

THE THIRD GREATEST
COMMANDMENT: MEMORY AS
IMPERATIVE, DEFENSE, AND
SUPPLICATION

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“[F]orgetfulness is fatal for those in exile. For what can be more important to the wayfaring exile—whether he be *polytropos* Odysseus in lotus-land or Jeremiah alongside alien waters—than memory?”



My theme is memory, that winged host that soared about me one grey morning of war-time. These memories, which are my life—for we possess nothing certainly except the past—were always with me.

—Charles Ryder in Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited*

In this essay, a survey of sorts, I attempt to understand memory in a few of its literary and in one of its liturgical manifestations. I will assume that memory is a feature of the *imago Dei* and thus treat it as a divine imperative that answers to man in his predicaments of exile and estrangement. But it is also, as St. Augustine taught, the human faculty that recognizes and apprehends the pattern of divine intention in the world. In its final consummation, memory

is God's answer to that irrepressible human supplication for glory that is everywhere evident in our cultural enterprise as far back as Homer. And it culminates not so much in our memory of God as in God's memory of us.

I

Odysseus, ashore among the lotus-eaters, exiled and longing for Ithaca, sends three men on a scouting trip. The men mingle with the benign and mellow natives, who give them some of the local produce—the honey-sweet fruit that dissolves forever “all memory of the journey home” and renders the men oblivious.¹ So Odysseus, man of many turns, must drag them by force back to their dark-prowed ships.

Homer thus provides us with an insight into the perils of the exilic state: your *nostos*, your return home, has no greater nemesis, nor your captors a better friend, than amnesia. This is why it is entirely proper to say that the lotus renders these men *oblivious*. They are not oblivious *to*, as we usually say, by which we mean “unaware,” for the men are fully aware of what the drug pushers have given them. They are so aware that they are mad to have more. Rather, the men are oblivious *of*: they have forgotten.² They do not remember why they are on this journey; they have forgotten Ithaca, their destination and their home. The implication here is that there is an allure to the lotus akin to that of Lethe, the river of forgetfulness. Oblivion, amnesia, whatever its ill effects, has an undeniable seductiveness to it. It especially appeals—as perhaps we know too well—to the transgressor bitten by the fang of conscience, just as amnesty appeals to the criminal on the lam. “Memory” (μνήμη) is found in “amnesia” and “amnesty” alike: these words suggest that memory can be a burden unlikely to be made lighter by a mere prefix. How blessed, at least in one sense, for the exile to be without memory of home, for amnesia wipes away what is most sorrowful about

1. Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1991), 9.109.

2. From *obliviosus*: forgetful, producing forgetfulness; *oblivisci*, to forget (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “nostalgia”).

nostalgia.³ It takes away the sickness in “homesickness.” Scurry down the long centuries of implacable time and you will hear a great admirer of Homer, John Keats, tubercular and dying, offer similar advice: “Go not to Lethe.”⁴

Or, if you prefer, think not of Odysseus but of Achilles: no one needs the lotus more than he, for there he is, taking a brief respite from his rage in order to mourn the loss of his friend Patroclus, who died “a world away from his fatherland.”⁵ And bear in mind that the modern warfaring state has not yet arrived on the scene to bestow PTSD on the sons and daughters it is always ready to sacrifice on the altars of its own bellicosity, nor has brain science appeared yet to give the debilitating effects of war this local habitation and name. But would it not be salutary for swift-footed Achilles if he could avail himself of “deep brain stimulation,” a form of neuro-manipulation that “can modulate dysfunctional circuits mediating sensorimotor, cognitive, and emotional processing . . . [and] erase a pathological fear memory by activating neurons and excitatory synapses constituting the memory trace”?⁶ Would it not be better for Achilles, though far from home and never to be granted a *nostos*, if he could forget? After all, he himself says that he has lost but also killed (*ton apole-sa*) his friend by sending him to battle in his stead—indeed, in his own armor. Who among the Achaeans would be better served by sweet forgetfulness than he?

We know full well what memory erasure offers to those longing for the waters of oblivion or for the fruit of the blessed lotus. To those orphaned in a wasteland from which all

3. “Nostalgia” comes from *nostos* (home) + *algia* (pain). Our sense of nostalgia as a disease of memory is etymologically naive.

4. John Keats, “Ode on Melancholy,” in *The Complete Poems*, ed. John Barnard (New York: Penguin, 1977), 348.

5. Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1990), 18.116.

