

DIFFERENT
REALITIES

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Over the years, I have watched with fascination how the stuff that shapes our everyday experience, the “fabric” of felt reality, changes over time and in different surroundings. I assume that the relative continuity in our interior life is due to the steady flow of our ideas and preoccupations, and to certain stable, permanent features of our physical environment. But what creates a different sense of reality – with a distinct aura – at particular times or places, to the extent that it can be recollected as such many decades later?

Familiar people or objects, even relatively secondary ones such as nannies or toys, take on extra significance during childhood. Two of my parents’ best friends, for instance, Thalia and Dimitrakis, loom

out of proportion from my early years. Within my rather limited child’s horizon, they apparently held an inexplicable importance that left traces in my psyche. Although later I kept perceiving them under a changing, diminishing perspective, recalling their image (or even their names) still awakens within me the essence of a specific reality – the setting of my early childhood in Larissa.

It is also remarkable how smells contribute so greatly to a particular awareness of ambiance. Not only in evoking the explicit memory of a place, but an entire mood connected with it. Sandalwood, for example, instantly brings back India to me, but furthermore, a whole world of feelings (compassion, admiration, longing, etc.) that I developed

towards the country during our trips there.

Likewise, the fragrance of blooming lilac is for me among the most moving because of its link with Greek Easter. Seasonally, the two almost always coincide, and both are associated with the sense of well-being during a maturing Greek spring. More specifically, though, the scent of lilac brings to my mind the image of my room in our old house on Easter eve, with the oil-lamp burning in front of our little prayer altar at the corner, a basket of red eggs on the table, and a vase of lilacs filling the room with their fragrance – a scene permeated with happy anticipation of the festive Easter day. The whiff of a blown-out candle, with its semi-burning wick and melting wax, also reminds me

strongly of sweet Easter nights in Greece, when we came out from church with our candles lit. I guess Proust's eating of a madeleine played a comparable role in triggering his reminiscences, through taste rather than smell.

Clearly, the flavor of moments, days or periods of one's life come back most vividly through associations of sensory memories. This summer, a leaf-lettuce's tender heart reminded me poignantly of salads in my childhood home (and my eating the heart), of our backyard (with other vague recollections about its atmosphere), and of my father who often used to sit or work in the yard.

Perhaps my earliest recollection of a "special reality" associated

with physical characteristics of a particular moment is when I awoke from a childhood illness and saw and smelled two tangerines that my grandmother had brought to my bed as a get-well present. I think that the comfort of my convalescence, combined with the pleasant odor and color of tangerines, contributed to giving me a unique sense of existence. Another such reminiscence is from my adolescence in Greece: the nostalgic impression of warm autumn days related to the pungent smell of chrysanthemum leaves and the bright blue of aster blossoms. That same longing mood comes back to me whenever I see blue asters.

However, what I mean by a special sense of reality is not necessarily associated with one

particular or significant memory, but often with a group of images or events that seem to have stuck together into a memory bundle to create a distinctive, yet often unimportant entity. Those “bundles” sometimes crop up in our mind totally unexpectedly and irrelevantly.

For instance, one evening when we were traveling in Indochina last winter, out of nowhere I had a vague recollection utterly unrelated to my thinking context or environment at the time (our hotel in Hué): a puzzling “parcel” of memory materialized and became slowly recognized as a vague ambiance related to my critiquing the work of graduate art students at Baton Rouge a few years earlier! It was not a precise or visual memory at all;

just a flavor or lived experience. It felt like an encounter with a synapse that had formed at that time and was somehow hit upon by wanderings of my mind.

On another occasion, I was cleaning vegetables in the kitchen sink with Richard when suddenly a wholly unaccountable remembrance popped in my mind (usually I am able to trace startling memories back, step-by-step, through various associations): the impression or feel of a morning years earlier when Richard, Ellen and I were leaving Bordeaux to get started on our drive to Burgundy, but first stopped at two banks to change money. There was no specific image or event – just a vague feeling – but very definite as a recollection, even though surprisingly trivial. Its

resurfacing must have been caused by some fortuitous neural connection, but it made me aware of the fact that memories must be stored not just as information bits (i.e., related to ideas, single events or words), but equally as general scenes or moods (formal or emotional settings).

