous mental architecture that enables us to construct our past, we cannot but pay attention to the language of our recollection—to its texture, its scenic depictions, and its representations.

In matters of personal memory, there is much to learn, then, from a deconstructive approach, from focusing on the performative aspect of language and on the intimate connection that exists between language and our inner, human world of representations. We use words to do things, to create our inner world and map out our outer world. Our memories are thus really born from a verbal performance, from naming: “I say: a flower! And out of the forgetting where my voice relegates others contours . . . musically arises, the absent from all bouquets.” In quoting this famous pronounce-

ment by the French poet Mallarmé, which tells us that it suffices to name an object to see it emerge from oblivion, I draw on the rich heritage of deconstruction and on a philosophical tradition that has singularly complicated the idea that words naturally refer us to things that are “out there” in the world. A deconstructive reading will thus emphasize the word “absent” in Mallarmé’s aphorism—to remind us that words, by definition, evoke what is not there.¹⁹ It will also warn us that in spite of our desire for memories vivid enough to give the illusion of presence, it would be wiser to consider that remembrance is our way of summoning up what is absent, what is past and gone. At several points in this book, important questions arise around this simple axiom that remembrance makes objects present in absentia and gives them a “contour” that can only be a mental projection. Only in hallucinations do our memories appear embodied and somehow present.

But although it draws on the epistemological findings of deconstruction, this book does not abide by deconstructive philosophical tenets. It makes too much room for the illusions of presence and reference that deconstructionists so cleverly denounces; it endorses too fully the rememberer’s nostalgic wish that the past be revived and be made, somehow, present. To study the issue of reference, I highlight this same, seemingly banal and unobtrusive figure that appears repeatedly in my rememberers’ accounts—a flower. For in their mnemonic experiments, Proust, Virginia Woolf, George Eliot, and Sigmund Freud confront the same predicament as Mallarmé with his *fleur*. What does it take to express a personal impression? For these rememberers, just as for Mallarmé, flowers born from simple words serve as emblems of the way imagination and language enable us to apprehend our personal phenomenal universe. Lilacs, hawthorns, cornflowers, poppies; colorful anemones on a maternal dress; the “blue-eyed speedwell in a wood in May”; flowers of the most vivid yellow—these epitomize the aesthetic promise that so often inspires Proustian remembrance. As the focal, salient point of a memory, they also seem to guarantee its reality and become the token of a “true” experience even though their existence is purely textual—a combination of phonemic and semantic features. I show in chapter 8, in reading Nerval through the lens provided by Proust, that the rememberer’s poetic use of language enables us in turn to grasp the emotional undertones that lie at the heart of certain memories. Indeed, for us, “readers” or “observers” of another person’s memories, the writer’s words are the keys to the inner recesses of a mind alive with images, ideas, and above all with affects. Proust conceives of Nerval’s words as magical tokens, inviting us to share experiences that are, in Damasio’s words, innately “private, hidden, internal” and “unequivocally subjective”—experiences that are memories.

This is why in my interpretation of Mallarmé's aphorism, the stress ultimately needs to fall on the phrase "musically arises": I want to believe, like Sacks, that in spite of its dauntingly complex structuration and ceaseless repatterning, the inner landscape of our mind is animated by an "artful melody."²⁰ I also want to do justice to the creative nature of memory. The remembering mind, Proust tells us, "is face to face with something which does not yet exist, to which it alone can give reality and substance." And this something, Mallarmé suggests, may be at first no more than a simple flower, brought into existence by the quasi-musical evocations of that word.

Contrary to appearances, my reliance on Mallarmé's aesthetic meditation for a better understanding of remembrance does not belong to the premises of this work, but represents the outcome of a sustained analysis of how writing and remembering mirror each other. It is only in the course of studying the writers' lifelike mnemonic experiments that the similarities between a "mental architecture" evocative of memories and the formal and symbolic processes that we associate with the art of writing became apparent. But through this inductive process, the need to revisit our common metaphors for remembrance arose, more forcefully than expected. Let me propose, then, that we conceive of remembrance for a moment (that is, as a heuristic device designed to enrich our grasp of mnemonic processes) in terms of writing. To emphasize this writing, however, is not to return to Freud's *Wunderblock*, the "mystic writing pad" that shows how the "mental apparatus" deals with memory traces; it is, rather, to focus on the complex representations—the "architexture"—constitutive of human remembrance. Old-fashioned as it may seem, this analogy has the advantage of giving back to memory its profoundly human and subjective dimensions (only we, humans, can invent characters and symbols to describe our world) and of highlighting features that the familiar comparison between human memory and computers fails to encompass. Photographs are often presented as good analogies for memory because, as Roland Barthes demonstrates in *Camera Lucida*, they can present the qualities of a "temporal hallucination" and thus help us believe in the existence of something "that has been" (115). Antonio Damasio has used the conceit of a "movie-in-the-brain" as a "metaphor for the integrated and unified composite of diverse sensory images—visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory and others—that constitute the multimedia show we call mind" ("How the Brain Creates the Mind," 115). But both the photographic and the cinematographic metaphors offer us greatly stylized and impoverished versions of remembrance, versions that overlook the phenomenal richness that characterizes Proustian memory. They also fail to render the richly nuanced emotional underpinnings of

human recollection. In order to account for these, the film's reel would have to be combined with a new, as yet uninvented instrument—a sort of brain scanner that could embed a rememberer's affects into the picture. For whereas a film might capture the aesthetic and formal dimensions of human recollection (its “scenic” or “dramatic” qualities), only the brain scan could give us the melodic quality, the rhythm and pulse, the appeal of the emotions that are part of the memory. But why reach for a new technology when writing offers a ready way of embedding feelings into representations? Memory, this book argues, is a writer, and rememberers are architects so well versed in the art of scripting memories that they produce—spontaneously, naturally—constructions that have the kind of texture we associate with reality.