6. Walter Glannon, “Brain Implants to Erase Memories,” *Frontiers in Neuroscience* 11 (October 24, 2017), available at <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnins.2017.00584>. Glannon continues, “This could disrupt reconsolidation of the memory stored as information in the brain. Erasing fear memories identified as the source of anxiety, panic, phobia, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) could be an effective therapy when they fail to respond to other treatments.”

the enchantments of the Homeric world have been banished it offers freedom from thought, conscience, guilt, horror, sorrow, and therefore ultimately from self. In part we can understand the allure. We can certainly understand why Helen is home again in Sparta with red-haired Menelaus, a man not much more impressive than his usurper Paris. In her fifties now, not quite the catch she once was, she understands that she has never had much more to recommend her than her beauty, which turns out to be ephemeral, and she knows that on account of it, and on account of her own unfaithfulness, many Greeks have died, including her brother-in-law Agamemnon, whose death is the cause of her own husband's depression (unless *she* is the cause). And so there she is, self-medicating, probably night after night, with all those lovely Egyptian drugs she collected on her seven-year journey home from Troy. What is there not to understand about the freedom on offer, the soothing balm of freedom *from*? As creatures of conscience we know what it means to suffer the torments and ravages of memory, to be lost "poorly" in our thoughts, as Lady Macbeth puts it to her murderous and now jittery and guilt-slain husband, a man of vaulting ambition near whom the Lethean waters of neuro-manipulation do not flow and over whom a brutal parody of baptism—"a little water clears us of this deed"⁷—turns out to have no power whatsoever.

And so it is with another of Shakespeare's murderers whose fratricide "hath the primal eldest curse upon't": "What if this cursed hand / Were thicker than itself with brother's blood, / Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens / To wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy / But to confront the visage of offense?"⁸ The question Claudius asks does not serve to put him in mercy's way; or, rather, "possessed of the effects" for which he did the murder—ambition, crown, and queen—he cannot avail himself of mercy. And yet the question—"Whereto serves mercy / But to confront the visage of offense?"—is the right one, so long as he is susceptible of being confronted and so long as no expert is on hand to "erase a pathological fear memory

7. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), 2.2.64. All quotations from Shakespeare's plays are taken from this edition.

8. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3.3.43–47.

by activating neurons and excitatory synapses constituting the memory trace.”

What our poets of old would say about neural manipulation is not difficult to imagine. Memory erasure may have all the seductions of the sirens’ song itself, and perhaps other seductions we do not know of, but the bards appear to believe that when you are in exile, including the exile of mortal sin, when you are far from home in any sense, you must not eat the lotus or go to Lethe. Likewise, Shakespeare seems to believe that if you are the Thane of Glamis, or the usurping uncle of Lord Hamlet, you would do well to let conscience do its job there in the unsettled and unsettling region of memory where your treachery lives on.

Why this should be so both Homer and Shakespeare make clear in their rites of reconciliation. Think of Cordelia’s forgiving Lear, who once made the mistake of regarding himself a man more sinned against than sinning. Or think of the great coming together of Priam and Achilles, which in dramatic terms takes place in the Greek encampment, but in spiritual or psychic terms, in *moral* terms, takes place in the quiet expanse of memory itself. At their meeting, Priam will say, “Revere the gods, Achilles! Pity me in my own right, / *Remember* your own father! I deserve more pity . . . / I have endured what no one on earth has ever done before— / I put to my lips the hands of the man who killed my son.”⁹ And then both of these great men will be “overpowered by memory,”¹⁰ and Achilles will say, “You have a heart of iron. / Come, please, sit down on this chair here . . . / Let us put our griefs to rest in our own hearts, / rake them up no more, raw as we are with mourning.”¹¹ Then Achilles, pitying Priam because he sees in him his own pitiable father, will at last relent and release the body of Priam’s son, Hector. He who in his rage had dragged the body of Hector before the city of Troy for all to see will lift “Hector up in his own arms” and place him on a funeral bier.¹² Priam, undoubtedly between two extremes of passion, will then take Hector home.

9. Homer, *The Iliad*, 24.588–91 (emphasis added).

10. *Ibid.*, 24.594.

11. *Ibid.*, 24.608–11.

12. *Ibid.*, 24.691.

Of course it is not in the purview of neuroscience to provide us with so great a scene as this, but then it is not in the power of any instrumental science to do so, for such enterprises do not treat of whole persons, personhood, or the self in the fullness of its enduring spiritual affliction. This great moment brings the history of Achilles's rage to its close, and thus brings to a close the project of *The Iliad* itself. Troy has not yet fallen, but the rage that is the cause of so much slaughter and grief has ebbed; it has been quieted in the court of memory, and *that* victory, not the victory over Troy, is that with which the poem has concerned itself. I say again that it is not in the power of those whose universe is fundamentally comprised of billiard-ball causation to provide us with pictures of such magnificence or to erect such monuments to human glory, for in granting themselves an intellectual shortcut through the causes and taking it they have left themselves with the human person as mere material, a lump of galvanized meat for whom memory is as great a nuisance as a sore tooth. Yet perhaps that is the point of the shortcut: what remains now is only the anesthesia and the cutting, for on this account the pursuit of knowledge has as its end mere power—not wisdom, not God, not the fear of God.

