

Memory as the guardian of identity in Robert Edric's *In Desolate Heaven*

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Abstract

In Desolate Heaven (1997) explores how we remember war and the role that memory plays as a guardian of identity as it reconstructs the past in the light of the present. Memory is not the **knowledge** of but the **presence** of the past because it establishes an emotional link between the events of the past and the present. Focusing on episodic memory, the article discusses the nature and function of memories related to or prompted by World War One. The darkness and complexity of the memories are heightened by the physical setting and the sparseness of Edric's prose.

Keywords: memory, identity, past, present, World War One

In Desolate Heaven (1997) explores how we remember war and the role that memory plays as a guardian of identity. Unlike Pat Barker's better-known *Regeneration* trilogy (1991–1995) and Sebastian Faulks's *Birdsong* (1994), Robert Edric's¹ novel features neither battle nor bloodshed.² Instead, it is set in post-war Switzerland. The memories of the protagonists are related to World War One and are stored as short but coherent stories. They take precedence over the more concrete manifestations of memory, namely "sites of memory" (Nora 1989),³ such as photographs and memorial stones that also feature in the novel. This article focuses on three episodes rehearsed by three of the protagonists: Elizabeth and Mary (who have lost a brother and a husband respectively during the war), and Hunter (a war veteran). The discussion concludes with observations about the importance and function of remembering by the fourth protagonist, Jameson, a war veteran and friend of Hunter. The dark and complex nature of the protagonists' memories and reflections is heightened by the physical setting and the sparseness of Edric's prose, which is largely devoid of adjectives, metaphor and sentiment.⁴

In Desolate Heaven is a disturbing story of unremitting loss, pain and suffering. Critics have noted that Edric is not afraid to address the distasteful aspects of life.⁵ This is perhaps one of the reasons why his novels have been largely overlooked both critically and commercially.⁶ This work, however, has been praised for its strong sense of the visual⁷ and its ability to look pain in the eye without flinching.⁸ The pain is mirrored in the lake town in which Elizabeth, Mary, Hunter and Jameson meet. The resort, still beautiful but now demoralised by the invasion of wounded soldiers, is gripped in living ice, which is “kept only in temporary abeyance by the summer warmth and the moat of the lake” (262). The sharp mountain peaks regularly “impale” the setting sun, ensuring that darkness and cold prevail (270). The stone quarry on the far side of the lake, to be re-opened to provide military cemeteries with stone, is abandoned, resembling a gaping wound that mirrors the memories that are tearing the protagonists apart. The majority of the inhabitants are temporary guests; many are wounded soldiers, doctors and nurses.

The town is an emotional as well as physical retreat; here, memories can be activated and rehearsed on the basis of present concerns and purposes, modifying recollections of past events. Present circumstances act as a filter that only lets through the elements of the past that can adapt to and are of use to the individual engaged in the present.⁹

The narrator notes that since 1918 people have become obsessed with preserving what remains after the destruction and horror of the war (298). For the protagonists, it is the memories locked in their minds that continue to be the most powerful representations of the war. Three leave the resort at the end of the novel: Elizabeth is determined to make a new start, Mary, whose memory is blocked, retreats into the past, returning to England with the express purpose of dying, and Hunter accepts the inevitable as he submits to his fate in the hands of the Military Police (he disobeyed orders in an effort to save the lives of soldiers in his regiment). Only Jameson remains because the town offers him security and because he has little alternative; he has cut himself off from both friends and family. Having already rehearsed and repressed his most poignant memories before arriving in the town, Jameson is a mysterious figure. Elizabeth is the most successful at rehearsing memories and reconstructing her identity. By the end of the novel, she crosses a boundary within herself, renounces responsibility for her sister-in-law and plans for a future in England (302).

Memory and war

Novels of the 1990s are preoccupied with how the events of 1914–1918 can be remembered, “not only from the point of view of participants in that war, but from that of later generations. Writers here fictionalise their own problems in looking back to and re-presenting a war remote from their own lived experience” (Korte 127).¹⁰ This is part of what Korte describes as the “phenomena of memory” that have awoken such intense interest among scholars and writers in the past few decades.

In Edric’s novel, past and present are juxtaposed. The procession of nurses and invalids watched by Elizabeth at the beginning is a reminder that the events of 1914–1918 are very much part of the present. Compared to “converging tributaries”, the “single flow” of the wounded and nurses apparently congregates according to “some governing reason of organisation and order” (15). As onlookers take off their hats and hold them to their chests,

they remember lost friends and relatives. The physical blindness of many of the men parallels the emotional darkness in which they now live. No details are given but the feeling of loss and misery is enhanced by the cold wind that the line of men and nurses blows through the town. *In Desolate Heaven* ends as it begins, with Elizabeth standing on her balcony. Her final act, to throw away the white kid gloves that she bought on the occasion of her photograph being taken, while “inexplicable” to her (394), is logical to the reader: physical props have become superfluous in a world where memory is strong.

