

Memoirs

Published in 2001 by Staffordshire University, Stoke on Trent, as part of 'Making History'.

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A collection of small books, rather like old school exercise books, held in a paper slipcase. It was made in response to St. Edwards Hospital, in Cheddleton, near Leek, Staffordshire. Built as the North Staffordshire Asylum over a hundred years ago, it closed in 2001, to be re-developed as luxury flats. My work was commissioned shortly before its closure, as part of a larger project initiated by Staffordshire University, called 'Making History'. I do not attempt to provide a historical record of the hospital or to make any intervention in the lives of those who were patients there. In initial meetings with staff of the hospital, the extent of their loss, their trauma became clear; the long-term patients were too heavily medicated to demonstrate any reaction. Although both parties were obviously held in the spell of the institution, it was the staff who found themselves without a compass upon the closure of their institution.

Each of the four books relates to a particular location in the hospital and each suggests certain kinds of behavior within these spaces. Book I, **Repetition**, is dependent on memory, the memory of June Haycock, who carefully mapped out the entire hospital. For Freud, repetition is the incessant exposure to horrible or upsetting events and circumstances, the compulsion to repeat an act when its origins are forgotten. Unless one remembers the past, if events are suppressed, something is returned in one's actions.

Book II is called **Resistance**, a term Freud first uses for the unwillingness to bring repressed memories to conscious recognition, which describes all the barriers to the progress of the work of a psychoanalytic treatment and which is inherent in the process of analysis. In Seminar 2, Lacan speaks of an irreducible residue of resistance that cannot be overcome, 'which may be essential'. In *Ecrits*, he remarks, 'When the patient's resistance opposes suggestion, it is only a desire to maintain the subject's desire'. And what could be more desirable than the flowers, the dresses that Evelyn Mountford draws, while from the fabric of the page something less attractive emerges.

Book III is called **Reminiscence**, and while the analytic process may not aim at reliving past experience, at feeling the same emotions of the past, it still happens. In reminiscing, stories are embellished, made better or worse, and so occupy a register of the imaginary. Memories are evoked, to be sure, and while this book demonstrates intense emotional effects, it is no more than a fiction. For all that, it has a certain optimism and a certain truth and the style of writing echoes quite faithfully the slippery connections of psychotic speech, in which everything and nothing makes sense.

The last book, IV, is **Recollection**, closer to the symbolic process of the assumption of one's history. The images show the stores and archives, the cataloguing of illness that cannot be revealed. The centre pages unfold, yet show only the white blankness of bed linen. The drawings are by Michael Garside, who draws what he sees on television. During the production of the book, his drawing ceased, and he became very anxious as a result. He told me through the blur of medication that he no longer felt very well. His only ability to describe the world abandoned him and he was in great pain. The records are also abandoned, destroyed; there is no longer any need to retain them as the hospital gives way to new development.

The books have never really been for sale. They were circulated through the Mental Health services, and curiously, unlike many works of art, elicited a large response. Though I would not claim this myself, it appeared to many who wrote to the project organisers, that I had described their experience of working in mental health. Yet what did I know of it? Had I only 'bent down and picked up what is to be found', transcribing what was to be seen and what was said, reading from later to earlier? I called the work *Memoirs*, and in French '*mémoire*' has a number of meanings. It is the faculty of conserving and recalling what has happened and what is associated with those events of the past; it is the mental function of representation of the past; it is what a person may leave behind for the future. It is also the reminder of a bill outstanding. In his discussions on memory, Freud moves to the speculation that all memories are screen memories, 'It may indeed be questioned whether we have any memories at all *from* our childhood: memories *relating* to our childhood may be all that we possess'.