But any pursuit that fails of its proper *telos* necessarily presupposes man as a mere dwarf of himself—man in ruins. If you doubt this, think for a moment of constructing a thoroughgoing anthropology with such words and phrases as “activating neurons” and “excitatory synapses,” next to which the metaphysical assumptions of the modern natural sciences seem delphic.¹³

13. Consider how little time it took this taker of intellectual shortcuts, this man who sees only material causation, to speak unproblematically of a computer as a thing that has memory—that has a memory—which is to suppose perforce that it can remember, which is absurd. His next move is to say that his brain is just a complex computer and that human memory is a mere storage facility for data. By such carelessness of thought he has turned himself into something even less than dead matter; he has turned himself into a machine, a device made not in the image of the incorruptible triune God but in the image of a corruptible god that he himself has made—in the image, that is, of a thing, a recent thing. In very short order that recent thing has become the presiding heuristic for this man's self-understanding, or rather for his self-misunderstanding, for no one in the preposterous position of being made in the image of something he himself has made can possibly understand himself. He certainly cannot understand memory or imagine why anyone would believe that Mnemosyne is the mother of the muses. But one thing is certain: it

I leave aside the question of which is the more noble occupation: a science that plays fast and loose with a primary faculty of moral accountability and personhood or a form of poetry that does not. I likewise leave aside the question of which pursuit honors and which debases the language our tongues and ears were actually made for. Perhaps it is enough to say that the dense complexity of man, the leaden depths of his heavy grief and the airy heights of his rapturous joy, his laughable foibles and his laudable triumphs, his inclinations to treachery and his capacity for forgiveness. All that we find justly rendered in the Homeric enterprise or in Shakespeare, where this paragon of animals is noble in reason, infinite in faculty, and admirable in form, should remind us that the irreducible man of our old expansive humane endeavors will brook no enforced diminishment in the new narrow mechanistic ones. He will not suffer to be made into yet another form of malleable dead matter or to be another trophy hanging in the temple of Baconian or Cartesian mastery, as susceptible of human prying and invasion as the nucleus is to the bomb-makers and as private grief is to the unblinking camera of public concupiscence.

Be that as it may, let us reiterate the point, which at least on the Homeric view is far more pressing: forgetfulness is fatal for those in exile. For what can be more important to the way-faring exile—whether he be *polytropos* Odysseus in lotus-land or Jeremiah alongside alien waters—than memory?

II

The Judeo-Christian inheritance, no less than the Greek, is clear on the matter of remembering. Even as Odysseus is “left to pine on an island, racked with grief / in the nymph Calypso’s house,”¹⁴ so by the waters of Babylon the exiled children of Israel hang their harps in the willows. “For they that led us away captive,”

can come as no surprise that he is deeply invested in “activating neurons and excitatory synapses,” for if you think of the brain as a machine, then a machine it will be, just as if you think of nature as a commodity, then a commodity it will be. There remains nothing left for you to do but to await the catastrophe that inevitably follows upon impudent tinkering.

14. Homer, *The Odyssey*, 5.15–16.

says the psalmist, “required of us then a song, and melody in our heaviness.” They said, “sing us one of the songs of Sion” (Ps 137:3).¹⁵

But no amount of mockery works: no one there can sing a song of home; no one can “sing the Lord’s song in a strange land” (Ps 137:4). The psalmist thus regards the circumstance seriously enough to take an oath: “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning” (Ps 137:5–6); that is, if I forget my home, may I also forget the skill by which I play on my harp the songs of home. We are not told that Odysseus takes such an oath, but remember that when he is home at last he will string “with virtuoso ease” the bow he has not held in twenty years: string it “like an expert singer skilled at lyre and song.”¹⁶ This is the Homeric way of saying that the hand of Odysseus, who did not eat the lotus, remembers her cunning.

“Remember” must surely be the third greatest commandment, if not on the evidence of sheer repetition then by dint of the Bible’s unrelenting emphasis on *anamnesis* itself. The translators appointed by King James used “remember” 117 times in the Old Testament (they used “forget” fifty-two times); “remember” appears twenty-six times in the books of Moses and twenty-four in the Psalms. Subjunctive and indicative forms recur, but by far the most frequent form is the imperative—about sixty times—and the commands go up from below no less frequently than they come down from above. God says, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Ex 20:8), but the psalmist says, “O remember not the sins and offences of my youth” (25:6).¹⁷ God says, “Remember, and forget not, how thou provokedst the Lord thy God to wrath in the wilderness” (Dt 9:7), but Job says, “Remember, I beseech thee, that thou hast made me as the clay; and wilt thou bring me into dust again?” (10:9). There are promises from on high—“I will remember their sins no more” (Jer 31:34)—as from below: “I will remember the works of the Lord, and call to mind thy wonders of old time” (Ps

15. All quotations from the Psalms are taken from the *Book of Common Prayer* (= *BCP*) translation.

16. Homer, *The Odyssey*, 21.456, 454.

17. All biblical quotations, excepting those from the Psalms, are taken from the *Authorized (King James) Version* (= *AKJV*) translation.

77:11). Oaths, such as we have already seen, likewise move both ways: the God who with a “mighty hand” redeemed Israel out of Egypt keeps the oath “which he had sworn unto your fathers” (Dt 7:8); the psalmist takes a self-maledictory oath: “If I do not remember thee [Jerusalem], let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth” (137:6).

