



Envoi Article: 'Memory': a Poem by G S Fraser by Brian Fewster

I never met George Fraser, although I came close to it when he spoke to a group of sixth formers at the John Cleveland College in Hinckley. It must have been between 1976, when I started to teach there, and 1980, when George died. I wasn't free that period, but I learned afterwards that the talk had followed the genesis and development of one of his poems, 'Memory', through successive drafts. The colleague who had issued the invitation to George posted the drafts on the staffroom notice board. Until that time I'd known him only as a critic, and they gave me the shock of a fresh and powerful poetic voice.

I don't know any other poem by any writer that so strongly enacts the way scenes and events – retrospectively blurred into continuity – can be "gappier than they seem". The subject is literally and metaphorically beyond the edge of vision: "out of the slant of sight". The experience is as if strained through several layers of muslin: from past to present in the poet's own mind and then through the words of the poem into the minds of readers. There is a vase of flowers on a window ledge, but are we inside the room looking out or outside looking in? And what is the "whirring light" before the bulb switches on? It suggests the flickering of a film projected on a screen. But before we've made our minds up about the exact position and status of the flowers, we're looking out through what is probably a different window on to a fell landscape. The phrasing of it as a question ("What window?") leaves this ambiguous.

Each image metamorphoses into another with a kind of cinematic fade. Indeed the "flash and flake" of the whole poem gives it a cinematic feel - seen, for example, in its use of simile. We proceed by association from a hayfield that is like a Japanese straw mat to an actual straw hat worn by a handyman in a remembered Japanese scene, before looking through a bamboo blind onto a Japanese lake, a porthole on to a Scottish firth.

According to the memoir by his wife Paddy in the online magazine *Jacket*, some of the images in the poem relate to a breakdown George had while teaching in Japan in 1951. In Paddy's words, "He had made a desperate and nearly successful attempt to commit suicide but, failing, had jumped out of a moving train, and was found by a farmer in a rice field ...He was sent to the American Army hospital where he was receiving five or six electric shock treatments a day, then considered the best treatment, but no attempt was made to diagnose the nature of his illness." (<http://jacketmagazine.com/20/fraser.html>). Even after his recovery, the episode was never discussed in depth. According to Paddy, "there was something Scottish about [his] reticence, a feeling that it was indecent to parade your deepest fears, that you must cope with them yourself." The electric shock treatment he received also adds a possibly more sinister meaning to the "whirring light" in stanza 2.

This frightening material is strapped into a tight corset of three-stress rhyming quatrains, but there is variation within its structure. The basic pattern is abab or abcb, with the second and fourth lines rhyming, except in stanza 6, which appears to rhyme abca. But further scrutiny reveals an abcb pattern beginning with line 2 of the same stanza and ending with the first line of the following stanza. The second line also rhymes with one in the following stanza. Similar cross-stanza rhyme links stanzas 1 and 2, 4 and 5, and 5 and 6 and, in a slightly different way, 3 and 4. This network of regular and irregular rhyme binds the disparate images into a single aesthetic experience, as the mind itself blurs the gaps of memories.

Stanza 6 is transitional, suggesting that these memories haunt the poet in half-remembered dreams ("Remembering no one dream"). In the last two stanzas the poem turns in a different direction, from a past filtered through unreliable dream-memories to a future mediated through ambiguous dream-symbolism.

Despite contacting the custodians of the G S Fraser archive in Edinburgh, I wasn't able to find copies of the earlier drafts of 'Memory', but there is a note in the archive linking this poem with another late one called 'Love Poem', which may have taken root in the same material before separating off. 'Love Poem' has a similar formal structure to 'Memory', and also some correspondences of imagery. Both bring "snow" and "roses" together, and at the end of 'Memory' these are combined in a romantic-erotic trinity with "thighs". A fourth image, of "doors", is not found in 'Love Poem', but that poem, which anticipates the poet's approaching death, ends with a powerful invocation of the "Shades" of the underworld. One can guess where the doors lead at the end of 'Memory'.