The inhospitable town, with its barren landscape and ice-covered mountains, underlies the transience of the present: its major buildings are hotels, the hospital is “in a state of flux... uncertainty and confusion” (330), the convent has deteriorated (leaves lie in mounds against the walls), water no longer falls from the fountain, and the benches and iron tables used in the schoolroom have been removed (347). As the deterioration continues, the necessity of finding a foothold in the present becomes increasingly urgent.

Three kinds of memory

As a spontaneous evocation of the past, memory delineates, symbolises, and classifies (Lowenthal 210)¹¹ the world around us, re-constructing past experiences into a coherent and intelligible whole that makes the present both bearable (Schacter 82)¹² and familiar (Lowenthal 194).¹³ Of the three main types of memory – procedural (concerning skills and habits), semantic (storage of conceptual and factual knowledge about the world) and episodic (the recollection of specific episodes and events in one’s life)¹⁴ – it is the latter which is in focus here because it is the time, place and how a particular recollection was stored that is important in providing perspectives on the past and enabling one to get in touch with past experiences. Of the four protagonists, it is only Jameson who does not go through this process because, having rehearsed his memories at an earlier stage, he has chosen to cut himself off from the past. Unlike the other three protagonists, on the rare occasions when memories impose themselves on his consciousness, he dismisses them immediately. Instead, he prefers to discuss with Elizabeth the nature and function of memory as a phenomenon. In his attempt to remain impersonal, he reveals his separation from the community in which he lives and from his earlier self.

Memory acts as the guardian of identity, a support and means of maintaining a sense of self in periods of change or crisis.¹⁵ “Extensively rehearsed and elaborated memories come to form the core of our life stories – narratives of self that help us to define and understand our identity and our place in the world” (Schacter 299).¹⁶ Yet memory is in a state of evolution as a result of constant personal interchange. It is also discriminating, recalling only fragments of past experiences.¹⁷ This constitutes a kind of selective forgetfulness in response to our changing perception of the world, which in turn alters our view of the past. The rehearsal and elaboration of the memories of war by Elizabeth and Hunter cause these to become increasingly intense and real as they are integrated into the self that is reconstructed out of the destruction of war.

As critics have noted, narratives of self demonstrate how a sense of identity may be sustained through time “because narrative is necessary to maintain continuity, and without it the identity of a person would seem just smoke and mirrors hiding in an amorphous swirl of material constituents, situations and behaviours constantly altering over time,

an instability which would make the idea of an identity based on absolute self-sameness untenable” (Middleton and Woods 69).¹⁸ This is an ongoing process, as the historical self of yesterday is replaced by a reconstructed version that is subject to change, not least because memory incorporates our deepest emotions. This, as Pierre Nora demonstrates, is the difference between history and memory: memory attempts to remain inside the event and is a link to “the eternal present”; history, on the other hand, is only a representation of the past (8).¹⁹

The assimilation of episodic memories is evidenced in outward reaction through movements and in inward reaction in the form of a recital of events in the words they address to others.²⁰ It is with inward reaction that the following discussion is concerned, and more specifically, with the context in which the three episodes under discussion took place and the context in which they are subsequently narrated by Elizabeth, Mary and Hunter. In Elizabeth and Hunter’s cases, their recollections are of a former, idyllic time, associated with beautiful scenery and weather, harmony and peace; for Mary, her one memory looks back to the time before she lost control over both her situation and feelings.

Elizabeth, Mary, Hunter and Jameson

One of the most important episodes recalled and rehearsed by Elizabeth appears late in the novel. Taking the form of a dream related by the narrator, it leads to a “conversation” with her brother, whose photograph – still packed in her suitcase because the memory is too painful – she takes out for the first time since arriving in the town. Alone in her hotel room, the transitory nature of her existence is emphasised by the placement of her suitcase at the foot of the bed; she is ready to move at short notice. The cabinet beside her bed, on which she is soon to place Michael’s photograph, is empty; it is snowing outside, covering the town in a white blanket which buries temporarily all traces of suffering. In her dream, her childhood is pictured as idyllic. It is also distant, as emphasised by the fact that she is flying over her home with her brother Michael, who is the pilot. It is he who is in charge and gives direction to both their lives. Unlike the town and hotel where she is staying, everything in Elizabeth’s dream is familiar: the scenery, the house – and above all, the friends and family who wave to her with smiling faces. The absence of detail stimulates the reader’s imagination. This is a silent world where not even the sound from the aeroplane engines can be heard.

The “charmed” world (366) of the dream cannot last because the one who is in charge is dead. The photograph, however, remains. As Elizabeth recalls the occasion on which it was taken and the garden in which she and her brother were standing, she realises that the war represents an irrevocable break with her former life. Her security and direction must come from inside as she processes her memories and forms a resolve to move forwards. She cannot express this realisation to Mary because her sister-in-law is too preoccupied with her own loss. As Elizabeth places the photograph on her bedside cabinet and begins to “talk to” Michael, her childhood and the immediate past and present merge in her concern about Mary’s condition and her own sense of loss for those who have died. For a fleeting moment, the dream becomes more real, “more substantial and sustaining” (366) than reality itself. While the memory of her brother’s face – so clear in the dream – fades, the photograph remains.

The memory prompted by the photograph enables Elizabeth to narrate her own story to Michael. The narrator's simple comment "[s]he told him about herself" (367) and the absence of any details prompt two important questions: does Elizabeth describe the self that Michael would recognise from their shared past or the self that she has become through suffering and loss? What is the primary purpose of rehearsing the memory of childhood through a dream and the "conversation" with Michael? The comment that "[s]he would have flown around the world with him in that same warm and silent vacuum, anything to have remained close to him and to have ensured that he came safely back to her" (367) reveals Elizabeth's continued love of her brother. There is, however, no longer any "warm and silent vacuum" to which to retreat; the spa town is a powerful reminder that the world has changed. Elizabeth is no longer the sister who must rely on her brother. By "talking" to Michael, and by crossing the earlier mentioned boundary within herself, she can face the future without her brother. Elizabeth leaves the spa town much stronger and more at peace than when she arrived because her memory of her brother has not only been rehearsed but has become an integral part of her new identity. She recognises that there is a future because she is capable of relegating the past to its proper position.

While Mary also accepts that Michael will not return, she cannot move forwards because her memory is blocked by impediments which obstruct the return of the images that are an essential part of memory.²¹ She does not recall her marriage or life without Michael because they are too painful. Instead, she tries to starve herself to death to avoid remembering. The only possible remedy for Mary, namely psychoanalysis, is not available.²² The one episode that she permits herself to recall took place after Michael's death. It is also the only occasion that she confides in her sister-in-law. It is no coincidence that she relates her memory as she stands close to the lake but in full view of their hotel, whose familiarity is a source of security. The details are related as a series of events that, with only one exception, are devoid of emotion. While Michael plays only a minor role in the dream, his service revolver is the focus. As Mary relates how she took Michael's gun and walked around with it for a full day, her gaze is "fixed" (37). She notes with satisfaction that the gun is always close to hand, in her bag or her pocket. As she visits the doctor, the bank and different shops, it is not these that she focuses on but the pleasure of knowing that she could use the gun at any time.

By telling Elizabeth that she kept herself "apart from everything" (37), she is warning her sister-in-law that she cannot be reached; she lives in the past and has no desire to return to the present. This is not a source of regret; rather, it gives satisfaction. Mary tells Elizabeth just enough for her to understand that she is capable of taking her life or even someone else's, but not sufficient to enable her to help her. Mary wishes to immerse herself in what could have been. While she relishes the idea that the gun is a source of power, she knows that she would never use it, just as she recognises that she has no intention of improving her present situation. The present holds no joy or hope for Mary, and the only cure for her condition – psychoanalysis – is, as already established, not available. Mary's life represents a living death, in which contact with the past and present has been broken. She is beyond help, a fact which the doctor and Elizabeth must gradually accept.

Hunter's situation is very different from both Elizabeth's and Mary's. Like Mary, he is passive, but he has not given up, recognising the need to face the court-martial. And like Elizabeth, Hunter finds an inner strength; and like her, this entails honouring

responsibilities. But unlike her, he is willing to risk his own life (execution was still a possibility even after the war), while Elizabeth refuses to sacrifice the present to the hopeless task of trying to save the life of her sister-in-law.

While Hunter seldom refers to his family (his wife left him before the war and he has not seen his two daughters since the separation), he is more than willing to share experiences of the war. He relates his most important memory to Elizabeth, Jameson and Margaret, a nun whom he has befriended. In the longest memory narrated in the novel, he tells a story of beauty and horror. The setting is idyllic: Hotel Sauvage, a hotel in Cassel for officers on leave from the front. Already familiar to its audience, the story continues to give Hunter "indulgent pleasure" (304) as he recalls the garden, the piano with a candelabrum on it and the apricot trees. No details are given and no adjectives are used, providing ample scope for the imagination of the reader.