I take it that the psalmist’s dilemma—*how* to sing a song of Zion in a strange land—is an aesthetic, not a practical, one, an artistic predicament such as bedeviled Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn when, free in the West and yet in exile, he said, “I have no home ground to support me.”¹⁸ But whether it be aesthetic or practical or otherwise, sing you must. The homeland must live freshly in your memory; the alternative is spiritual death. For this reason, the Hebraic injunctions bear—as indeed an appreciable amount of our now-toppled and desecrated statuary bears—variations on the warning “lest ye forget” or “lest thou forget,” most frequently and with most urgency in the book of Deuteronomy, of which the following is but one example: “Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life: but teach them thy sons, and thy sons’ sons” (4:9).

Homer was not wrong, but he had nothing on the children of Israel: the great enemy of exile is amnesia of the rich life-giving cultural, liturgical, historical, and religious endowment by which a people knows and understands itself and in accordance with which it undertakes the difficult, necessary, and inescapable task of rearing its children, lest that rich endowment be lost. Would you fend off dissolution from within? Would you enjoy stability, longevity, and comity? Then avail yourself of moral instruction by preserving the songs and stories that serve as its repositories; tell the stories to your children; sing the songs to your children’s children. Bear in mind that singing and storytelling are themselves a means of remembering.¹⁹

18. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Between Two Millstones, Book 2: Exile in America, 1978–1994*, trans. Peter Constantine (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2020), 51.

19. Storytelling is also a means of taking arms against a sea of distractions. It is nearly impossible when thinking about memory not to call upon Socrates, who in the *Phaedrus* insists that this new technology called “writing” will prove fatal to memory. On this account, even the children of Israel, already

III

In considering Odysseus on Ogygia and the psalmist in Babylon I have been preparing to say something about their enduring relevance to our own mode of being in the world and our very structures of thought. For exile is not particular; it is no respecter of persons. It became the default condition of man at his eviction from paradise, and it accounts at least in part for the theme of remembrance and the injunctions to remember that run throughout the Old Testament. Once the paradigm of exile had passed through and been fully assimilated by the mind of St. Augustine, there would be no casting it off. Man as wayfaring pilgrim has too much about it of a primary or “given” metaphor—like the associations between sleep and death or light and knowledge—to be regarded as the product of mere fancy.²⁰

Thus, in *On Christian Doctrine* we are sojourners on account of our exile, pilgrims whose real journey has a divine analog and end: “Suppose, then, that we are wanderers in a strange country, and could not live happily away from our fatherland. . . . Such is a picture of our condition in this life of mortality. We have wandered far from God.”²¹ So as Augustine says in *City of God*, Cain “built a city,” but Abel, “being a sojourner, built none,”

a people of the book, could become hearers of “many things without being properly taught.” Writing, says Socrates, is “not a potion for remembering, but for reminding” (Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995], 80, 79). To the hawkers of unlimited talk and text, to the chattering classes of twenty-four-hour cable news, this is as much a cause for rejoicing as to the exile it is a cause for alarm—and indeed a call to vigilance. The makers of ambient noise and all that would distract us even from distraction will never sing the songs of home, for they have no home. They are peripatetic lotus-eaters living in contempt of their cultural inheritance. It is only lucky for a groaning creation if they are having fewer children to sing to.

20. For a discussion of a “given” metaphor, see Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 75–82. You might say, if you like, that the heart is a pump, but this metaphor does not have the power of a likeness that is built into the structure of things. The mind might leap to a new metaphor if it is good, but the metaphor is unlikely to have enduring or mythic puissance, for it is susceptible of displacement as soon as the next gadget to come along provides a greater clarity (and more instrumental power) by dint of a more convincing likeness.

21. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, ed. Philip Schaff, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2 (Hendrickson: Peabody, 1994), 523.

and yet “one portion of the earthly city became an image of the heavenly city, not having a significance of its own, but signifying another city, and therefore serving, or ‘being in bondage.’ For it was founded not for its own sake, but to prefigure another city.”²² Augustine’s source is St. Paul himself: “Here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come” (Heb 13:14).

On Augustine’s account, the purpose of the journey, which is to say the purpose of life itself, is to be worthy of the destination; the purpose is transformation—so long as the destination be not forgotten.²³ This was certainly true for the children of Israel leaving the land of bondage and passing through the Red Sea on their way to the land of promise, for it included that purging which took an additional forty years, an exile within the exile. A letter-writer no less given to analogy than St. Paul perceived the paradigmatic power of this sojourn, and so he told his charges that each of us is called out of bondage not to Pharaoh but to sin and death. We pass through the waters of baptism like the children of old through the Red Sea, no doubt pursued by our former captor, no doubt sometimes longing for his fleshpots, on our way to newness of life.

Not even contemporary theology nor the appalling enterprise of “religious studies” will exempt us—except to our peril—from this mode of being or this structure of thought. It is fundamental to Christian self-understanding. Dante retold the story of exile and pilgrimage; Chaucer retold the story; Shakespeare retold the story. In our own era, we see it in the works of Flannery O’Connor, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, and Walker Percy, for example, all of whom are heirs to Augustine and the great Pauline metaphor he certified.

