*Tony Whedon*

# Dream-Time

Until recently the memory narrative had been considered another of several sub-genres that appeared in the late-seventies, a retrospective form which expressed society's general lust for nostalgia and nothing more. Ten years and many volumes of narrative poetry later, it's apparent a dominant new mode has emerged. The form is also spawning many articles about itself. Several magazines — *The Reaper* and the *New England Review / Bread Loaf Quarterly* the most notable — devote all or large segments of their space to narrative poetry, and it's clear that the form is quickly evolving. It's not my purpose here to define the memory narrative. Nevertheless, a few words about it might help in this discussion of Herbert Morris' astonishing new book, *Dream Palace.*

The memory narrative works out of an artistic drive that differs from that of its predecessor, confessional poetry. Where the latter was concerned with biographical disclosure, the memory narrative focusses on time and its effect on how we view the past. I make this distinction since some critics confuse a concern with a personal past with a preoccupation with autobiography. Where confessional poetry was psychological in its disclosures, the memory narrative is more epistemological in its concerns; that is, it is interested in how we know what we know, how we come to perceive the past as we do.

Memory narratives also differ from their antecedents in how they tell their stories. While the traditional narrative is linear, the memory narrative moves curvilinearly, its grand moment occurring within the speaker's mind as he comes to terms with a swirl of associations. In this sense, these new poems resemble — in their attempts to knit together swatches of the past and interweave them with the present — the montaging of modernist poetry. But where the speaker in a modernist poem often takes no responsibility for the past — indeed, much modernistic poetry sees the past as a ruin, a pile of rubble — the memory narrativist seems to desire a coherence, even if that coherence is provisional at best. The drive for such a coherence

predisposes the memory narrativist to the use of exposition and other techniques that are not unlike those used by fiction writers. Indeed, much of the delight in reading these new poems comes from the freedom one feels in being granted access to a series of related events.

The contemporary narrative has been criticized for a slackness of form, a lack of those metrical virtues characterizing most poetry of the past. It's true that much of this newer "story" poetry structurally resembles fiction in its use of transitions, its scenes and half-scenes. But a glance at poems written in the memory narrative mode also turns up work that relies on a strategies which are quite poetic, ranging from the eccentric free verse forms of Larry Levis and David St. John, to the more traditional approaches of Herbert Morris and Alfred Corn.

In some ways it's a hybrid form enriched by techniques used in contemporary novels and short stories. Its breadth of approach gives us the chance to become lost in a world, while its design, its form, affords us the delight that comes from lyric poetry. And so one would expect that a poet writing in more traditional forms would ignore the fictional techniques I've ascribed to the practitioners of this new poetry, and that, because of the assumed rigidity of blank verse, a poet like Herbert Morris would be more restricted in writing the kind of cross-over poetry described here. But I'd like to show that the opposite is true: The surprise of *Dream Palace* comes from a creative tension between the expansive narrative and the enclosed blank verse form with which Morris chooses to shape his poems.

A central poem in Herbert Morris' collection *Dream Palace* concerns Sigmund Freud and focuses on Freud's well-known fainting "episodes." Freud, master of dream-analysis, is made human in this fantasy poem in which he, as speaker, visits the Park Hotel in Munich — as he had many times before — and relives the past by purposely bringing on one of these episodes. "The Park Hotel: Munich, 1907," a dramatic monologue, tells the story of a hypothetical relationship, a dream relationship, between Freud and a younger colleague, whose affinities are so great that they meet clandestinely once a year in the dream-setting of an exotic hotel, a hotel with pastel palms, ornate columns, scrubbed marble floors. These meetings, which take on the air of an illicit liaison, are finally shattered by a break in the relationship that has been brought on by irrational forces:

> The cause, or causes, may not be
> clear to me even now, may, in truth, lie

deep in the unconscious, as I suspect.

The speaker — addressing a doctor who has helped him out of one of his Park Hotel fainting episodes — tells the doctor that his spells

> . . . occur whenever
> thinking back to that time, dreaming the dream
> that once more we are close, exchanging visits,
> writing the most impassioned letters, mind you
> (even now, even now, I feel love for him),
> I pass the Park Hotel (more accurately
> find excuses to pass the Park Hotel).

Although much of the poem describes Freud's relationship with the young man, the poem's latter half is the more important, focussing as it does on how the speaker triggers his fainting spell by evoking a memory of the past.

