

Introduction

It was an earlier time, late nineteenth or early twentieth century, perhaps, when three learned men—Hermann Sorgel, Daniel Thorpe, and Major Barclay—gathered in an English pub. They had attended a day-long Shakespearean conference in London, listening to lectures on the works of William Shakespeare and experiencing a lively discussion on the structure and theme of their favorite sonnet. What better place to finish the day. A bar lined one wall, a smoke-stained fireplace stood against another, and several like-minded patrons circled small wooden tables separated just enough for an intimate conversation. The cigars were strong that night, and the dark, warm beer was smooth and plentiful.

The major abruptly changed the conversation when he pointed to a beggar standing outside. Islamic legend has it, he said, that King Solomon owned a ring that allowed him to understand the language of the birds. And a particular beggar, so the story goes, somehow came into possession of the ring. Of course the ring was beyond any imaginable value and, as a result, could not be sold. Legend has it that the beggar died in one of the courtyards of the mosque of Wazir Khan, in Lahore.

Sorgel jokingly added that the ring was surely lost, like all magical thingamajigs. Or maybe some chap has it, he said with a chuckle, and can't make out what they're saying because of all the racket.

Thorpe weighed in. "It is not a parable. Or if it is, it is still a true story. There are certain things that have a price so high that they can never be sold." Thorpe went mute and stared at the floor. He seemed to regret having spoken at all.

The darkening of Thorpe's mood and the lateness of the evening moved the major to call it a night. Thorpe and Sorgel soon followed suit and returned to their hotel. Thorpe then invited Sorgel to his room to continue their conversation. It was there, in the privacy of Thorpe's room, that he asked Sorgel if he would like to own King Solomon's ring. "That's a metaphor, of course, but the thing the metaphor stands for is every bit as wondrous as the ring. 'Shakespeare's Memory,' from his youngest boyhood days to early April 1616—I offer it to you." Sorgel fell silent as he struggled to find a word.

Thorpe continued. "I am not an impostor, I am not insane. I beg you to suspend judgment until you hear me out. I was a military physician. I was in a field hospital when a soldier who had been shot twice was about to die. What he told me might sound quite startling, but strange things are the norm in times of war. The soldier, Adam Clay, offered me 'Shakespeare's

Memory,' and then, in the final minutes of his life, he struggled to explain the singular condition of the gift. 'The one who offers the gift must offer it aloud, and the one who is to receive it must accept it the same way. The man who gives it loses it forever,' he said to me."

"And you now possess 'Shakespeare's Memory'?" Sorgel asked.

"I am now in possession of two memories—Shakespeare's and my own. They seem to merge, or maybe I should say that two memories possess me."

I've searched the works of Shakespeare for years, Sorgel thought. What better gift than to know the inner workings of Shakespeare's mind, and maybe touch his soul. "Yes," Sorgel declared with an assertive tone. "I accept 'Shakespeare's Memory.'"

"Shakespeare's Memory" is a short story by Jorge Luis Borges. While the work is fiction, Borges' insights into memory are both precise and profound, and as real as life itself. Borges leads us through a maze of discoveries as bits and pieces and chunks of memory begin to unfold.

Sorgel recalled Thorpe's words. "It will emerge in dreams, or when you awake, when you turn the pages of a book, or turn a corner. Don't be impatient. Don't invent recollections. As I gradually forget, you will remember."

Sorgel's sleepless nights were mixed with the fear that it was a hoax, or possibly an illusion, and the longing hope that he might in some way become Shakespeare. Memories began to return as visual images and then auditory, sounds that issued from him when Sorgel sang a melody he had never heard before. In a few days, Sorgel's speech took on the r's and open vowels of the sixteenth century. He began to sound like Shakespeare.

Memory was not the stretch of rolling hills with green meadows and natural springs that Sorgel had hoped for. It was a mountain range with beautiful and, at the same time, terrifying peaks, frigid temperatures, and threatening crevasse just around the corner. Some memories were shadowy, and some were so traumatic that they were hidden forever. Sorgel enjoyed the happiness of the moment, and then his mood darkened from an unwanted memory.

At first, Sorgel's and Shakespeare's memories were separate and easily distinguishable from each other. Then they began to mix, and finally "Shakespeare's Memory" overpowered his own, causing Sorgel to question his sanity and wonder how little time was left before he was no longer the man he once knew.

