

The Memorial Dimension in Conservative Life

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I

IT IS OFTEN SAID that conservatism is not simply an intellectual movement which seeks to preserve the status quo. After all, the content of the status quo can be inimical to everything the conservative believes to be true: it can destroy good government, trivialize life, and annihilate the spirit. Rather than merely preserving the status quo, conservatives criticize its perverse elements with just as much gusto as any liberal or progressive.

Yet no conservative wishes to engage in critique alone, donning nothing more than a well-dressed deconstructionism. The conservative criticizes and critiques in order to come to the defense of something which endures. But what is it that endures? If we say that the conservative defends enduring principles, we do not seem to identify anything that identifies the conservative position in particular. All serious intellectuals, of every political position, fight for their enduring principles and ideas. Even if we try to qualify “enduring principles” by picking one set of special conservative principles that differ from those of liberals, we have still come dangerously close to portraying

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the conservative as just another species of progressive. For, conceived in this way, the conservative, like his liberal counterpart, is fighting to make the current and the future state of the world conform to a set of principles. Such a conservative is essentially an *activist*, and though we may insist that he has a clearer and more defensible basis for his struggle than his liberal counterpart, his life so conceived is fundamentally oriented towards creating change within current and future affairs.

Of course it would be a gross error to think that conservatives cannot be activists, and cannot be critiquing within and fighting upon today’s political battlefield. On the contrary, my point is simply that this account has to be supplemented with some additional element that better explains the nature of conservatism. I suggest the following: a conservative must be thought of as someone who, to be blunt, *conserves*. More specifically, he is someone who conserves the *past*. The purpose of this essay is to try and map out a few of the basic, foundational elements that help us understand the manner in which conservatives “bring things along from the past.” When this process is better understood, we are better able to understand the element that makes conservatism what it is.

At first glance, my assertion should

strike the reader as a tired platitude. Is there really any question about the way in which the past is conserved? It seems quite obvious that conservatives bring things along from the past by remembering them; indeed there are two accounts of such remembering which are already quite familiar to conservatives. Explicitly, the conservative remembers by studying history and keeping track of its past successes and failures. Implicitly, the conservative remembers by cultivating the aesthetic balance and tacit comprehension that characterize the practices of craftsmanship. The former kind of remembering makes the conservative wary of reckless visions of future utopia, while the latter kind makes him suspicious of the functional inhumanity of technology.

But these two familiar ways of accounting for the conserving element are inadequate; they both obscure the way in which conservatives hold onto the past *as past*. First, it is easy enough to toss out the phrase, "conservatives remember their history." But it is difficult not then to understand the conservative as one who possesses a kind of data-set which only happens to be historical. The conservative becomes the scientist of history who is no more backward looking or preserving of the past than an astronomer who records the current appearances of light that were emitted from stars millions of years ago. Both work to analyze the past—but this past is really but a present fossil. Second, no matter how eloquent our praise of craftsmanship, thinking of remembering as a kind of tacit know-how depicts the conservative as focusing exclusively on the present, albeit in a way that stresses the way in which the present is quaint. The "past," if it still plays a role here at all, is essentially a label we affix to a feeling of balance and joy in our present constructing.

But before we suggest any new explanations of how remembering conserves

the past, we should appreciate how difficult a challenge this really is. By even asking how memory conserves the past as past, we are running afoul of one of the modern world's crucial assumptions: a human being is *essentially* free consciousness. This false assumption derives from the radicalization of an important truth. It is true that no matter the quality of chains within which a person is caught, no matter what environment he inhabits, no matter how he was raised, a human being has the capacity (even if it is never perfectly actualized) to ruminate, cogitate, and think his way along a path that leads outside these limitations. This truth will forever be one of our greatest safeguards against propaganda, but also one of the greatest sources of hubris and disaster. Nevertheless, rather than taking free consciousness to be one faculty among many, the modern world focuses exclusively on it and claims that it is our *one* essential characteristic. All other aspects of a human being are classified as *nature*, and nature, unlike consciousness, is determined, predictable, and, thus, decidedly non-human.

