MEATWORKERS’ MEMORIES:
THE MNEMONICS OF THE NOSE

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Over a number of years, in both his teaching and his example, Greg Dening reminded me and many others at the University of Melbourne about the specificity of the performative moments in which we enunciate scholarship. Greg was also the first of my teachers to make me think seriously about the ways in which the histories we produce work beyond the University in the social domains of history’s cultures. In that spirit I offer a very particular and public oral presentation transcribed for this volume.

It is entirely proper that I have travelled from Melbourne to Sydney to present a few thoughts on memory, history and smell. The first time I visited Sydney as an adult was at the end of a surfing safari along the coast from Melbourne. As we came into the metropolitan area four of us were in what might loosely be described as high spirits. I was driving, and the portable tape-recorder was probably playing one of those tuneful post-punk numbers that tended to be our favourites at the time. Elisa was the most excited of us all. She had spent some of her childhood in Sydney, and had not been back for many years. Going along one of the freeways that carve through the hills south of the city, I looked over to the passenger seat and was startled by a pair of legs. Elisa had not so much put her head out of the window as she was out the window, sitting on the door frame and hanging on to the roof-rack. She was laughing and sniffing and yelling, all at the same time. “Breathe... Breathe. Can’t you smell it... can’t you smell it!” Once we got her back in the car we agreed — yes, we could smell this place that for Elisa came with memories of smells and for us was a brand new sensation.

When Elisa used to get annoyed with Melbourne she would always moan about Smellbourne. It is an old term which, one hundred years ago, evoked the noxious effluvia and violent smells of the tanneries, abattoirs, fellmongeries, woolwashers, dyeing plants, gasworks, soapmakers and papermillers along one of Melbourne’s two main rivers — the Yarra. Mark Kershaw traced the memory of these smells in his adieu to the city:

Before saying goodbye to marvellous Melbourne, just a word about its river... In its lower courses... it is as sinuous as a snake in spasms. Its banks are of mud, and its stagnant waters a mixture of sludge and filth... The worst smell of all is the Yarra itself... O smell of smells! products of decomposition, sulferretted and
arseniuretted hydrogen, carbon disulphide, and all the odours of the chemist! what are ye to this? Still you have your use. Pilots with good noses can steer by you on the darkest night.²

Rivers, like smells, can mark spatial boundaries and order difference. The Yarra was rich on both scores; on one side the low-lands of smelling, miasmic working-class suburbs, on the other the fresh air zones of middle-class quasi-rural retreat. However, during the twentieth century the association of river and smell in Melbourne shifted west from the Yarra to the Maribyrnong River. To cross the Maribyrnong was and is to travel across a boundary both imaginary and real into a region dominated by industrial factories and into an olfactory world created by the chemical industry, a salt water river, foundries, oil refineries and meatworks.

One of these meatworks, Angliss’s, was for much of the twentieth century the largest abattoir in the southern hemisphere, capable of handling a kill of 10,000 sheep per day. It was an integrated factory in which workers performed almost every process that could be applied to the products of beef, mutton, pork, rabbits and poultry, from slaughtering to the freezing of meat for export, the processing of offal, canning, the manufacture of smallgoods and the preparation of skins. The stench of these operations was liminal — it welcomed visitors at one of the gateways to the region as they passed a factory perched beside a river — and it was also antediluvian. European and European-derived cities of the nineteenth century knew smells of both the industrial and the pre-industrial in which the “odours of the chemist” mingled with the much older smells of dung, decomposition and dross. In the twentieth century a great deal of governmentality, science and human will has gone into removing those older organic odours. Today the fumes of the (industrial) chemist choke the metropolis while the scents of the (hygiene) chemist are used by many metropolitan populations to douse, mask and remove (again and again) the last vestiges of corporeal aromas and to deodorise the flesh.

In producing an oral history of the then closed and soon to be demolished Angliss Meatworks, with co-workers in a local museum and ex-workers of the factory I became implicated in memories of that factory.³ The transcriptions of those interviews record that I never once inquired directly about the smell of the factory. Perhaps it was not necessary. Perhaps it formed part of a shared common sense about the nature of working at Angliss’s, part of the legend of Angliss’s that did not need to be asked about. When I asked Jim Carlton about what he remembered of his first day at Angliss’s he responded quickly:

Yeah. It stinks. I mean the fellmongery workers got the most violent smell that you could wish to smell. You don’t have to walk in the door... you get down as far as the front gate and you can smell it. But after a time you really get used to it,
you know, it’s something that you don’t take any notice of... The only time you’d really stink was if you had to pick pie. Pie pickers that they used to have there... he’d get from here to that corner down there [points in the direction of the next street corner] and you could smell him. I done a bit of it sometimes, but the smell would get into you and oh it stinks. It’s unbelievable... it was thick on them... oohh talk about a walkin shithouse. Oh... true it was shockin but they done it because there was no other work... it was just a case of you had to do it.

Jim Carlton worked in the Fellmongery where the skins that had been torn from the backs of the slaughtered animals had the fleece or hair removed and were then prepared for tanning. The pie pickers were the men who would remove the dead skin and dags, leave it to sweat for three days and then separate the fleece from the rotting skin by hand.

In the exchanges of oral history many stories, theories and questions can emerge. Conversely, many particular details, for example, about rates of pay or labour processes or strikes have to be elicited. Memories of smell did not have to be called forth in this manner. This does not mean that the memories “just came out”; on the contrary, I can be quite specific about their conditions of emergence. The memories of smell were, in most instances, linked to place and not time; that is, they were topoanalytic rather than chronotypic memories. My question about time to Jim Carlton brought a response about his first time in a particular place—the Fellmongery, for many the worst smelling place in the entire factory, perhaps on a par with the Offal and Dry Rendering Departments.

It is also clear that the memories of smell were not simply physiological perceptions recalled. All of the memories of smell in our conversations were moments of interpretation and articulation. Frank Graham spoke of smells when discussing the ignominy of being “picked up” as a casual worker from the crowd that would gather at the factory gate when work was hard to come by:

... Oh they had favourites. They’d know the blokes that would do anything. ... Like you’d knock back a job, like, if it was the fellmongery. They always had trouble getting blokes to work in the fellmongery. It stunk and fuckin it was terrible... I’ve done a few days there... yeah in the fellmongery. It stinks and you get stuff up your nose and in your fuckin hair and on your clothes. Oohhh terrible job.

The smell of the Fellmongery was articulated, that is, linked with the exploitation of the gate on days when a butcher was reduced to taking any work he could get. Graham interpreted those smells as implicated in the rituals of power exercised by management. Lester Allan used memories of smell in a similar vein to explain, in part, why he left the meat industry:
I don’t know why a lot came into the meat industry... wages weren’t that good... the turnover annually in men was enormous... Some would come and only... last one day. Some couldn’t stand the smell, some couldn’t stand the sight of blood... some couldn’t stand the cries... the anguish of the animals... in the end it got to me. I just couldn’t... I just couldn’t accept the anguish of the animals, particularly the cattle. Hear them... they would know once they enter those premises... they knew they were doomed an’ they let you know it too.

In this and many other instances, memories of sound and smell were imbricated with how meatworkers understood the factory. These kinds of memories were common amongst the meatworkers I interviewed. However, in the history of thinking about memory they are unusual, perhaps even of a different order of memory from that which is usually thought of as mnemonics.

We know from the work of Francis Yates and others that, in western cultures, mnemonics has long been governed by interlocking regimes of training in the ordering of memory, image and language. For example, a man might be remembered by associating his moustache with a memory image. Groups or sequences would be visualised in place, so the objects in a familiar room could hold and order memory images, as in the case of Matteo Ricci’s memory palace. Finally, linguistic associations, primarily those around double entendre, word play or rhyme rather than any quality of sound, have been recurrent in memory training. A woman named Smith could be remembered by associating her with an anvil. These mnemonic systems suggest two propositions. First, that western culture’s valorisation of the gaze is reproduced in mnemonic systems by privileging the visual. Secondly, that linguistic and spatial apprehension have been central to mnemonic systems. By implication then, a tradition of memory in the logic of seeing and writing might tend to exclude memories reliant on other senses.

In *Memory and Matter* Henri Bergson broached some of these questions in order to recast traditions in mnemonics. Bergson argued for a distinction between two varieties of memory — habit memory and pure memory. “Habit memory” describes those social and bodily remembrances which we need in order to function in the world. “Pure memory” describes those processes by which experiences, images and sensations from the past have been stored away, to be called forth and perceived again when the present requires those memories. The main enemies of Bergson’s treatise are those whose belief in the associative nature of memory denies that memory is fundamentally about both duration and contemporaneity. Like Nietzsche before him, Bergson was concerned with the uses of memory for the present and the future. In a passage attacking “passive” notions of memory Bergson wrote of those who have an overabundance of
memory, the daydreamer as opposed to the man of action, as stuck in the “lower intellect.” Such characterisations are part of very old dualisms for our culture — higher and lower, cerebral and corporeal, mind and body. But memories of smell, particularly extreme smells like those of a meatworks, confound these distinctions of mind and body. They are memories of “lower functions,” of bodily fluids, excreta and decomposition, yet these memories are themselves mnemonic, in the case of Angliss workers, they were one means by which meatworkers understood and interpreted their working lives.