This point bears elaboration. Take the example of Tom More in Percy’s *Love in the Ruins*, even though he is no more exemplary than the main characters in any of these other novelists’ works. Consider what happens when, like Dante, he comes to himself: he sees that he is a “sovereign wanderer,” a “lordly exile,” and he cries out, “Dear God, I can see it now . . . that it is you I love in the beauty of the world and in all the lovely girls

22. Augustine, *City of God*, in *ibid.*, 285.

23. See, e.g., *ibid.*, 287: “The citizens of the city of God are healed while still they sojourn in the earth and sigh for the peace of their heavenly country.”

and dear good friends, and it is pilgrims we are, wayfarers on a journey, and not pigs, nor angels.”²⁴ He will be brought at last to confession and the Eucharist, which is to say the pilgrimage will have done its job of transformation.²⁵

Or take the example of Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited*, which hews closely to the theme of exile. (Waugh, too, regarded exile as our default condition.) It is distinct among these works for one reason in particular, as it is clearly modeled on Augustine’s *Confessions*. The principal similarity to the *Confessions* is that the narrator, Charles Ryder, tells the story of a twenty-year period in his life by remembering it and, in remembering, unveiling the design that governed it. In real time there are wrecks and rows, storms and Sunderings. In real time all is chaos. In real *life* all is chaos and chance. But in memory, for Charles as for Augustine, all is pattern. Charles’s friendship with a young man named Sebastian, whom he meets if not by accident then by rotten luck (Sebastian, drunk, leans through Charles’s open ground-floor window and vomits into his Oxford digs), is nothing less than the sure inauguration of Charles’s conversion. The friendship is punctuated by what Charles calls

24. Walker Percy, *Love in the Ruins* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), 109.

25. In Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*, Hazel Motes is a traveler who goes so far as to put all his confidence in a vehicle of transport, a high rat-colored car. No one who has a good car, he says, needs to be justified. Against the Augustinian warning, he mistakes the vehicle for the destination; he would enjoy rather than use the things of this world. His confidence in the means rather than his hope for the destination persists until a patrol officer destroys the car, whereupon Hazel begins to realize that there is no other earthly city awaiting him, only a pinpoint of light off in the darkness, which is his true destination. In Graham Greene’s *The Power and the Glory*, the “Whiskey Priest” sets out from Concepción hoping to arrive in Vera Cruz. Instead he is forced to be a fugitive and an exile until the pilgrimage transforms him. He is changed not from an undisciplined priest into a martyr, though he becomes one, but from an undisciplined priest into a saint. Consider also Tony Last in Evelyn Waugh’s *A Handful of Dust*, whose sojourn into the heart of darkness affords him the opportunities for the renunciations that are necessary if he is to find redemption. All of these works are in a manner of speaking part of the Augustinian trust, for it was Augustine who stamped on Christian consciousness the metaphor of the pilgrim in exile, the wayfarer who, like the wandering Odysseus, had better remember his true home.

“naughtiness high in the catalogue of grave sins,”²⁶ and it makes possible—it gives way to—his adulterous romance with Sebastian’s sister Julia, which in turn gives way to Charles’s union with God sealed in his taking on the Roman Catholic obedience. Sebastian is the “forerunner” to Julia, who in turn is a forerunner to the Church—to another love that enables Charles in the end to say a prayer, “an ancient, newly learned form of words,”²⁷ to a God he once regarded as bosh. In Augustinian fashion, the lesser objects of Charles’s desires tutor him in the true object of desire. Love and happiness die in order to give way to another love and another kind of happiness. In Waugh’s imagination, as in the imaginations of most writers in this lineage, the love and happiness are limited and laid hold of imperfectly, as befits the imperfect denizen of the earthly city, but we see that love and happiness are properly ordered at last. Even so did Dante, the exile and wayfarer, see fear turn into desire.

Thus happiness, perhaps better thought of as “blessedness,” is possible; indeed, I will suggest that a kind of ecstasy is possible. It is possible within a comedic view of human history, which is to say the view handed down to us by the Bible itself.

IV

Aristotle told us that happiness (*eudaimonia*) requires “complete virtue and a complete life.” He used the qualifier “complete” because “there are many vicissitudes in life” and because “even the most successful can meet with great misfortunes in old age.”²⁸ Augustine likewise acknowledged that vicissitudes complicate the matter of happiness.²⁹ But he also fine-tuned the point—in a sense he redirected the Aristotelian question—not so much by

26. Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1944), 45.

27. *Ibid.*, 350.

28. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 16 (1.9).

