A FRAGMENT OF LIFE

A Thesis

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by

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To My Parents
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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           Printmaking, Carlyle Johnson
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A FRAGMENT OF LIFE

A fragment of life possesses my consciousness
And absorbs the whole of my thought and being
For a time in the past when I can remember
The old folks carrying them around with such pride.

Now I too possess a stock of them well worn
From constant thought and the delights of telling
Of pain and time collected into a thought or word
That proves our existence (but not much more)

Gathering and unfolding our lives in the rhythm
Of days where one is more precious than the other
To the point of realization that the whole
Is but a fragment, a memory.

November 1986

The idea that one's entire life can be recounted in an incomplete and somewhat preferential series of memories, not necessarily accurate or sequential, has been the focus of my art and poetry for the last year. It is because of a need for a sense of identity that we, individually and as a group, collect and preserve memories by relating them to ourselves in thought, to others in speech, and to the future in writing and in art. These
communications become the symbols or tokens of ourselves, condensed for convenience.

Some moments in our lives are so precious to us that we arbitrarily frame them within a narrative context; a story with a beginning, middle, and end. These stories are only pieces though; smaller parts of an overwhelmingly complex whole. They are the fragments of our lives that have been orchestrated for simplicity’s sake. The periods of time between these events have no relative significance, and are somehow lost. The result is an imperfect, and perhaps somewhat idealistic, history.

Well rounded,
      turned over and over.
I hold out a piece of my history.

Can’t you see that this is my life
That I have spent so much time organizing
      into easy-to-swallow doses
      For you
      (and me).

Well rehearsed,
      Told over and over.
I pull out a story to tell you of me.

January 1987
There is no possibility of total recall of memories on a conscious level. I know of no one who can relate the entire story of his/her life without bias, error, or omission. Something always escapes mental notation and ceases to exist the moment we divert our attention from it. The fact that I cannot recall each and every moment of my life has always bothered me. I feel a great sense of loss for those moments of time which, by being perceived as less valuable, have escaped my notice.

Those seemingly trivial events become lost or at least pooled into categorical memories. For example, driving to work; who can remember every single time one has performed such a rote task? The time absorbed by such simple feats is better used pursuing other, more productive activities (e.g., daydreaming, thinking, etc.). In this sense, one can lose large tracts of time because there is no conscious record of specific actions that provide the necessary framework for a time/space/event memory. Therefore, only those moments which are significant enough to warrant specific mental notation become the stuff of memories.

In searching for a visual equivalent to the feeling of the loss of holistic narrative, I was drawn to the remains of Greek and Roman figurative sculpture. Here, in the broken forms of the human body, I found a metaphor between the physical loss of the smaller, less significant parts and the mental loss of smaller, less significant memories. There was also a certain inevitability to the destruction of these statues that was very poetic and applicable. I was very pleased that the fragments could operate on another, more archeological level; they are physical testimony to the thoughts and
ideals of a culture and, for the most part, the only tangible evidence we have of that culture. In this sense the fragments become the symbols and tokens of our knowledge and memory of the past.

Dore Ashton, as an aside to an article he wrote about Stephen DeStaebler, recounted an experience he had while visiting the Roman Campagna:

[1] was to discover, not far below the surface of reddish earth, first a rounded chin and lips in terra cotta, and then a fully formed slender foot: a fragment of a sculpture that I could easily fashion to its full with my mind’s eye, and from there compose a whole civilization... these fragments were shaped by ancient hands, of the very earth I was digging, and were talismans of time. Cooked earth. Earth shaped in man’s image. Fire and earth. Memories embalmed in the earth’s crust. An ineffable link from those days to these days.¹

Also a strong influence has been the work of August Rodin who worked with fragments in such a way as to excite the imagination of the viewer to complete from memory the incomplete. The “fragment aesthetic”, as opposed to what I guess could be called the “partial aesthetic”, was first actively pursued by Rodin in such works as The Man with the Broken Nose (1864) and Iris, Messenger of the Gods (1890). As H.W. Janson puts it in History of Art (Second Edition, Prentice-Hall, c. 1977, p. 615), “by discovering what

from mechanical verisimilitude just as Manet rescued painting from photographic realism.² Although Rodin's fragmented forms were probably approached on a formal level, they nevertheless impart a great deal of expressive power.

Stephen Destabler also creates fragmented bodies which not only succeed in being expressive, but also quietly grotesque. And although his work deals more specifically with the decay of humanity rather than the decay of memory, it has been a strong influence on me. The power which his incomplete forms have over any imaginable completed forms is subtle; the influence of such understatement is important in light of my past work, which tended to be overly didactic.

My own work is characterized by the careful arrangement of body fragments that are initially cast from life. The fragments themselves are shaped by chance and incidental abuse, not unlike their metaphorical counterparts. These broken, beaten, and weathered parts are then orchestrated, through a series of strictly formal decisions, into a compostition which can only suggest the integrity of the whole. Large parts of these physical and mnemonic wholes are lost in the process of deteriorating/of living - only the larger and more durable parts survive. I see these surviving fragments as poetic remains of a whole, rather than as brutal remnants. The fact that they are shattered does not cause me pain directly, as a sort of empathetic response to a "broken" limb; but rather indirectly, in the sense

that I see these fragments as being all that is left of a life in memories. Why can't there be something more?

Why can't there be something more
Left behind
Beyond the crushing weight
Of time.
It grinds me down to dust
Blown away
With the hard dreams of life.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY
