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Armstrong, Charles I. 2009. *Figures of Memory: Poetry, Space, and the Past*. Palgrave Macmillan. 244pp. ISBN 13: 978-0-230-22353-0 hardback. £50.

The first figure of memory to confront the reader of this book is René Magritte's *La mémoire* (1948) on the cover. The reddish splash on the sculpted head might be blood from a wound, but it is also a patch of vivid colour standing out against the dead pallor of marble or plaster. This serves to introduce some of the ambiguities of memory as pain and pleasure, both wound or trauma and vivid and vital component of the life of the imagination. This sophisticated, theoretically informed study of ten poets from Wordsworth and Tennyson to Jeremy Prynne and Alice Oswald, well-versed in recent criticism, dwells on ambivalence, on memory in poetry as less or more than mimesis, nostalgia or almost new creation, as celebration not forbidding mourning. Memory can be collective as well as individual, so it is appropriate that the study includes the Irish poets W.B. Yeats, Seamus Heaney and Eavan Boland who come from a memory-haunted country that may need to do a lot of forgetting. It is also appropriate that prominence is given to two of the most influential theorists and practitioners of literary remembering, the Wordsworth of the *Prelude* and the T.S. Eliot of 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. New light challenging the established poetics of memory is reflected from the radically revisionist work of three contemporary writers: the book concludes with an assessment of feminist critique of male tradition in Eavan Boland, future-oriented spatial aesthetics in the late modernism of J.H. Prynne and presentist ecopoetics in Alice Oswald.

The approach through the theme of memory delivers gains and losses, winners and losers. Variousness triumphs over tidiness and Yeatsian dreams of order. Poetry, criticism and the imagination are championed and vindicated both severally and collectively. Much-maligned mimesis as an aspect of art recedes even further into the twilight zone. The imperfections of hindsight are identified but championed rather than reproached. Wordsworth is reaffirmed as not just a monument but a living and energising presence in contemporary poetry. Christina Rossetti's intense lyrical opacities appear in a different and more interesting light in the company of Wordsworth, Tennyson and

Stefan George. Prynne's notoriously challenging work is sympathetically discussed in a way that should encourage baffled readers to try again.

But the rather oddly-focused Eliot discussion, only rather tangentially engaged with *The Waste Land*, perhaps says more about memory than about Eliot. Boland and Heaney are left alone and palely loitering rather than integrated into the rest of the discussion. It seems odd to pay so little attention to *Station Island*, Heaney's most direct and ambitious engagement with earlier writers such as Carleton and Joyce, the undead presences which haunt the Irish writer. It was less helpful than the author may have hoped to discuss Heaney immediately after Eliot: the links with Wordsworth are much stronger and Wordsworth's 'Fair seedtime had my soul' from the *Prelude* provides an epigraph for the important autobiographical sequence 'Singing School' in *North*. But 'Singing School' is not discussed and possible connections with Heidegger receive more attention than the actual connections with Wordsworth. While Yeats's ambition to conflate individual recollection with 'the collective memory of the nation, rooted in its native soil' is accurately identified and described there is no real recognition of the pressure this remembered legacy exerted on Heaney's negotiations of collective memory or how he survived it.

Hardy's increasingly recognised influence on contemporary poetry earns him a place in this book, but the manner of his incorporation, based on the *Poems of 1912-13*, is perhaps more ingenious than helpful. He is grouped with the Yeats of 'Under Ben Bulbin' and Tennyson in Arthurian mode in a chapter entitled 'Weird Wests: Victorian and Post-Victorian Displacements of Nostalgia.' There is indeed a common reference to the west, whether Victorian Cornwall or Yeats's Connaught or mythological Arthurian territory, but these are rather different places even if Hardy's memories are Tennysonian as well as personal. One is tempted to devise other groupings such as 'Noxious Norths: Ibsen and Heaney' or 'Savage Souths: Faulkner and Shelley'. Even so, the reader is introduced or reintroduced to rewarding poems and there are there stimulating and suggestive readings. Hardy's haunting, enigmatic phrase 'chasmal beauty' in 'Beeny Cliff' is persuasively linked with the paradox of continuity and disjunction over time. It is for moments like these, or for Armstrong's reading of Prynne's reading of Wordsworth's 'The Solitary Reaper', that one will come back to this book.

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There are a few miscellaneous oddities. Armstrong is appropriately alert to remembered European and classical influences pressing upon the treatment of memory in English poetry and quotes Mallarmé and Rilke to good effect. But why quote Mallarmé only in translation when Rilke is quoted in German, followed by a translation? Proust's extended explorations of memory in *A la recherche du temps perdu* had a profound influence on modernist and contemporary writing, yet there are only two very brief passing references to him. Scott is ignored altogether though his negotiations of collective memory in poems and historical fictions cast a long shadow across literary Europe. Collective memory invites consideration of its unacknowledged sibling the collective unconscious, but Armstrong ignores the invitation and Jung is never mentioned. The Greek term *anamnesis* ('calling to mind', 'recollection') is important in Platonic and Aristotelian doctrine, which is presumably why the Greek title of Aristotle's *On Memory and Reminiscence* is transliterated, as *Peri mnemes kai anamnesis*, but *anamnesis* is actually in the genitive case in the title: it should read *anamneseos*. While readings are usually careful and sensitive it is not clear how many readers would recognize *In Memoriam* cxix as 'a fetishistic roll call of bodily impressions' even if they read it out of context.

But these are small matters. This is a thoughtful and informed study which renews our respect for poetic transformations of what has gone before.

Norman Vance
University of Sussex