29. “What flood of eloquence,” he asked, “can suffice to detail the miseries of this life? . . . Is the body of the wise man exempt from any pain which may dispel pleasure, from any inquietude which may banish repose?” (Augustine, *City of God*, 401).

tossing it out, though in a manner of speaking he did toss it, but by exalting memory as the faculty that accomplishes the completion Aristotle required. Or, if you prefer, Augustine's great court of memory is a court of adjudication where the rememberer meets God and in remembering becomes aware, by grace, of patterns hitherto imperceptible to him. He makes sense, he *sees* the sense, of the chaotic past. Augustine and Charles Ryder, rememberers both, even make sense of their past sins. As Flannery O'Connor put it, "Sin occasionally brings one closer to God."³⁰

This should strike a harmonious chord with anyone who has given Shakespeare's comedic vision its due, for we also have it from Hamlet—in a tragedy, no less—that "there's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough hew them how we will."³¹ The *Confessions*, we might say, is a painstaking elaboration of the process by which a man of rough-hewn ends comes to this elegant—and in its elegance simple—conclusion. From the perspective that memory affords, a man can see how things stand with him and have always stood between him and his God. From the perspective that memory affords, he can say, "From this vast, deep sea you are even now drawing out to safety a soul that seeks you and thirsts to enjoy you,"³² all the swimming away from God notwithstanding.

If in place of a filched pear to think back on Hamlet has instead the skull of Yorick, he is no less than Augustine in the court of memory: the melancholy prince remembers Yorick as a man of "infinite jest." We see Hamlet there in the graveyard, head spinning in the bewitching perplexities of remembrance, holding the lipless skull and asking of it, "Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar?"³³ So too, Augustine, remembering, had asked, "What did it profit me, O God, my true life, that my speech was acclaimed above those of my peers and

30. Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), 92.

31. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 5.2.10–11.

32. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 28.

33. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 5.1.189–91.

fellow-students? Was it not all smoke and wind?"³⁴ The answer of course is "yes," but seeing it as smoke and wind is impossible outside the court of memory. The jokes of the one, the oratorical contests of the other, the pleasure, the happiness of both—none of it can fall into its place until it falls into the court of memory. Only when it has all been remembered can Augustine put to rest his restlessness; only then can Hamlet arrive at the "readiness" for death that is "all."³⁵

Memory alone conjures into being the complete thing Aristotle required, and we may even say that memory concerns the wayfaring pilgrim more than do external goods, virtue, or both. This is an important point for the morally anguished: in *Confessions* Augustine would be made chaste, and in *Brideshead* Sebastian Flyte would be made good, but not yet, for perhaps there would be more girls to ogle during Mass and more nights to get drunk on, more fictions like Dido's to indulge, more oratorical contests in which to bury the competition. But what matters for the sojourner on his way to the true city, what he should very much like the comfort of, is something like the assurance that all shall be well. *That* is a matter for memory to adjudicate, which it does in the unmistakably comedic structure of history itself.

The structure of our lives is then made clear: we are actors in a comedy, which implies a comic (and cosmic) playwright. We move from chaos to order, and a marriage feast awaits us at the end. It awaits us as surely as in *Much Ado About Nothing* a marriage feast awaits Beatrice and Benedick in messy Messina, sealing for them and the house of Leonato the restoration of the social order. How fitting that again and again in this life we should be escorted from confession to the eucharistic banquet—a rhythmic sacramental repetition that reminds us of our roles in the comedy we have been written into.

V

Having considered memory as the defender of the exile and the site of reconciliation, having considered it as both command and

34. Augustine, *Confessions*, 27.

35. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 5.2.222.

promise, and having recurred to St. Augustine's insistence on memory as that vast region where the pattern of divine intention in the world reveals itself amid the chaos of our limited vision, I now consider the joyful redemptive end that the conventions of comedy—and history as comedy—require.

To do this, I turn to a story no less redemptive than a novel aforementioned, Greene's *The Power and the Glory*, which ends, clearly, in a vision of epithalamic glory. Apt as that example is, its denouement offers less to the present theme of memory than a story we can hardly help calling to mind when treating of memory, namely, Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Dostoevsky, in this great work completed not long before his death, intimated by liturgical allusion the salvific power of memory in terms both temporal and eternal. Memory, he suggested, our memory first but God's memory of us ultimately, takes us beyond Augustinian rest and quietude to a place outside ourselves: to ecstasy (*ek stasis*).

In the novel's final chapter, Alyosha Karamazov, addressing a group of young boys who once grossly mistreated another boy whose funeral they have just attended, says to them, "Let us agree here, by Ilyusha's stone, that we will never forget—first, Ilyushechka,³⁶ and second, one another. . . . Let us never forget how good we once felt here, altogether, united by such good and kind feelings as made us, too, for the time that we loved the poor boy, perhaps better than we actually are."³⁷ Alyosha is first suggesting to the boys, indeed recommending to them, an ethic of love rooted in remembrance: "You must know that there is nothing higher, or stronger, or more useful afterwards in life, than some good memory, especially a memory from childhood, from the parental home. You hear a lot said about your education, yet some such beautiful sacred memory, preserved from childhood, is perhaps the best education." There is something greater, however, that Alyosha, in a kind of cunning charity, is working toward. Such a store of memories, he tells the boys, "may serve some day for our salvation." He says it might

36. The diminutive for Ilyusha, the dead boy.

37. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 774. The following quotations from this work are taken from pages 774–76.

even keep these boys “from great evil.” But this requires that they keep one another in remembrance, and so Alyosha reminds them, “Let us never forget one another. I say it again. I give you my word, gentlemen, that for my part I will never forget any one of you. . . . You are all dear to me, gentlemen, from now on I shall keep you all in my heart, and I ask you to keep me in your hearts, too!” It is Ilyusha himself, Alyosha says, who unites them all in “this good, kind feeling. . . . Let us never forget him, and may his memory be eternal and good in our hearts now and unto ages of ages.” To this priestly injunction the boys enthusiastically reply as if in liturgical response, “Yes, yes, eternal, eternal.”

