Introduction

In *Myth and Reality,* Mircea Eliade gives us a general account of the Greek mythology of memory. It reminds us that the goddess Mnemosyne, sister to Cronos and Oceanus, was considered the mother of the Muses. According to Hesiod, Mnemosyne preserved the memory of everything that had been but also knew what was yet to come. The poet, when graced by the Muses, gains access to the knowledge Mnemosyne possesses, the knowledge of sources and originary principles. The Muses sing: beginning with the sources, they recount the origins of the gods and of human beings. From them the poet receives the superhuman memory of Mnemosyne.

Yet precisely because they are linked to the sources, these aspects of the originary reality do not enter the orbit of our present life and instead remain inaccessible to daily experience. For this reason, Mnemosyne seems to draw the poet she endows with superior memory into another world, the world of oblivion and the past, identified with death. Lethe, the river of oblivion that flows through Hades, annihilates the memory of the deceased: indeed, it is this very act that renders them dead.

With the emergence of metempsychosis as a doctrine, however, Eliade notes a change in the mythology of memory. It is now the prior life of the soul that must be recalled rather than the sources or originary principles. From this point on, oblivion no longer symbolizes death but rather a return to life, a return marked by the soul's loss of any memory of its preceding lives. In this context death emerges once again as the return to another world, the world of sources and higher knowledge. The prophets and those favored by the Muses are among the few to have been permitted by Mnemosyne to retain their memory of their previous lives and the originary principles: "They attempt to unite the scattered fragments, insert them into a single chain, in order to grasp the meaning of their own fate."

Because taking fragments of history, fragments that in themselves had nothing in common, and unifying them in recollection signified the "coming together of beginning and end."[1]

In trying to make a coherent text out of fragments receding into oblivion, these poets and prophets do the work of culture, a culture that has become scattered, fragmented, dispersed in the invisible archives of many languages, but one that is seeking to gain wholeness, unity, and logic. In essence every text carries these fragments within itself, sometimes openly, sometimes covertly, and strives to order them according to the logic of its story.

Among the prophets whose memories the gods preserved after their death, there is one, named Tiresias, who stands out. While still a young man Tiresias happened to sight the goddess Athena bathing in the fountain of Hippocrene. For this he was blinded but at the same time granted the gift of foresight. Later, while wandering along the slopes of Mount Cyllene he happened to see two snakes copulating and was turned into a woman for many years. The blind androgyne Tiresias was chosen by the gods to bear forever a memory that would not fade.

The blind Tiresias would later meet Odysseus in the underworld. Recognizing Odysseus, Tiresias foretells his future. Alongside the seer Odysseus encounters his own mother, who sees him but fails to recognize him. The blind man, it turns out, can see better, for his blindness has retained the past and its images in the dark. To recognize is to place what you see alongside what you know, alongside what has already been. Odysseus's mother, bereft of her memory, cannot "see" her son. Sight without memory is blind. This opposition of visionary blindness and blind sight is particularly evident in the tragedy *Oedipus,* where the venerable Tiresias also puts in an appearance. In the words of O. Freidenberg: "The peripetia involving a transition from blindness to sight and vice versa is one of the topics of tragedy. It is most clearly seen in the contrast between Tiresias who is blind but can see and Oedipus who can see but is blind."[2]

Vision, sight, seeing, and looking are all concepts connected with spectacle. Many texts confront us culturally as mobile pictures. In the twentieth century, cinema has come to embody this cultural tendency to cultivate spectacle. But the story Homer tells also serves to remind us that seeing without remembering means not understanding. The memory of Tiresias turns out to be a better spectator than the clouded gaze of Odysseus's mother. A spectacle that is not immersed in memory, that has not been granted access to the sources of Mnemosyne, remains a meaningless collection of disjointed fragments. The memory of culture, the memory of Tiresias must be linked up to the individual text for the desired "union of beginning and end" to take place and for history to emerge.

It is no accident that blindness has become a sign of superior vision. It is the very darkness of memory that allows visual images to come loose from their contexts, forming new combinations, superimposing themselves on each other or finding hidden similarities. Metaphoric blindness becomes the condition of reading and insight. It allows us to break away from the persistent presence of the visible text, in order to raise what is known out of the depths and plunge the text back into its sources.

The blind androgyne Tiresias has come out of antiquity to our own time. He figures in the procession of immortal seers in Apollinaire's *L'Enchanteur pourrissant* and resurfaces in the play *Les Mamelles de Tirésias,* also by Apollinaire. He also enjoys a central place in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land:*

> At the violet hour, when the eyes and back
> Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits
> Like a taxi throbbing, waiting,
> I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,
> Old Man with wrinkled female breasts, can see
> At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives
> Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,
> The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights
> Her stove, and lays out food in tins.
> Out of the window perilously spread
> Her drying combinations. . . .[3]

What is Tiresias doing in this "film" of modern life (and some critics have in fact suggested that Eliot's poetry is directly linked to cinematic montage)?[4] He brings together these montage fragments of life as other people have lived them, using his limitless memory to make them one:

> I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs
> Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest—
> (*The Waste Land,* ll. 228–229)

Eliot himself had noted: "Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a 'character,' is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest."[5] Eliot is here making an essential observation. His point is that only the viewer or the reader can unite a text, using his cultural memory to make it one. The androgynous Tiresias is the ideal reader of any text, as one Eliot critic notes: "Thus, all the men, though individually identified, are one man; all the women one woman; and man and woman meet in Tiresias, the blind seer, who is both a mere spectator and 'the most important personage,' is at the same time pivotal and peripheral."[6] The synchronic nature of the pivotal and peripheral positions that a viewer's memory together brings to bear upon a text is one of the basic themes of the pages to follow.

James McFarlane has called the mode of seeing typical of modern culture "Tiresian." This is how memory sees the fragmented images of the world around us, images that its vision tries to arrange within the vast labyrinth we call culture. The main hero of Elias Canetti's novel *Auto da Fé* can find his way by touch through the huge library that he has hidden in his memory. In becoming blind, the hero is brought into contact with the world's imaginary library.

The memory of Tiresias gives us our bearings; it is the guiding thread that keeps us, however illusory its effects may be, from losing ourselves in the chaos of texts and the chaos of being. It is the ability to unite, juxtapose, and make sense of things. Every reader or spectator has this visionary memory to varying degrees. The memory of Tiresias, it seems to me, might well serve as a symbol for cultural theory today, which is also called upon to unite, juxtapose, and make sense of things.