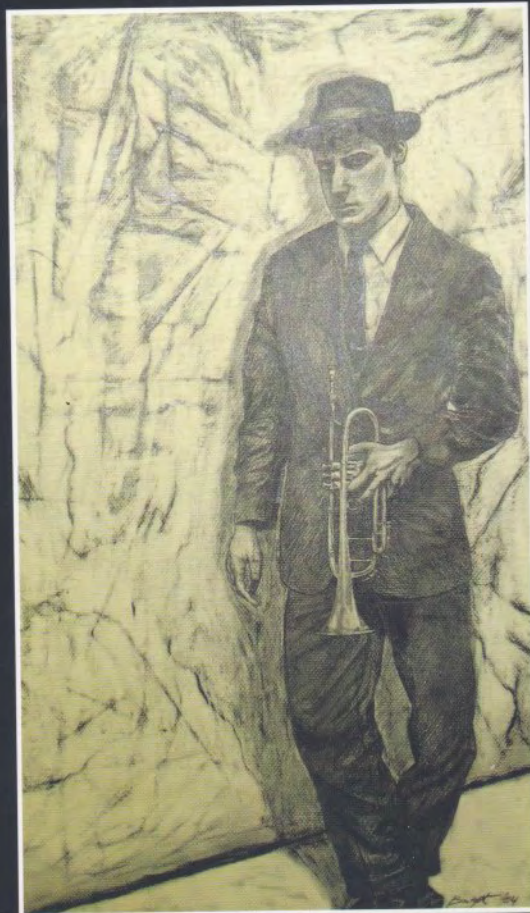


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a fine arts journal
Seventeenth Edition



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Size and Memory

by M.G. Piety

I've often heard people remark that things from childhood seem larger in our memories than they actually were and my own experience has confirmed this. I visited once, many years after I'd left it, the house I'd grown up in and the rooms did indeed seem smaller than I remembered them and that has been true for other things as well.

There was a swing on the playground of the first school I attended, a strange contraption that looked rather like the hoop portion of an antebellum hoop skirt. It had a central iron pole imbedded in asphalt from which numerous slender poles radiated outward and downward ending in a circle of wooden bench seats at what would have been the hem. This structure swung back and forth and around the axis of its central pole to the delight of the many children crowded on the wooden hem. Sometimes when the motion of the swing became too vigorous, the bottom would come crashing against the central pole with frightening force.

It was considered dangerous, this swing, and so one had to be in the second grade, at least, to be allowed on it. There were even monitors to keep younger children off. I remember the year I entered the second grade. I was so excited finally to be allowed to ride on it. It had always looked thrilling, this towering, bell-like thing. And it was thrilling. I remember screaming with glee as it traced huge figure eights through the air and I remember the slight edge of fear that would creep into those screams when my seat crashed with particular force against the pole.

When I think back on it, it seems to me that that swing probably *was* dangerous. Little limbs could easily have been crushed between the seats and the pole when they made contact and there was nothing to keep the children on the seats themselves other than their own sometimes less-than-sure grip on the little iron bar that ran parallel to the seats at a child's shoulder height. It seems miraculous to me now that I recall no injuries associated with that swing from the three and a half years I attended that school. I could not imagine that it would survive our own litigious age.

It was there though the last time I visited that school, which must be twenty years ago now. It was there and I was struck, as one so often is when confronted with things from childhood, by how much smaller it was than my memory of it. This phenomenon which, for want of a better name, one could call the inflation of memory, is often attributed to the fact that we are ourselves very much smaller when our impressions of the objects from childhood are originally formed than when we later encounter these same objects as adults. According to this interpretation, it is not that memory misrepresents the size of the objects, but that they were in fact very much larger relative to us when we first encountered them and that it is simply the memory of this now obsolete relative size that we retain.

I suspect that there is some truth to this explanation, considering that I can now see over the tops of counters that I remember as towering above me. I have gradually come to the view, however, that it is in fact incomplete. I don't remember when I first became aware of this, but I gradually began to notice that it is not simply things from childhood that have a tendency to seem larger in memory than they actually were, but that things from adolescence often have this strange character too. The gym where I used to practice with the gymnastics team in high school seems larger to me in my memory that it

seemed to me several years ago when I revisited the place, and I was no smaller then than I am now. My rooms at Bryn Mawr seem cavernous in my memory, whereas they appear no more than spacious to me now.