The therapeutic nature of the story is recognised by both Elizabeth and Margaret who, by questioning minor details, encourage Hunter. Even in paradise, it seems, there is no escape from the war. The horror of the starburst that reaches the idyllic garden is represented by the starlings that fall from the trees and cover the ground, the piano and the tables. In comparing the accuracy of Hunter's memory with that of a map, the narrator identifies an important feature of memory: while the one who recalls may appear to be certain, he or she is nonetheless almost invariably "lost and uncertain" (305). In retracing one's steps "away from the dangerous and unfamiliar terrain back to the known, to common ground, to the present" (305), one may lose one's way because to retrace one's steps, it is necessary to remember the way back. The present is not a fixed place in time but a merger of now and then that is experienced differently each time the memory is related. Hunter is puzzled that the starlings regain consciousness; while their revival represents a return to the present, it is not the present that the starlings had left just a few minutes earlier. Just as the starlings were powerless to control their destiny, Hunter recognises the inevitability of the court-martial. He does so, however, with a clear conscience because he knows that the decision to disobey orders was morally correct and he is certain that he would do the same again in similar circumstances. His confinement at the hospital and his rehearsal of the decision and its circumstances have convinced him of this. As a result, Hunter accepts the present and has no reason to fear the future.

Jameson, on the other hand, has no such inner peace because he has no desire to remember the past. As already established, having rehearsed his memories at a time before the events of the novel, he has decided to cut away his "anchors" (266), thereby severing his ties with the past. When his wife left him shortly after their marriage, Jameson traversed a boundary he had previously been afraid to cross: "At the time I didn't know what to do", he explains to Elizabeth, "whether to cling to the past and sink back into it with all its comforts and securities, or whether it was best to cut it all loose and struggle up to the surface of this new world" (268). The "comforts and securities of the past" are not defined but clearly do not include memories of a happy family life. The "new world" represents the present, which can only be reached by a struggle. This has not resulted in happiness but an acceptance of life as it is.

Jameson tells Elizabeth that the price to pay for "what we have allowed to happen to us, for what we have allowed ourselves to become" is "the lives we lead" (268). Unlike Elizabeth and Mary, Jameson does not feel sorry for himself because he believes that the

present is his own creation. The ice on the lake through which Elizabeth fears that Jameson will try to dive symbolises the harshness of the world that he has created for himself. While Jameson's feelings are not described by the narrator, the simple statement "[e]verything I touch I soil in some way" (269) indicates the depth of his misery.

Jameson's "present" has been created at a high price. While he appears to be sure of himself and his opinions, the reader suspects that severing his ties with the past is an act of hopelessness based on fear as much as insight. Jameson is locked in an existence that threatens to destroy him because he has deliberately removed the one means of reconstructing his identity – the rehearsal of his memories. When his best friend Hunter is collected to face trial, all that is left for Jameson is the town and a few rare manuscripts from his pre-war days as a book seller. Unlike Elizabeth and Hunter, Jameson is not at peace with his decision – he can see no alternative. By refusing to rehearse his memories, Jameson has broken the narrative that maintains continuity with the present and enables the reconstruction of identity. Indeed, Jameson's identity resembles the "smoke and mirrors hiding in an amorphous swirl of material constituents, situations and behaviours" referred to earlier (69).²³

Concluding remarks

For Elizabeth, Mary and Hunter, the war and its aftermath are an integral part of their memories and thus of their present. The nature of Elizabeth and Hunter's episodic memories demonstrates that memory is an action, a linguistic operation whose purpose is to tell a story that is part of a continuous life story. In the cases of Elizabeth and Hunter, their memories are fully assimilated through the words that they address to themselves, through their recital of the event to others and themselves, and through the putting of this recital in its place as one of the chapters in their personal history. In the case of Mary, this process is blocked and can only be put in motion with the aid of psychoanalysis. For Jameson, it is deliberately terminated, with disastrous consequences for the continued development of his identity. By rehearsing their memories, Elizabeth and Hunter know what they were and confirm who they are. For Mary and Jameson, this is impossible.