Questions of form, questions of narrative, and questions of person are at the heart of literature, confronting every writer and relating, crucially, to the shaping of a personal voice and of a persona; in short, they bear on our subjectivity. Indeed, the richest lesson one can draw from writers—and the one I elicit from this extensive investigation into Proustian memory, is that *autobiographical memory is an act of imaginative construction that is constitutive of human subjectivity*. What these italicized words imply is explored in detail in the first chapter, “The Aroma of the Past: Marcel Proust and the Science of Memory”; what they mean, for our lives and for how we remember, is the subject of the remaining chapters.

In exploring this proposition, which endows a creative act with a foundational value, we reach yet another paradox that lies at the heart of personal remembrance: it would seem that we build our present and future through an act of retrospection that embraces the images of the past we have constructed as persuasive fictions—fictions we can live by.²¹ In the philosophical section of his book on brain and mind, *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire*, Gerald Edelman states the following: “Human individuals possess selfhood, shored up by emotions and high order consciousness. And they are tragic in so far as they can imagine their own extinction” (176). Sigmund Freud, writing from the opposite perspective, states in his essay on the uncanny that “no human being grasps [the statement “All men are mortal”] and our unconscious has as little use now as it ever had for the idea of its own mortality” (242). Thus these scientists tell us that we need memory to ward off the daunting fact of death, and their philosophical pronouncements confirm my own findings—namely that our desire and need for remembrance express, in one breath, what is the predicament as well as the future of our human condition. Memory speaks of our fear and our tragic awareness of death, but it also attests to our remarkable resilience. As mas-

ter storytellers, rememberers provide us with what is, according to an expert theorist on subjectivity, the “one possible *récit* . . . that of the extension of time across the body” (P. Smith, 111). The paradox at the heart of personal memory—which tells of our ability to comfort ourselves with fictive, mental constructions born from our wondrous capacity for imagination—makes us all, perhaps, the epigones of the child who whistles in the dark to keep fear at bay. Gérard de Nerval, whose desperate need to remember I study in chapter 7, offers a vivid reminder that autobiographical remembrance can sometimes save a mind from madness or despair, just as it can freeze the rememberer in an autistic nightmare.

We are driven back to the past, we are driven to remember, because it is essential for us, as human beings, to make sense of our lives by connecting to the thread of impressions, feelings, emotions that we have experienced. Memory images provide a fragmentary record of our deepest and most significant emotions, bringing us back to the singular of histories that define each individual’s existence. To study remembrance among writers is to discover beautifully crafted narratives that make us see and understand what it feels like to be alive. It is to witness or experience, vicariously, moments when, as W. B. Yeats might say, the “soul clap[s] its hand.” The art of memory might indeed represent one of our human responses to a “tragic condition.” Were it not for the fact that memories remain so often private and internal, one would want to add the word *memories* to the list of human accomplishments Edelman draws up in the wake of his observations about our tragic consciousness of mortality: “what is perhaps most extraordinary about conscious human beings is their art—their ability to convey feelings and emotions symbolically and formally in external objects such as poems, paintings, or symphonies” (*Bright Air*, 176).

In recent years, personal memory has come to feature prominently in the social, cultural, legal, and medical fields. Ours is an age of fascination with virtual realities, with clones and with artificially created intelligence, preoccupations that paradoxically intersect with a renewed interest in autobiographies, the genre reserved for the depiction of “real stories,” for the preservation of the uniqueness and “authenticity” of personal experience. We now have unparalleled resources for storing information in images; words and bytes make us believe that we have entrusted our memories to machines, yet we eagerly chronicle in our newspapers every new step in memory research, in the hope of a magical remedy or vaccine against memory loss. Our present is also repeatedly marked by disputes, in the historical and legal professions, over personal testimonies: by increasing the value and the weight of personal remembrance, we have ignited “memory wars” over

the controversial recovery of traumatic memories. Amid this resurgence of cultural interest in memory, it is all the more pressing to reconsider, from the perspective of the humanities, what we know about personal recollection as a subjective phenomenon—not to reject, but rather to take in what modern science has taught us. Thus, despite its focus on the inner aspects of our subjectivities and histories, this questioning belongs in our modern era—because it speaks of a search for the soul at a time of increasing contradictions and anomie. Never before has there been a greater need to reflect on the relation between memory and human experience.

The art of memory, I thus propose, is deeply bound up with our human survival. It is an art that is characteristically human—linguistic, historical, cultural—and it celebrates human consciousness not only in its highest, creative forms but also as part of our responsibility. We gather our memories in view of our future, shaping our existence through the sense that we have given to our past, and thus owe it to ourselves to discover, in the words of Woolf, “the truth about this vast mass we call the world.” This truth does not consist merely in the information, however accurate, provided by our senses. It must contain the sum of our autobiographies as well, autobiographies that were built through the memories that both embody and express our subjective responses to the world. As we listen to rememberers and strive to understand what their words symbolize, we will learn to decipher history differently—we will learn to discern, among the accumulated mass of facts that make up our modern, information-driven world, the more precious, more significant human truths. Only then will history speak to us in a new voice, one more filled with poignant meaning, and richer in personal, subjective inflections.