I have all kinds of memories like that, of what seemed to me the palatial stairwell in the school where my mother used to teach, of the huge grassy terraces that made up the backyard of the house I grew up in, of the long walk from my apartment in Montreal to the university. Most striking though are my memories of this city because they are so recent and yet they too seem subject to this strange inflation of memory.

It was only a year ago that I moved here after having spent the last eight years living in the somnolent city of Copenhagen. It had been time for me to leave though. I'd exhausted that place, or in any case exhausted myself trying for eight years to push the man I loved uphill, or to pull him, through the sheer force of my will, out of the depths of the depression in which he had lived since long before I'd met him.

It's impossible to explain what it is like to live with someone like that, to live with someone who is never happy, who is always angry, someone for whom nothing is ever enough. It is impossible to explain the toll it takes on the one who tries to please, to appease, to comfort. It is impossible to explain what it is like to fail the person one loves, to fail day in and day out and yet to continue to love. The first thing to go is optimism, one hopes against hope because as the optimism wanes the love deepens. One loves the depressive person like one loves a wounded animal, like God loves the sinner, because he is so helpless, so miserable, so lost.

"Here, take some of my strength," one says. "I'll help you," because it is horrible to be a passive observer to the misery of someone one loves. One cannot be a passive observer to the misery of a loved one. To reach out is instinctual. And after all, the healthy have a little strength to spare. So one doesn't really notice when one's own strength begins to ebb, or if one notices, one thinks-after all, the healthy have a little strength to spare.

That's where I was when I met you, living on the thin soup of a brief good mood. And then you came along and you seemed glorious to me, that mass of dark, unruly hair, those soft brown eyes. There was such a combination in you of strength and grace and wit and that kind of intelligence of which one never tires. You wanted me and that made me fall in love with you, though I had no idea of what I was going to do. I knew only that you made me happy and I had been so long without happiness I felt brought back from the dead.

And then, as if God perhaps wanted me to be happy after all, he brought me to where you were, dropped that opportunity into my lap: a job. I had not sought it because of you, though I do not believe even now that you understand that. I had not come to you. I had gone away from him, gone away because of a scene so terrible I had become afraid for myself. I fled without packing, because it was, after all, my intention to return. I fled and then God said, "I'm going to put you here. I think you'll like it here."

And I did like it. I remember still how brightly the sun shone on the shock of green in the middle of the city and how the huge flags that hung in front of the many shops on that square fluttered in the breeze the first day I made my way to your apartment, for "coffee," wasn't it? It seemed that there was so much sky, such an expanse of blue above me, such great buildings on either side. Everything seemed vast and beautiful and new.

The buildings do not seem so high to me now though, those many buildings that have become so familiar, nor does the park there in the middle of the city seem so vast. It was a walk back then, a stroll, full of interesting sights and sounds and smells. Now I am through it almost before I realize I have made that turn. And it is behind me, like the vast expanse of sky, consigned to memory.

One never seems to remember things smaller than they were, but always larger. I suppose there are any number of possible explanations for this phenomenon. I have a theory about it though. Neurological research has revealed that only a fraction of the sensory information that is processed by the brain ever comes to consciousness and it seems that the more familiar are one's surroundings, the more this is true. Consciousness is such a precious resource that the brain does not like to waste it on unnecessary things. Once an environment has become familiar, it is no longer necessary to be explicitly aware of it. That's why people constantly fail to notice if some small item in their home has been moved from its usual place, fail to notice it until they come to need this item, because they have long since ceased to see it.

When, however, an environment is new, it is much more important that the brain take cognizance of its every detail. Perhaps there is something threatening in it, or something edible, or of God knows what other use to the perceiver. There is something intimidating, threatening, exciting about the new that causes the mind to drink in its every detail and make it loom larger than it actually is.

First impressions of a place thus often make it appear larger than it comes to appear to one later, after it has become familiar. What is so fascinating is that one often preserves these first impressions along side the later impressions so that one has, in fact, two impressions of the very same place that nevertheless are quite different because one seems to shimmer with detail whereas the other impression is like a faded watercolor with no distinct edges.

This fact alone does not explain, however, the phenomenon referred to earlier as the inflation of memory because it is impossible to tell which of these two impressions of a place one normally compares to present experiences to find the latter lacking in dimensions. Perhaps it is that the space of memory is so great it stretches things out, extends them indefinitely into the infinite expanse of the imagination. Reality, we discover, is always smaller than it seems to us initially and smaller still than our memories of it. Experience, or is it familiarity, diminishes things.

You too turned out to be smaller than you seemed to me in the beginning.