Next they declare their love for Alyosha, who then repeats what he has just quoted from the final hymn of the Orthodox memorial prayers, the simple phrase “memory eternal”: “Memory eternal for the dead boy!” And again the boys cry out, “Memory eternal!” Then a boy named Kolya asks Alyosha, “Can it really be true as religion says, that we shall all rise from the dead, and come to life, and see one another again, and everyone, and Ilyushechka?” Alyosha assures him that this is so: “Certainly we shall rise, certainly we shall see and gladly, joyfully tell one another all that has been.” Alyosha is apparently enraptured, for he says this “half laughing, half in ecstasy,” and then, hand in hand, they all repair to Ilyusha’s memorial dinner, “an ancient, eternal thing.” Dostoyevsky gives Kolya the last line: “And eternally so, all our lives hand in hand! Hurrah for Karamazov!”

“Memory eternal” is an imperative given to the living to preserve the dead not in impudent formaldehyde, nor by impious cryogenic manipulation, for we are not treating of mere animal flesh unhappily accessorized with neural pathways. It is an imperative given to the living to preserve the dead in the mansions and fields and treasure houses of memory itself, for we are treating of God’s image. The memory of the living will of course fail, but all the same in this temporal moment (“all our lives hand in hand”) they are joined to eternity (“and eternally so”) in the mystical body that is and ever shall be. I repeat, “memory eternal” is an imperative to the living.

However, to treat “memory eternal” only as a human imperative is ultimately to impoverish it, for in its consummation it is also, ultimately, a supplication to God. It was the prayer of the thief that he live on, though dead, in Christ’s eternal

memory: “Remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom” (Lk 23:42). It is now a request that we ourselves be preserved in God’s eternal remembrance, for in the divine memory, of which human memory is an image, we are “re-membered” into the mystical body.³⁸ The living undertake this work, this *leiturgia*, on behalf of the reposed: it falls to the living not only to remember but to say the prayer of eternal remembrance on behalf of all, as Alyosha and the young boys say on behalf of Ilyusha. Thus do they, in at least one way, and in a manner not indifferent to those awaiting the resurrection, go all their lives hand in hand—and eternally so—uttering the prayer that will in turn be eternally uttered on their behalf by members of that mystical body whose sacred duty is to obey what I am calling the third greatest commandment: remember.

But why should Alyosha, laughing with joy, also be ecstatic? The answer lies in the mystical sweetness of divine memory itself. The good thief’s request, “Remember me,” elicits from Jesus the reply, “Verily, I say unto thee, Today thou shalt be with me in paradise” (Lk 23:42–43).

In other words [says Pavel Florensky], “to be remembered” by the Lord is the same thing as “to be in paradise.” “To be in paradise” is to be in eternal memory and, consequently, to have eternal existence and therefore an eternal memory of God. Without remembrance of God we die, but our very remembrance of God is possible through God’s remembrance of us.³⁹

38. In “Memory Eternal: The Presence of the Dead in Orthodox Christian Piety,” Albert Raboteau says that “to remember the dead is to remember the body of Christ” (Ingersoll Lecture, Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, MA, November 4, 2010).

39. Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters*, trans. Boris Jakim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 144. Thomas Hopko reminds us that “Sheol or Hades or the Pit, the biblical realm of the dead also called Abaddon, is the condition of forsakenness and forgottenness by God. It is the situation of non-life” (*The Orthodox Faith*, vol. 2 [Yonkers: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1981], 56). I am indebted to Professor Donald Sheehan for directing me to Florensky. See Sheehan’s “Dostoevsky and Memory Eternal: An Eastern Orthodox Approach to *The Brothers Karamazov*,” in *Another City: A Journal of Orthodox Culture* (October 31, 2020), <https://anothercity.org/dostoevsky-and-memory-eternal-an-eastern-orthodox-approach-to-the-brothers-karamazov/>.