The sparseness of Edric's prose stimulates reader's imagination and focuses their attention on the elements of the different episodes related, as well as on the time, place and how they were stored. While three of the protagonists can leave the town, none, not even Jameson, can escape from their memories because, for better or worse, they are part of their identity. There is hope for Elizabeth, and perhaps even for Hunter (whatever the outcome of the court-martial, he is at least at peace with his decision), and both have a firm sense of self. For Mary, the situation is hopeless as she is locked in the past. For Jameson, the future is unclear. While recognising the importance of memory, he has severed his ties with the past, thereby denying himself the possibility of continued development of his identity through the rehearsal of memories. While the war is remote from our own experience, it becomes painfully real through the characters of Elizabeth, Mary, Hunter and Jameson. Published on the eve of the one hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of World War One, Edric's novel is a reminder that it is important never to forget if we are to be able to live in the present and face the future.

Notes

¹ Robert Edric is the pseudonym of G.E. Armitage. *In Desolate Heaven* is the eleventh of Edric's fourteen novels, which are classified as murder mystery, horror, crime and historical fiction. See Anne-Marie Obilade, "G.E. Armitage," *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2002) 3–12.

² See Nick Rennison, *Contemporary British Novelists* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005) 62–63.

³ A term coined by Pierre Nora in 1984. See Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7–24. Sites of memory arise at "a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn – but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists" (*ibid.* 7). See also Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Winter uses a wide variety of literary, artistic and architectural evidence to explore the culture of commemoration and the ways in which communities endeavoured to find collective consolation after 1918.

⁴ Jonathan Keates, "A Sapper's Story," *Times Literary Supplement* 11 July 1997: 4919. Tom Adair of *Scotland on Sunday* remarks in his review at the beginning of the Anchor edition of *In Desolate Heaven* that the "prose, in contrast to the historical events, is almost colourless, written in pointed, often short, sentences, keeping a steady, beating momentum, a constant heartbeat signaling writing alert with engaging, persistent life" (n.p.).

⁵ See Obilade, "G. E. Armitage," 5, for a review of some of Edric's works.

⁶ To the best of my knowledge, no academic article has been written about any of Edric's novels. Neither, as Virginie Renard observes, is any mention made of Edric on the British Council website <http://literature.britishcouncil.org/writers>, which claims to contain the names and works of some of the most important British and Commonwealth writers today. See Virginie Renard, "The Great War and Post-Modern Memory: The First World War in Contemporary British Fiction (1985–2000)." Unpublished doctoral thesis. (University of Louvain-la-Neuve, 2009) 177.

⁷ George Moore in *The Sunday Star-Times*, Auckland, 24 January 1999. Quoted in Obilade, "G.E. Armitage," 10.

⁸ Linda Grant in *The Guardian*, 27 November 1997. Quoted in Obilade, "G.E. Armitage," 10.

⁹ See Roger Bastide, "Mémoire collective et sociologie du bricolage," *L'année sociologique* 21 (1970): 65–108.

¹⁰ Barbara Korte, "The Grandfather's War: Re-imagining World War 1 in British Novels and Films of the 1990s," *Retrovisions: Reinventing the Past in Film and Fiction*. Eds. Deborah Cartmell, I.Q. Hunter and I. Whelehan. (London: Pluto Press, 2001) 120–134.

¹¹ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

¹² Daniel Schacter, *Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

¹³ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 17 and 170.

¹⁵ Ross J. Wilson argues that "the construction of identity" should be "regarded as an ongoing discourse, utilising the memory of the past to articulate current desires and needs" ("The Trenches in British Popular Memory," *InterCulture* 5 (2008): 109–118, at 116). He concludes that "[c]ritics of the popular memory have underestimated the value of memory of the trenches of the Western Front in the representation of current concerns; failing to recognise that to an extent every generation will return to the trenches as it seeks to utilise a powerful memory as a vehicle to express itself. Until the place of this popular memory is acknowledged, there can be no chance of expanding it or

gaining a wider public appraisal of the war" (ibid.). See Renard, "The Great War and Post-Modern Memory," 19–20, for a more detailed discussion of the relationship between memory and identity.

¹⁶ Daniel Schacter, *Searching for Memory*.

¹⁷ See ibid., 81.

¹⁸ Peter Middleton and Tim Woods, *Literatures of Memory: History, Time and Space in Postwar Writing* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000).

¹⁹ Nora, "Between Memory and History."

²⁰ For a discussion of outward and inward reactions, see Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, "The Intrusive Past: the Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma," *Trauma, Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) 158–182.

²¹ For a discussion of blocked memory, see Paul Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, transl. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 68–92.

²² Psychoanalysis was, of course, only in its infancy at the time. Sigmund Freud's *Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* were not published until 1910 (they were re-published by W.W. Norton in 1990), and his *Recommendations to Physicians Practising Psycho-Analysis* was not published until 1912 (J. Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XII, 1911–1913).

²³ Peter Middleton and Tim Woods, *Literatures of Memory: History, Time and Space in Postwar Writing*.

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