

ON THE PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY

ELENA RIVERA MIRANO

Oliver Sacks, neurologist and writer, discussing the case of a patient stricken with severe memory loss asks the questions:

What sort of a life (if any), what sort of a world, what sort of a self, can be preserved in a man who has lost the greater part of his memory and, with this, his past, and his moorings in time? (Sacks 1990, 23)

Quoting Buñuel, he continues:

Life without memory is no life at all...Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our actions. Without it, we are nothing. (ibid)

As human beings, we lie on the borders of nothingness every time we give up a memory and consign it to an *aparador*, a wastebasket, a bonfire. It becomes worse when we willingly suppress, when we deliberately allow ourselves to forget. A part of us dies and we subsequently become less than we might have been.

And so it is in the life of a nation. Workers in the domain of traditional arts and culture often face discouragement at innocent comments from well-meaning advocates asking why we waste our time resuscitating dead things that should be left to disappear naturally. They further suggest, why not concentrate our efforts on the present, on the modern, on things belonging to the path of progress. Perhaps in this way, we can correct what they consider our rather dismal past and focus our investments in a rosy future.

What is often forgotten is that in neglecting one's past, in dismissing it as not worthy of concern, in dooming it to oblivion, we pass negative judgement on ourselves and our experience as a people. By forgetting the past, we take heed of other people's judgement that our memories are not worth remembering and thus, seek to erase them. Once erased, there is no way of retrieving them and we suffer the sad condition of those stricken with amnesia.

But Sacks offers hope to these, counseling us that even in the most profound cases:

...however great the organic damage and Humean dissolution, there remains the undiminished possibility of reintegration by art, by communion, by touching the human spirit; and this can be preserved in what seems at first a hopeless state of neurological devastation. (ibid, 39)

By seeking to bring the komedyā and sarsuwela back to the consciousness of our people; by reencountering the things that we have discarded on the road to modern nationhood; by confronting and examining the traditional concepts that have persisted in spite of our willed forgetting; by restoring them through performances, discussions, workshops on traditional theater techniques, we give our fractured and devastated nation the chance to remember and make itself whole.

Reference

Sacks, Oliver. 1990. *The man who mistook his wife for a hat and other clinical tales*. New York: Harper Collins, Publishers.