One of the characteristics of industrial production such as that at the Angliss meatworks is that it subordinates human bodies to the pace, processes and rationality of machinery. Bodies become interchangeable units inserted into a chain of production where they are trained to perform certain tasks. Neither industrial nor post-industrial robotic production can do away with bodies. Because of this, bodies are inscribed by traces of work. We know this even in commonsense pre-industrial images: the hunched charwoman or “the professor” who has spent too long bent over words and is thus stooped and short-sighted. In the case of meatworkers, and particularly slaughtermen, the bodily marks of work are missing fingers, scars from the deep cuts of boning knives and gnarled hands produced by severed tendons.

Somewhat less dramatic transgressions of the boundaries between self and the world are a recurring theme in the memories of smell at Angliss’s. Edna McLeod worked in the casing department making, as she described it, overcoats for sausages:

It was a very clean department but the smell would get into your hands and even into your hair. We lived in turbans to try and keep the smell out but it was impossible. When I first started they never had showers. They had troughs and plenty of soap but that was cold water, too. You’d be washing your hair every night, which was unusual in those days. I remember we used to go through dozens and dozens of bottles of scent.

George Linnard was a painter who remembered:

... Dry Rendering where they used to render down all the blood and bone ... was not a very nice place to be in ... very hot and smelly because there’s a lot of steam ... off what they were rendering in the great pots. It’d ... get into your skin and no matter how much you showered you could go walk into a hotel and everybody would smell ya ... a very strong odour. It used to get into the pores of your skin ... there were times that we had to paint it and ... I’d come home and me mates would say ... “Gee where’ve you been today ... you smell shocking.”
These smells had literally become part of the body, part of the transitive flows through which we take in and excrete. In Kristeva's terms, they have the qualities of the abject, in crossing the boundary that we imagine our skin provides. We can talk about smells like those of the Casings and Dry Rendering Departments as leaving literal traces on and in the body — traces that could be washed away but would come out, without bidding, in sweat. Memories of smell, perhaps all memories, might be thought of metaphorically in similar terms; bodily traces that can be summoned and can also come out without conscious bidding. As Proust was fond of noting, if mainly in relation to other senses, we smell again a fetor or fragrance from our past that cannot possibly be there again. Memories of smell are products of neither higher nor lower functions, mind nor body. On the contrary, they remind us that our memories are always em-bodied.

If memories of smell are both corporeal and interpretations, they force us to re-think the relations between history and memory, and in particular to resist the monumental logic of History. Bachelard appeals to similar qualities in a passage from The Poetics of Space, where he writes of the memories of space, in this instance the rooms and places of childhood:

I alone, in my memories of another century, can open the deep cupboard that still retains for me alone that unique odour, the odour of raisins drying on a wicker tray. The odour of raisins! It is an odour that is beyond description, one that takes a lot of imagination to smell. But I've already said too much. If I said more, the reader, back in his own room, would not open that unique wardrobe, with its unique smell, which is the signature of intimacy.⁶

I read Bachelard's memories of his childhood and memories of the smells of space as an argument against History. His emphasis is relentlessly specific, his terms, "I alone," "unique" (three times in a short passage) and "beyond description" all militantly anti-representation. It is an argument in favour of the imagination required in order to remember. The reader cannot smell the raisins but must "open that unique wardrobe," that is remember her own "smell of raisins." Memories of smell have the dream-like qualities that Bachelard evokes, in part because language cannot inscribe their particularity. They might remind us of that which history can neither grasp nor consign to the past. Smell is not unique but memories of smell are. The moment of apprehending smell is situational yet its memories are enduring in their presence, outside of chronology and certainly neither evidence nor markers of progress. Memories of smell remind us of the anti-historical qualities of memory that we require to inhabit space and time through our bodies.
One of the strongest smells in my remembered life does not have a name but it does have a story, a place and a time. The time is autumn because my Nana, like all good gardeners on Saturdays in autumn, was clearing her garden of the spring and summer growth, raking and burning leaves, pruning bushes and retrieving bulbs. I was working with her pulling weeds while she turned the earth with a garden fork. We stopped at one point, probably so she could go inside to hear the second leg of the daily double in a kitchen where the radio was always tuned to the races, the dogs, the trots, or the football. It was a kitchen that smelt of Craven A’s and shandies.

As I stood up to go inside, Nana put the fork into the ground and straight through my foot. In a moment of silent transfixed pain, smells surrounded me; smells of burning leaves and gardening clothes, of potting mix and grass, scents too many to name. I stood there in the wet afternoon air pinned to the earth by a fork that had gone through my gumboots and through my foot into the soil. Nana didn’t immediately notice what had happened. Then I yelled, she pulled the fork out, took me to a tap by the gully trap, let the water run through the hole in my foot and patched it with mercurochrome. That moment can never be an historic event. It will remain part of my sense of history because it left me, like so many meatworkers, with a scar and memories of smell.
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