Once this dichotomy between essential free consciousness and inessential nature is entrenched, there are three important repercussions for the understanding of memory. First, the faculty of memory immediately becomes something like a natural solid. Because it is not free consciousness, memory must be just another predictable substance—a blank piece of paper on which the world writes, a clean slate on which sense-data are recorded, a lump of wax upon which impressions are fixed, etc. Like blood, bones, and ligaments, memory becomes yet another bit of unspiritual matter which a human—in the proper, essential sense of the word—must drag around throughout his life.

The second major result, which is already intimated in the first, is that remembering itself has lost all power and agency. According to the modern world's depic-

tion of a human being, only free consciousness has agency and control. Thus, when we talk about the activity of “remembering,” this model implies that we are simply putting a new name upon one more of the familiar activities of free consciousness. For example, remembering is often thought to signify those moments when free consciousness has turned its attention away from the incoming impressions of the external world to the impressions upon the internal piece of nature called memory.

The third result for memory of thinking that humans are essentially free consciousness, but only non-essentially nature, is the most difficult to understand but also the most important: this assumption creates a temporal prejudice for free consciousness that is exclusively forward-facing and future-oriented, and memory itself it essentially cast in terms of the future. Why is this so? There are two reasons that free consciousness emphasizes the future. First, if a human is essentially a *free* consciousness, a human is also essentially beyond whatever limits, boundaries, or rules it confronts. Clearly, under this model, a person is still free to choose to submit to these constraints and boundaries. But the important point is that under this model the limitation is self-chosen and self-enforced; the limiting factor comes not from the limit, but from the choice of the will. As an essentially free being, a human must continually shed whatever skin is put upon him, and this shedding will continue even if he chooses to turn around and clothe himself in this discarded hide. Second, if humans are essentially *conscious* beings, everything that is fundamentally human must be situated within *awareness*—that is, within a thoughtful attentiveness to what is before and *in front* of the mind. Taken together, these two traits of mankind’s essential element imply that free consciousness is fundamentally a going beyond of that which presents it-

self in awareness. Put in a slightly more concrete way, these two traits depict man as choosing between the options and the possibilities in present awareness for the sake of something beyond them; the human being has essentially become the planner and anticipator of outcomes. Thus, cast in this light, free consciousness has a fundamental orientation towards the future.

But if free consciousness is fundamentally future-facing, and remembering is just a name for another activity of free consciousness, the faculty of memory is itself forced to be futural. The way this works is that memory is always forced to be a faculty which brings up something from the past only in order that it sit before and in front of the mind’s eye as a present possibility. Notice how this general understanding of memory underlies these three, often-encountered ways of thinking about memory:

1. *The Storage Model.* Here memory is spoken of as if it were literally a closet. Memory stores items for the mind, and when the mind needs something from memory, the mind opens the door of memory, looks in, and then shuts the door when it is done.

2. *The Cinematic Model.* It is a common technique for film directors to try to capture the memory of a character by focusing on the character’s face, blurring the image, and then showing the past to the audience. The audience is supposed to understand that the character, in his mind, is “reliving” this past experience which the audience is watching.

3. *The Scaffold of Consciousness Model.* This model itself comes in many varieties. The basic idea is that our present consciousness is structured in some way by categories, concepts, rules, or associations. Some thinkers believe this “scaffolding” is very rational, others think that the associations are emotional and habitual. In any case, memory ends up being the faculty which sets up this scaffolding and holds it in place, structuring the possibilities of our conscious experiences.