What we hear in the requiem hymns of the Eastern Church is, on the one hand, remembrance of lost glory, a great longing for home characteristic of the exile to whom forgetfulness is fatal: "I am an image of thy glory ineffable, though I bear the brands of transgressions; Show thy compassions upon thy creature, O Master, and purify him by thy loving-kindness; and grant unto me the home-country of my heart's desire, making me again a citizen of Paradise."⁴⁰ But what we also hear, and this without equivocation, is that it is God's eternal remembrance of us that makes possible—that accomplishes—the repose or rest we so fervently pray for, even as our own remembrance in time reveals to us the pattern of divine intention. The final prayer offered by the clergy is this: "Give rest eternal in blessed falling asleep, O Lord, to the soul of thy servant, departed this life, and make his memory to be eternal." In response the choir sings, three times, "Memory Eternal," which means "both God's 'eternal memory' of me and my 'eternal memory' of God. In other words, it is the eternal memory of the Church, in which God and man converge."⁴¹ Even as the dust we are made of is constantly before us until we are returned to it in the end, so he who "remembereth that we are but dust" preserves us against corruption in that mansion that is beyond it: a memory that alone has leave, as perhaps divine paradox would have it, to forget our transgressions and still our restlessness.⁴² Or, as Florensky says,

The whole Office of Burial is built on these inseparable ideas of justification, peace, bliss, and immortality, and the opposite ideas of sin, vanity, torment, and death. Christ's victory over death, the gift of life, is viewed as the overcoming of worldly passion, as the cooling of the inner burning of a sinful soul, as the illumination of sinful darkness, as "the habitation of the just" (Prv 3:33).⁴³

40. *Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Apostolic Church*, trans. and ed. Elizabeth Florence Hapgood, 6th ed. (Englewood, NJ: Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America, 1983), 566. All quotations from the requiem are taken from this service book.

41. Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, 144.

42. Ps 103:14; Jer 31:34.

43. Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, 141.

“Bliss,” he says, is “rest from ceaseless, greedy, insatiable desire”⁴⁴—and also, we might add, from a warrior’s rage. To find such rest, to be so delivered—no wonder Alyosha, half-laughing, is also half-ecstatic.

VI

Hamlet’s father is in torment, doomed, he says, “for a certain term to walk the night, / And for the day confined to fast in fires, / Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature / Are burnt and purged away.”⁴⁵ His state is more hopeful than that of Odysseus, who not only has no god to keep in eternal remembrance; no god’s eternal remembrance keeps him. He does not even have the assurance that foul crimes done in his days of nature can be burned and purged away, for he has no real notion of foul deeds. It is true that he suffers less than Achilles from the torment of being forgotten, but all either of them can ever hope for is to live on in a succession of individual memories that both men, Achilles especially, rightly fear will fail them, even if those attempting to keep the memories alive never run afoul of neuroscience. That is the great dilemma of the Greek underworld and the Greek conception of man: it is paganism falling short of the thing it most desires but has no proper theory or notion of, namely what in Christianity is called the resurrection of the body. Odysseus, during his *nekylia*, takes no comfort from meeting his mother’s shade: he longs to embrace Anticleia, but his hands pass through her three heartbreaking times. Although Odysseus assures the dead Achilles that he is better regarded than any other man in Hades and that he is honored as a god in the memory of the living, Achilles finds no rest in this. He says he would rather live on earth as a peasant’s slave “than rule down here over all

44. *Ibid.*, 140. “Chaste life is the integrity and incorruptness of man’s being. That is its definition as existent ‘in itself.’ ‘For itself,’ it is the bliss of a heart made peaceful and measured, a heart brought from the boundlessness of desire to measure, a heart restrained by measure, made beautiful by measure. But . . . what is this chastity ‘for another’ and precisely ‘for Another’? What is it as an aspect of God’s life? It is ‘God’s memory,’ His ‘eternal memory’” (*ibid.*, 143).

45. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.5.10–13.

the breathless dead."⁴⁶ The Church will later triumph over this proto-Manichaean and proto-Platonic problem that the bodiless Anticleia and breathless dead are agonizing emblems of; she will do it in that delicate, difficult, and tricky endeavor called eschatology, which is so easy to get wrong and far too often botched, especially by the gnostic popularizers of doom erotically stimulated by the thought of *others* being left behind.

Homer is no homilist, but if he were a homilist his preaching would be in vain, for in his world there is no conquering of death by death (*thanáto thánaton patísas*), no incarnate God to be resurrected, and thus no resurrection. Yet the Homeric enterprise and the cultural enterprise the Homeric poems set in motion have deep within them that great human longing for glory (*kleos*), for eternity, the longing to endure and to outwit death.

For all the imaginative richness of the Homeric enterprise, however, its great shortcoming is a failure of imagination; it is a theological failure as well, obviously, but it is a failure of imagination inasmuch as it fails to see human memory as an image of divine memory—a feature, that is, of the *imago Dei*. It provides a version of memory analogous to that by which a man remembers his homeland, but it is a version that could promise nothing more than glory vouchsafed to mortals liable this side of the eschaton to forget and too much inclined in this vale of sorrows to feast on the lotus. Possessed of that apparently universal feeling of exile and compelled by innate longings to find eternal remembrance, anyone can intuit as the Greeks did the importance of remembering. But that remembering would need a long and careful elaboration in Jewish and Christian thought and especially in Christian liturgical practice, thanks to which we can see how the great command to remember serves a very great purpose: to preserve the exile and defend the pilgrim. Its final version, God's unending memory, is the *locus amoenus* of the wayfarer's hope of paradise regained. Sown in corruption, he is the supplicant for a glory vouchsafed in incorruption. □

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46. Homer, *Odyssey*, 11.558.