> Turning into the corridors where blindness
> is the thing to be risked just where we turn,
> rear views and side views, views holding the past,
> summing a present, pretending a future,
> I can feel myself shudder as those mirrors
> show me to myself, give back the reflection
> of who I was, what I felt, to what end,
> all much too late, too lost, to be retrieved.

These lines underscore a theme in most other poems in the collection, and emphasize the dream psychology at work in Morris's work. The speakers in these poems are not only interested in bringing back images of the past, but are bent upon describing the way in which the past is evoked. Proust, with his madeleine, is implicitly alluded to in this poem and in many others in the *Dream Palace* collection. But unlike Proust, Morris sees retrieving the past as almost futile. At the close of the poem, the speaker admits,

> The past? Still an abominable weight
> (all that wreckage, my dear man, all the losses),

and further admits, that

> at last I can look at it, speak of it;
> I too must come to live with what I know.
> These fainting spells are not quite evidence
> of my success, though, are they? I will learn.
> I am not slow, I am not unreceptive,
> rigid or fixed, none of these, and I have
> astonishment on my side for the journey
> into the still-uncharted. I will learn.

Though not all the speakers in this collection are as aware of psychological intricacies as the Freud of "Park Hotel," all seem to grapple with the same difficulties. However, the poems in *Dream Palace* are so ample, so complex, that much of this astute psychological observation may be lost in the rush of narrative. Here are poems which create circuses, magic shows. Some of them — "Boardwalk," "A Snapshot of My Parents' Honeymoon," and "At the Station" — are family poems, and their intent seems to be to establish continuity — which the speaker in "Boardwalk" realizes is flawed, at best — between past and present, between poem and poem. These are truly narrative in structure and length, a few examining spots in time, while others cover broader sweeps. "Boardwalk" and "Circus" focus on how the speaker comes to an astonished view of the world; these meditations on the life of the imagination appropriately frame the more fictive impulses in the book, and each meditation is earned by a prolonged imagistic study, an extrapolation of physical detail. While the poems employ colorful language, their effect is posed, muted; Morris recreates snapshots, paintings, each one consciously rendered and often written about as though the speaker were addressing the image — photographic or painterly — of the past. The colors in Morris' evocations are monochromatic, and because the poet's predisposition is to distance emotional material through time, the poems seem slightly distorted, as though we were looking at them across the surface of a shimmering pool.

*Dream Palace* achieves a consistency of tone through the use of blank verse, with its long cumulative sentences, and through repetitive use of parallelism and relative clauses. Such distortions remind me of the blank verse narratives of Anthony Hecht, recalling Hecht's lengthy "Venetian Vespers" in their colors and textures, in their narrative

complexity — in fact, Morris appears to expand upon a narrative mode that Hecht articulated in his Vespers poem. But where Hecht embraces in his poem both a lifetime and a historical epoch, moving from his speaker's illness-stricken childhood to his last days in Venice, Morris focusses upon the richly ornamented details of a recaptured *moment,* using the present only as a touchstone, a point of consciousness, from which to view the past. While both poets are masters of the long sentence, the expanded phrase, while Hecht achieves narrative power through the piling up of rich details, Morris' narrative strength arises from his syntactical strategies, his classically shaped lines. At times Morris' mega-sentences feel as though they might go on indefinitely, unfolding as they do, quietly parenthesizing and modulating themselves, undergoing the same kind of transformation, syntactically, as do his speakers as they contemplate the past.

'The Park Hotel: Munich, 1907" is important, coming in the beginning of the collection as it does, for it sets the recollective tone for the rest of the pieces and establishes some themes to be explored further in other poems. There is in all of Morris's poems a tendency to analyze the past, a psychoanalytical approach in poems which deal with mother-son relationships and with the poem's speakers' attempts to find at the heart of childhood some singular event or trauma that will explain the past and give significance to the present. "The Park Hotel" pays homage to Freud's powers of analysis, while it compassionately demonstrates the limits of reason, of analysis. Some readers see the Freud of this poem as a stand-in for Morris himself, succumbing, I think, to the kind of easy psychologizing Freud himself would have disliked. It's more to the point to say Morris admires the historical Freud's courage, his willingness to confront the past's terrors, even if this means crossing the borders of reason. In this sense the poem anticipates what is to follow in later work in this volume, where the speakers perform a kind of magical rescue of the moment from time. What illuminates these moments is the speakers' understanding that their truths are somehow beyond logic and reason, residing in the undertow of language, as the Freud of the "Park Hotel" realizes.