These models are neither incorrect nor fictitious. Clearly we do store and recall information, we do relive past situations, and we do have our awareness shaped by rules and associations. But these activities seem to have been given an exclusive legitimacy as models of memory because they reaffirm the temporal prejudice of free consciousness. Free consciousness, as I explained above, works with the past in this way: future→past→present. In its anticipation of the future, consciousness accesses the past only in order to inform the present. In each case, the past is used for the sake of the future, and it is not the past as past that is remembered, but the past insofar as it informs present awareness—the past as present for the future. The three models above depict memory as current processes of (re)seeing, (re)living, and (re)structuring—and in each case the “re” is superfluous to the meaning of the activity.

Let me summarize the argument so far. The modern world operates under the assumption that a human being is essentially free consciousness, while everything else is nature. This assumption entails that (1) memory itself is thought of as natural; (2) remembering is not its own distinct activity, but just a name for another activity of free-consciousness; and (3) memory does not preserve the past as past, but uses the past as present for the future. Thus, at this point in the argument, it should be clear why I earlier claimed that by even asking how memory preserves the past as past, we run afoul of fundamental modern assumptions. This question asks us not only to investigate memory, but to call into question our very conception of humanity.

Yet, as is often the case, it is easier to ask the questions than to provide good answers, and by inquiring about a memory that preserves the past as past, we enter into foreign territory. In fact, we can appreciate just how unfamiliar this kind of memory is by contrasting it with our

astounding familiarity with the faculty of imagination. Imagination is constantly celebrated because it nicely exemplifies the free-consciousness conception of humanity. By designating the creative ability of the mind to bring a picture or concept before it which is not real or present, imagination perfectly fits with a conception of humanity as essentially beyond limits. What faculty could be more useful for a being who must, by his very essence, try to conceive of future goals not yet attained? Imagination is an illustrative faculty for a mind that must anticipate, and thus our culture, our thought, and our assumptions cater to it. Notice, for example, that we have a word which is perfectly suited for identifying imaginative excellence: poetry. What could be more familiar? Imagination, creativity, poetry—these are qualities and powers constantly acknowledged and lauded.

By contrast, notice how unfamiliar and uncomfortable we are with memory. How do we even begin to talk about this faculty? Memory is *not* creative. Memory of the past as past, almost by definition, *cannot* be bold or risky, daring or imaginative. And while we have a word to capture imaginative excellence—poetry—what word do we have to capture memorial excellence? There is no answer that immediately leaps to mind; the question seems awkward and the answer unknown. Indeed, memorial excellence is so unfamiliar that the closest many people can come to understanding it is to negate the familiar imaginative model and think of the memorialist as being *unimaginative*: he is the bore, the bureaucrat, the bourgeois, etc. But clearly this is unsatisfactory. Being unimaginative is not demonstrating memorial excellence; rather, it is demonstrating a deformed imagination.

II

If we are to articulate how memory conserves the past so as to illuminate conservatism, we need to reintroduce ourselves

to the activity of remembering without the corrupting assumption that human nature is, essentially, free consciousness. Let us drop such abstractions and assumptions and consider, in concrete terms, the following example: the similarities and the differences among an old museum piece, an antique, and an heirloom.

First we take up the museum piece. If something is to be a museum piece, it has to be sitting in a museum, and the purpose of the museum is to display old objects that managed to last into the present for the inquiring eyes of the current public. The public spectator is supposed to confront this object; he is to inspect it, analyze it, and then *imagine* what kind of culture and civilization could have produced such a thing. He should also note how old the thing is and attach a date to the object, just as he should also attach an artist's name, title, and country of origin. Though laudable, none of these urbane activities use the faculty of memory in any significant way. Rather, the emphasis is on learning, seeing, analyzing, etc. Indeed, these are the kind of skills which might make someone think that the best way to appreciate these museum objects would be by understanding a theory that unifies all of these sights and impressions. Or, perhaps, these activities might suggest that museum objects are special only in that they open the viewer up to new possibilities. In any case, the preservative activity of memory is missing.