It became clear that Sorgel had no choice but to give "Shakespeare's Memory" away. He dialed telephone numbers at random. At first they were met with skepticism and then an abrupt hang-up. In time, he reached a more receptive gentleman, and Sorgel said, "Do you want

‘Shakespeare’s Memory?’” And to Sorgel’s surprise, the voice answered, “I will take that risk. I accept ‘Shakespeare’s Memory.’”

“Shakespeare’s Memory” was transferred a little at a time, and it was irregular at best. But years later, some residue still remained. “I am now a man among men,” Sorgel wrote. “In my waking hours I am Professor Emeritus Hermann Sorgel. I putter about the card catalog and compose erudite trivialities, but at dawn I sometimes know that the person dreaming is that other man. Every so often in the evening I am unsettled by small, fleeting memories that are perhaps authentic.”

We awake in the morning, take our shower, brush our teeth, shave without cutting our face, and dress ourselves, all without conscious thought. We remember the names of our children, our spouse, our dog. A friend or family member calls us on the phone to share an incident that happened over ten years ago. We arrive at the office, look at our schedule, and immediately know what must be done and where to go. Memory is miraculous.

It could be argued that memory is our most precious gift. Whether from God, or an evolutionary product developed through the generational pressures of natural selection, memory is our most treasured asset, our life, our history, our footprint in the snow. But it lacks perfection, and it can leave us lost. It can be the temporary loss of a name, a forgotten appointment, or possibly something more serious: amnesia, Alzheimer’s, dementia, brain injuries, repressed memories, tumors, disease. All these and more can leave us with a broken mind.

Throughout civilization, we have questioned our origins, our purpose, and what lies ahead when we are dead and gone. This lingering curiosity is the constant human denominator from one century to another. The ancient Greeks were no different. Long before the alphabet and written word, they shared life’s lessons through the storytelling of myths and legends, using an assortment of gods, goddesses, and other mythological creatures. Through mythology, the Greeks learned the laws of the universe, the cycle of life, and how to best live in their world. The journey shows humanity’s inherent need to explore the origins, meaning, and morality of their lives.

Modern scholars use Greek mythology to study the religions and political institutions of ancient Greek civilization. We know that the ancient Greeks did not believe in absolute truths as practiced by Christianity and Judaism, that gods and goddesses were sometimes believed to have

shared intimate relationships with humans, that mythological creatures held both the power and the fragility of humans, and that gods and goddesses were immortal while humans were not.

Although gods and goddesses of ancient mythology are no longer worshipped by any formal religions of modern times, their legacy continues throughout the world. Many well-known masterpieces in painting, music, literature, and theater employ themes from mythology. The moral and intellectual themes of the stories told about ancient gods and goddesses have been proven easily adaptable to many cultures over many centuries. Not unlike literary metaphors, mythology can sometimes make the complexities, even paradoxes, easier to understand.

Mnemosyne, daughter of Uranus and Gaia, was the goddess of memory. Story has it that Mnemosyne slept with Zeus, the god of weather, for nine consecutive nights and later gave birth to the nine daughters called muses. Each daughter had a specialty of her own: history, astronomy, tragedy, comedy, dance, epic poetry, love poetry, dance to the gods, and lyric poetry. While important in their own right, their gifts would be meaningless without Mnemosyne. How could the gifts of history, poetry, dance, and the others flourish or even continue to exist without memory? Lacking memory, our species would not survive, the act of being could not be apprehended, for the human species must remember who it is or vanish in the darkness of confusion.

Mnemosyne held the secrets to memory. Its power, fragility, and complexities were hers to share; and only through her love could a human begin to understand. Paintings preserve her beauty for all to see. An auburn full mane draped down her back and partially covered her breasts. She had a round face, green eyes, flesh-filled lips, and skin the color of river pearls. She was portrayed as seductive and sophisticated—just what you would expect from a goddess. But her beauty, as striking as it was, was merely the prologue to her magic.

Whether or not you believe that love between a mythological immortal and a human is real is unimportant. Imagination drives the mind and moves the heart and makes the earth change course. That's what love is all about. This is a story about two men's love affair with Mnemosyne. It has the passion and trappings of an all-consuming, out-of-control love affair. Neither man was left untouched. One man fought off the seduction of death, pulled himself through the dark side, and emerged in a different state. He was left with a never-ending love for life's greatest asset, the gift of memory. The other man shot himself in the heart. The three main characters of my story are myself, Larry L. Franklin (1942–), Richard Semon (1859–1918), and of course *Mnemosyne* (Memory).