The most affecting poem in *Dream Palace* is Morris' "Boardwalk," from which the title of the selection is derived, an ingeniously structured piece whose form mirrors its theme. The poem has an almost baroque fascination with light and dark; its overall movement

is controlled by a highly organized sequence of family portraits. The scene is a boardwalk in the 1930's, recalled through the speaker's contemplation of a snapshot of himself, his brother and his mother and father, who have been caught by a wandering commercial photographer. This extended narrative achieves its power through a balance of portraiture and plot, the family emerging from the photo into the poem's text through the exercise of the imagination of the speaker, who moves from studying the photo to a rememberance of his father buying the speaker-as-child a Chinese box in an exotic curio shop. The poem's latter part focuses on the child's fascination with the box. There the speaker becomes lost in the box's mysterious latches and inner boxes, lost in layers of dreams-within-dreams.

Indeed, the entire poem has a kind of dream structure — though this is not a surrealist poem, for the juxtapositioning of images is far from bizarre or incongruous — beginning in an acknowledgement of the incompleteness of memory — "from what I remember of the light's angle" — and moving through a series of flickering images which the speaker labels "dream-like." Enhancing the poem's dreaminess are its long spiralling lines which create a feeling of seamlessness and move shudderingly forward through parenthesis and parenthetical expression, repetition and alliteration, and internal rhyme. Describing honeymoon couples, the speaker *remembers* observing them

> walking the boardwalk, back and forth, and back
> until at last they turn to their hotels
> (turn back, or turn again, or for the first time;
> what shall matter is that they make the turn
> at some point farthest south from here advancing,
> and, in the dark, dream splendor of the turn.)

The poem's alliteration, assonance and internal rhyme (to name only a few of the repetends that dominate "Boardwalk") fit into its easily scanned iambics, providing a symmetry of tone and diction which matches the rather methodical ordering of family portraits and narrative. And the poem's tension is achieved by the murkily subjective quality of the speaker's memory, set against his struggle to recall, to organize experience, through the poem's blank verse structure.

After an introductory stanza in which the scene on the boardwalk is described, each family member comes forth in discretely stanza'd *tableaux*. While the speaker describes his mother as dressed

in black

> . . . with a fox collar
> from whose recesses her face now looks out,
> pale flower framed by rings of jet black petals,

his father is introduced beside her

> . . . gray on gray
> wears a gray felt hat, gray trousers.

They are on a family outing, but their attire befits a funeral more than it does a holiday and reinforces the elegiac feel of the poem. The parents are defined by the way light strikes them.

> Her shoes seem somehow splendid, though they seem
> wholly unremarkable, too, at first glance,
> at second glance, their proportion, sane and just,
> undecorated, plain, above all quiet

defines the speaker's mother, while the father

> wears a freshly starched shirt collar, white,
> and a dark necktie in the center of which two or three
> . . . tiny diamonds of a stick pin
> snare the light . . .

Both parents project a sense of somber security, of burgher-like prosperity. His mother's shoes, "in proportion," are "sane and just, undecorated, plain, above all quiet"; and though his father is "dapper," "stylish," "meticulously groomed," he also has "the look of someone substantial."

Each of these portraits concludes with deft generalizations about its subjects' characters, i. e. the mother's simplicity, the father's substantiality. The quickness and rightness of these generalizations come fast upon portraits that are painterly rather than photographic, emphasizing a wholeness of perception in a poem that subordinates generalization and abstraction to concrete description — an attitude which seems to me wholly postmodernist. Though its main concern is with the speaker's wonder, its complete expression doesn't come till poem's closure.

After the parents' introduction, the speaker's brother (who remains nameless as everyone else in the poem) emerges, insubstantial compared to mother and father. A few years after the photograph is taken the brother will die, "this most difficult to fathom boy: who even strolling the boardwalk that day . . . seems in the process of drifting off like smoke." With the brother's introduction the diction becomes explosive, and with this scene, the poem shifts gears, the portrait animates, goes into slow motion. The speaker becomes shaken by his brother, who seems to "disappear before my eyes," and in whom "damage would have spread, in whom the most destruction would occur." The family portrait is distanced by the speaker's abrupt reflection on the photograph, by his sudden leap into the future: and the change in tone signals a change in mood — from foggy reverie to lucid remembrance — and shatters the spell that, momentarily, has lulled the reader into a contemplative mood.

After this extended meditation on the brother's insubstantiality —

> with father anchoring him to the boardwalk,
> with all of us, (I could not know it then)
> somehow, each in his own way, engaged in secret,
> in some last, futile, desperate attempt
> to keep him here with us . . .