The reason memory is missing in speculating is because it does not recognize that the museum piece is a special kind of object: the museum piece is an *antique* with its own history, and, by virtue of this history, is a very special kind of object which can be the focus for a special kind of activity. History makes the object special because it is through its history that the object differentiates and retains its own identity by itself through time. I say "by itself" because the item does not be-

come an antique by being in the museum or being before spectators. Regardless of where it is located, and regardless of whether anyone is looking at it, or even knows about its existence, this thing preserves its own past. The past is not "projected" upon the object and thereby made antique. Now because of these qualities, the antique object has what it takes to be the focus of scholarship rather than mere expertise. That is to say that this object offers more than a sight, more than a starting point for imagination, and more than a site for query—it also offers remembrance. The scholar is the person who has so much knowledge and patience that he can adopt the luxurious, passive attitude of soaking up the history of the antique. Indeed, in an important sense, it is the antique that speaks its history, and it is the scholar who listens. This listening, I think, is remembering.

Let me provide an extra word or two of explanation for these bizarre sounding claims. For a period in my life I worked in an antique store, and often had occasion to watch different kinds of people deal with antiques. The first group was made up of the people who simply thought of the antique store as just another store, displaying another type of decor. Could they find a couch that would match their curtains? Did they like the way a piece of jewelry looked on their fingers? For these customers, the "past" of the antiques did not speak, but only signified a style—a style which may or may not have suited their plans. But I met another group of people who were not spectators of style, but collectors. This group was itself divided in two. On the one hand there were those who focused on the *collecting* more than the fact that what they were collecting were antiques. But, on the other hand, there were the quixotic collectors who genuinely loved, were intrigued by, and excited by the *pastness* of the antiques. It was precisely the element of "the time gone by" that interested them. Oftentimes

such people would say things like, “you see, in the past people didn’t have X, and they would Y instead”; it would delight them that the past, though different from the present, made sense on its own terms and had a special kind of beauty, poignancy, and appropriateness.

For example, in the past people did not have photographs to preserve an image of a loved one who had passed away. Instead, they had special little boxes or compartments in which they would preserve a strand of hair of the person they had loved so much. Indeed, I vividly recall holding an antique silver brush which had a compartment on its back side to hold the hair of deceased love ones. Such a brush tells us much about remembering. When the woman who had owned this antique brushed her hair, she was preparing for the day; but the dead locks of the deceased, small tokens of the beloved tucked into the brush, did not encourage this woman to make the dead part of her present day as if they were alive again; rather, they preserved the past in its pastness, in its poignancy. We today have a hard time appreciating this because we demand “closure”—that is, we demand to leave the past behind and “get on with it.” But this woman’s brush, rather than providing closure, provided preservation—and it did not preserve the past as a new option of the present, but preserved the past as past. In other words, this woman’s remembering was not a kind of bringing up and placing an image before the eyes, it was not a *projection* of an idea or cognition, but rather an *injection* of the preserved past as past.

This injection of the past as past attaches us to what is poignant, and poignancy itself can be analyzed into three more specific elements. First, this poignancy has an inescapable *objectivity*, for the memory does not come from the soul, but from the external world. Remembering always takes us outside of ourselves into what is historical and fixed. Of course

we sometimes put a “spin” on our memories, and even misremember—but the objective world must always lie at the root of memory itself. Second, the poignancy of remembering is *melodic*, and this in two ways. A melody is made of a number of notes sounded sequentially through time whose relationship holds a mounting tension that builds and builds and then resolves. But when we go out of our way to say that some tune is melodic, we are also saying that it is particularly memorable. Remarkably, a particular gathering of notes into a tension which resolves will stick in the mind, while another equally pleasant song does not. Poignancy designates a kind of *historical* melody: events in history gather together into a tension which resolves in a memorable way. Third, poignancy possesses *finitude*. Many philosophers have felt that we most authentically meet finitude in confronting our own eventual death. This conception, however, is a great mistake: for our own deaths, while clearly important, do not really teach us anything about the *nature* of death. Our own eventual death merely sits before us as a kind of termination point of the imagination and experience. But the death of someone we love, or someone who was great and noble, is truly tragic and authentic. It is here we confront the finitude of life: for when we feel love or admiration for the dead, the delicacy of the precarious struggle for what is worthwhile and good overwhelms us. The antique, by preserving the past as past, is the object of all of these aspects of poignancy, and itself embodies an objective melodic finitude accessible by the scholar.

