

Memory and Forgetting: Response to Toby Olson's "The Other Woman"



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Concerning, as it does, memory and forgetting, Toby Olson's "The Other Woman, a brief memoir" (about caring for his wife Miriam, an Alzheimer sufferer) takes me to Marcel Proust's *Finding Time Again*, which is so full of insights and inspiration for any writer diving into the deep space of memory.

"There is scarcely an old Charlus who is not a ruin within which one can recognize with surprise under all the impasto of powder and paint a few fragments of a beautiful woman in her eternal youth," Proust writes, in the midst of his reverie on the way Time makes us take on disguises like masks in a stage performance. Yet we can find eternal parts of ourselves, youth for instance, through our chance encounters between experiences in the present, such as Proust's famous madeleine, and the being or existence we had in past time. In doing this, he says, we step outside of Time.

Proust reminds us that "In our memories people . . . do not have the same uniformity as a picture. Their development is subject to the arbitrary whims of our forgetting." This means even lovers who travel perhaps quite a long distance in Time together, as have Olson and his wife, accumulate a collection of impressions very different from each other's. "Our parallel lives," Proust says, "seemed like those

garden walks where, at regularly positioned intervals, tubs of flowers are placed symmetrically but never opposite each other.” Thus, there was always something that eluded Olson in *Miriam*. Her smile, which he says entranced him when he met her is the same smile she has on her face dancing in her chair at 80. It returns to him often in this memoir, and brings him both what is eternal about her and their love, and what he never did know at the beginning, any more than he does now, on the other side of that smile. Readers get little hint of what this smile actually looks like, but its recurring image, like a musical tonality threading together a pattern of phrases and motifs, reminds them of what is lost to themselves of the people they love.

For, as Proust tells us, objects and people (so called reality) never really touch our minds. Everything is in the mind itself, not in the object perceived. He notes the fabric memory weaves around a “simple relationship, even a material object” when he rediscovers it in memory: “life had gone on weaving different threads around it which eventually became dense enough to form that inimitable lovely, velvety bloom . . . like the accretion which in old parks shrouds a simple water-pipe in a sheath of emerald.” Indeed, on our parallel journeys through Time what grows in our consciousness is a double of our lover, an accumulation of memories and accretions, an Other Woman as it were, who is more real to us in some ways than the physical person beside us.

Somehow we normally feel we have some access to each other’s web of memories. How much this is an illusion is hard to say, but it’s certain whatever access we think we have is partial at most. Olson’s “Memoir” brings into stark painful contrast the difficulty of access when verbal language fails (he so desperately wants to share *Miriam*’s perceptions through words; desperate enough to imagine himself in her mind looking back at him). Yet other languages emerge, he seems to suggest, other intimate communications through gestures that previously, when verbal language was present, seemed to carry no meaning.

The most important life particularly for a writer, Proust argues, is not the daily life “accomplished within us from minute to minute as we live . . . heedless of ourselves, by vanity, passion, intellect and habit . . . [which] overlay our true impressions so as to hide them from us completely, with the repertoire of words, and practical aims, which we wrongly call life.” The most important life, the real life, is found

in the web of impressions which Time has scored into our memories the way lead type impresses a page. Sifting and reconnecting those impressions, recreating for others in effect the book that Time has written on the soul, is the primary task of the writer of literature, for it is only through such literature that life is lived to the full. Olson is fully engaged in precisely this task, linking incidents in his daily life with Miriam to other much more distant ones to create a rare vision of and tremendous empathy for a world most of us dread.

The book written by those who would regain time and at last fully live life in literature, Proust argues, “is the most painful of all to decipher” and it “is also the only one dictated to us by reality, the one whose ‘impression’ has been made in us by reality itself. Whatever the ideas that may have been left in us by our life, their material outline, the trace of the impression they originally made on us, is always the indispensable warrant of their truth.” Olson is engaged in deciphering a truly painful book. He shies from no details, however horrendous, instead building them powerfully to evoke love and beauty in a life most of us fear and think impossible to tolerate.

Indeed it is precisely pain that is the source of the writer’s best work Proust tells us: “Imagination and thinking can be inert. . . . Suffering sets them in motion.” With each seemingly tiny insignificant detail (his wife’s chant “*little little little little little little*”) Olson lets us in to the unfathomable reverberations of his feeling, and I will not soon forget the constellations he has unfolded.