Yet again, last August, while I was working on a little cardboard model of *Tension Arches* for a public art competition, a recollection sprang up in my mind – absolutely unconnected – of a wine merchant in Pera, outside of Thessaloniki, where we had shopped for a couple of bottles of Greek wine the evening before we left Greece the previous summer. Why had I even retained such a memory, let alone recalled it? (Once more, it was an atmosphere,

rather than an exact image.) It really seems that many memories are packages of information that the brain shoves in odd places (wherever there is free space? like in a computer's hard disk?). One can reach them through association (voluntarily), as long as they don't get buried under and forgotten (irretrievable?). But sometimes they do arise unpredictably and out of context, perhaps because of a misfiring neuron or cross-wired synapse.

What I am trying to understand more precisely is what creates the singular sense of reality – the “psychological climate” – of various places. How different, indeed, was the savor of our days during a recent vacation on Samothrace

from that of our daily life in Washington, or of our past life in Oberlin. How different was the feeling of sojourns in our Greek summer house from the mood of our past Greek island vacations with Ellen, my mother and Marianne, or from the “texture” of our days when we lived in Rome. Almost every place I have been has an experienced reality of its own as I recollect it. Just hearing the word Dahab, for instance, brings to my mind a vague, yet very specific sense of our stay there – a mixture of camels, snorkeling, our hotel, the village's streets and the hodjas' songs at sunset.

We used to spend at least one month a year for twenty years at Malia Koukia, our Greek summer house. I often have tried to analyze

what constituted its particular reality, which I felt strongly every time I returned. Some of the elements that contributed to it were constant: the relentless sun and dry heat, the red earth of Attica, and the song of cicadas on pines; our daily drives (in whatever rented or borrowed car) to the Lagonissi coast for swimming, or to the nearby villages for shopping, with the windows open to the hot air and dust; the smell of jasmine that we usually picked on the way back; the every day struggle taking care of the house and the garden; the delightful ouzo with pistachios and salmon roe every evening after work, on our south terrace overlooking the beautiful hills and the blue sea; our treasured peacefulness and isolation (notwithstanding the fear of the

roaming Albanian refugees); and of course the ever-present figures of Paul, our architect, old friend and adviser, of Vangelis, our regular housekeeper and gardener from the village, and of our next hill neighbor, Thanassis, who had a factory-warehouse surrounded by an orchard and who allowed us to use his telephone for a few crucial years. All of these elements, plus the memory traces of more specific isolated events (such as the wood fires and break-ins), entered into the generic but characteristic atmosphere of our Malia Koukia vacations.

Aside from the diverse visual and geographical factors, what generates a new reality may be, above all, having to cope with a new set of physical constraints and

problems. Old problems, from a previous environment, seem irrelevant and immaterial in another setting. For example, it would not even enter one's mind to worry about having a coat and socks in Greece in July, while they are a necessity when traveling to Alaska even in the summer. In other words, having to confront and resolve different or unfamiliar practicalities gives one a stronger feeling of a new reality than even fresh images, novel smells or varied climate conditions.

Still, weather and temperature are in themselves essential ingredients, independent of the actual needs they dictate. The balmy air of Tucson, for instance, must cause different chemical reactions inside one's brain, than, say, a rainy day in Paris or London,

although both may be equally loaded with enjoyment or expectations. Unpacking in a hotel in Bonaire, with the warm air caressing you through open windows, creates a mood far removed from unpacking at home upon return, even though both may be welcome in different ways.

I wonder if all this has to do with what I call the "mythopoeitic" ability of the human mind, projecting upon reality our imagination, wishes or vision – our myths, a process initiated in childhood by people or events that shape our early conception of the world. Advertising and the media often exploit through images this susceptibility of our mind. For instance, seeing a TV ad for travel with a young couple kissing on a tropical beach bathed

in golden light, or a handsomely dressed pair dancing on a cruiser's deck, induces the atmosphere of an ideal vacation. Art uses the same devices to immerse one in unique moods, whenever one reads a novel, listens to music or looks at a painting. Our subjective reality is constantly reshaped, re-invested with imagination and emotion, whether by pictures in our childhood books, by our intellectual explorations, or through our changing actual experiences. Reality simply is multiple – and re-spun forever.

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