The heirloom preserves the past and uses memory to an even greater degree than the antique. Just as with the antique, the process that makes an object an heirloom is not a projection of the mind. Even if an heir inadvertently and unknowingly passes on an object to a generation which unknowingly retains possession of the

object, the object is still an heirloom of the _____ family. Moreover, an heirloom can make its way into an antique store or museum and display all the kinds of traits I was discussing above. Nevertheless, there are two important differences between antique and heirloom. First, the heirloom possesses a familial element that the antique lacks. An heirloom belongs to a family, and what is an heirloom for one family can only be an antique for another. Yet the heirloom has a second, far more astonishing difference from the antique than just being associated with one family: the heirloom requires a double remembering. For with the heirloom, the family member is not just remembering the history of the antique, but remembering his own lineage as well. Surprisingly, the heirloom makes the family member remember that *he himself is an antique* since he is part of, and an embodiment of, a lineage with history. This is easy to forget in the quotidian world of daily relations in which he is a museum object for the spectating public: people analyze him, look him over, attach a name to him, etc. But the heirloom bids him to treat his own existence in a more scholarly way.

Let me add to this analysis of the heirloom two additional points that we should keep in mind. First, my examples so far have involved physical things. But it is important to realize that when we talk of heirlooms and antiques we are not only talking about concrete objects. Consider heraldry, for example. At one time aristocratic families made a point of displaying heraldic markings in coats of arms. What was the effect of this activity? What did it mean for a knight to blazon his surcoat with these symbols? In these cases it is not the object itself (the surcoat or the shield) which is necessarily antique, but the heraldic display. Nevertheless, even though this information is not a physical thing, it has all of properties of the heirloom. The knight displays this antique information to preserve past glory—a

symbol which itself has history and makes him remember that he is the latest embodiment of something from the past.

This brings me to the second addendum. Heirlooms, which require the use of memory in a double degree, rely on the objective fact of *familial* lineage. The heirloom, in the most proper sense of the word, should always be understood this way. There is, however, a secondary species of heirloom that we can recognize by extending the idea of family to larger communities: we can recognize the *political* heirloom. Insofar as we consider a political community to be a kind of family, we will also have a class of objects that will be heirlooms of this "family." This class will include more tangible objects (e.g., the Liberty Bell) and less tangible (e.g., the constitution). Moreover, even though political heirlooms are not heirlooms in the most proper sense, they nevertheless display the double remembering that marks the heirloom. On the one hand, each political heirloom is itself an antique object, possessing an objective history that preserves the past as past. On the other hand, these antiques make the citizen remember that he himself is a political antique, the inheritor of a kind of civic lineage from his political heirs. His own nature is a result of the laws, customs, and institutions to which both he and the antique belong.

When we step back and consider the similarities and the differences between the museum object, antique, and heirloom, I think we can see quite clearly what a mistake it would be to think of memory as being a mere subset of the imagination. Memory is a faculty which is independent from, and to be contrasted with, imagination. Imagination has its special character wonderfully expressed in the temporal scheme of free consciousness: future → past → present. Memory, by contrast, embodies a completely different scheme: past → future → present. For, as the antique and heirloom make clear, our

remembering injects the preserved past as past, and in such remembering the “future,” if it is to be called that at all, is but the melodic carry-over and resolution of the past. When we live in the present of the memorial dimension—that is, when we engage in the activity of remembering—the present is but a poignant movement of past history into a future that is its memorable unfolding.

But though memory and imagination are to be contrasted in this way, we should not infer that they share no similarities as faculties of the human soul. As faculties, both can be used in different degrees, ranging from the mundane to profound. The most profound and highest use of the imagination is captured by the title “poetic.” But we should also recognize that we use imagination when choosing where to go on vacation or looking for a parking space. Similarly, memory can be graded from its most mundane use to its most profound. It can be used to hold on to phone numbers, names, and can indicate the tacit knowledge of a familiar environment. But these mundane uses do not show memory injecting the preservation of the past as past; instead, they depict the nature of our memorial faculty to the same anemic degree that looking for a parking space captures the nature of our creative/imaginative faculty.

This brings me to my final point. How should we describe memory in its most profound use? When imagination is used profoundly, displaying incredible creativity and vivid newness, we say that this is poetic and that we are in the presence of the poet. But what shall we say when memory is being used profoundly, injecting the past as past in the highest degree? I would like to suggest that the profound use of memory is the *noble*, and that the person who is an excellent memorialist is *nobility*. While the poet dwells in the futural dimension of human life, the nobleman dwells in the memorial dimension.

III

The most complete and best life is both poetic and noble. A life which only remembers and does not imagine is deficient because life requires confronting the present and prognosticating for the future. But a life which only imagines and plans without remembering is also deficient. Such a futural life can be perfectly practical and useful, and it can even be beautiful and picturesque—but this life will always be ignoble because the poignancy, struggle, and finite delicacy of the past as past will be closed off and forgotten.

Through the ages, there has been a constant struggle between those who excel in memory and nobility, and those who excel in poetic imagining. In some ages the memorialists have had the upper hand, and in others the poets. But no matter how complete the victory of one type in one age, the other type always abides. For regardless of how shallow, ideological, or narrow-minded a person becomes, he, like the age in which he lives, will never lose access to either the futural or the memorial dimension of his life. Both the faculties of imagination and memory will always exist for all healthy human beings.

In our time, however, the memorial dimension of human life, though present, has atrophied. Though it remains available, it is not familiar to us; though it is accessible, we are neither adept at living in it, nor do we appreciate it. The signs that this is so are everywhere. For example, whenever the conservative praises the past, he is called nostalgic—a medical term that reduces the past into nothing but a *present* condition, like an open wound or a bad flu.

Again, consider how both conservatives and liberals often assume that the past can play a role in our life only to the degree it is “relevant.” Conceived in this way, conservatives are those who think

the past is very relevant, while progressives are those who think the past is less relevant. But the idea that *relevancy* is the hurdle over which important things must pass is utterly debilitating to the memorial dimension, and betrays a gross prejudice for the future. For what is meant by “relevancy” is future-facing, anticipating, and planning.

Third, we now think of “nobility” as only referring to landed aristocracy, further assuming that landed aristocracy only signifies a perpetual source of money. Thinking of nobility as nothing but a vast supply of money perfectly illustrates a future bias: here, nobility is effectively reduced to nothing but vast possibilities and incredible plans. Now it is true that real aristocracy will often cultivate their memorial nature to a high degree. Surrounded by heirlooms, deeply aware of lineage, full of history, its delicacy and finitude, the aristocrat clearly demonstrates the kind of life I have been trying to discuss in this essay. But it is a mistake to think that it is only with aristocracy

that nobility is cultivated. For while landed money is able to enshrine and gild the memorial dimension, all families have the memorial resources to cultivate and grow it. Similarly, even though older countries and cities have greater cultural resources in which to house their political heirlooms, so, too, younger countries have their own civic inheritance which their generations nurture.

Conservatives today are those who conserve; they preserve the antique and heirloom, and they remember the past as past. In fact, these activities are so rare that they have become the unique features that distinguish conservatives from all others. But the conservative who is the highest kind of person does not only conserve, but imagines as well. He is able both to celebrate art for art’s sake, and yet also appreciate the antique for the antique’s sake. He lives in the real world of the present, dwells in the poetic imaginings of the future, and yet still upholds his honor and nobility in a remembering of the past.