— the focus shifts to the speaker who, in contrast to his brother, "seems so wholly present (the way my face / takes on light? The confidence I seem to walk with? how I grip mother's hand)," though, like his brother, he, too, is rooted to his father "here in the thirties." And with this shift in focus, a theme which is repeated throughout *Dream Palace* emerges as a subtext to the poem: that of the impermanence of the present when viewed from the future, of the impossibility of coming to terms with the present in any but the most illusory way. This perception is given to us through a pathetic fallacy, a fleeting glimpse of

> this tumult of grey-blue-green sea, momentous
> unrelenting, asking, over and over
> one question, offering one answer
> (neither of which, it seems, has been disclosed,
> not that year, not in any season since), spray on our
> . . . lips, our faces.

If *Boardwalk* were to conclude here, it would remain an important poem, a poem of amazing resonance. But it expands its rather Buddhist theme *beyond* the photograph to include a final scene which makes comment on all that has preceded it. The move from photo description to narrative is helped by a transitional, parenthetical paragraph where the speaker and his mother view the photograph together, and where the mother marvels at her children; tears fill her eyes "spilling to her cheeks [as] she whispers these words: 'You two were dazzling, dazzling.' " This short stanza, casually interjected within the narrative, reinforces the sense that a process of recapitulation is taking place — that together mother and son reconstitute the past, that the past intervenes upon and *overlays* the present. If the poem's first section moves forward with no surprises — its rhythms, its antitheses, ordered, regular, the contrast of light and dark, substantiality and insubstantiality and the long measured phrasing baroque in its grand balancing — the last pages enact a dramatic shift in tone, syntax, dramatic structure: the speaker leaves the photograph, "moves back to the hotel," where he looks into the window of the oriental curio shop, through "slivers of sun" at "teak elephants, necklaces, cloisonné" — objects that kindle his four-year-old's imagination and affect him still. Now the tone falters, the parentheses increase, as they did when he described his brother, and are fragmented (certainly, "slivers of sun" underscores the fragmentation) by a sense of mystery.

Finally, the speaker's eyes catch on "this small square box," and the imagery, the allusions here to the nightingale on the box, become Keatsian. What began as a poem of classical lineation becomes, quite suddenly, romantic, mannerist; the enjambments increase, the imagery — for a moment — almost chokes the poem. On the father's request, the kimono-clad shop owner — a gate-keeper to the world of the imagination — opens the box, places it "gently" in the boy's hands.

> There are carvings of nightingales and pine boughs
> spilling across its surface, down its sides,
> a lattice-work of intricate cross-weavings
> depicting some lost, mythic underbrush
> in China (or in paradise) — black loam
> as black as mother's fox, perhaps, a stream . . .

But I have to remind myself here that this is landscape *recalled* rather than *recreated*, resembling Keats' landscape of forgetfulness,

and arrested time, and I can't help but wonder at the degree to which it conforms to its original subject. I find the details in this section somewhat forced, the parallel with Keats' ode in detail and theme overwhelming. It's as if Morris felt obliged to flesh out what Keats kept minimal in his description of his nightingale, but in the ensuing stanzas Morris regains the voice that made the first section of "Boardwalk" compelling. The curio shop scene concludes with the shop owner explaining the box's puzzle, the difficulties of finding a spring which frees a latch so that a second box is revealed.

> His fingers glide across the second box,
> smaller than the first; its lid now springs back.
> Within it lies a box, quite small, a third box . . .

But the shopkeeper restrains himself from opening the third box, reserving that moment for some later time in the boy's life. The analogy of the "inner mystery" I refer to above with other mysteries in the poem — the mystery of the brother's death, the mystery of the sea — is central to an understanding of the main theme of "Boardwalk": the analogies, in themselves, are not as interesting as the fact that they are made; their placement in the poem is *also* analogous to the series of Chinese boxes, to this oriental puzzle within puzzle, illusion within illusion. The poem begins with the speaker contemplating a photograph, in itself an illusion, in which other mysterious illusions reside, and, in the concluding sections, the speaker contemplates the significance of these illusions.

It should be clear that "Boardwalk" is a poem of remarkable summetry and complexity. The charm of its handiwork resides in how Morris attains a consonance of vision and execution, while sustaining the illusion of spontaneous creation. But at times that spontaneity grows thin. As with so many narrative poems, "Boardwalk" verges closer to meditative essay than poem in its preoccupation with lucidity, its intent to resolve ambiguities; as with so many other memory narratives, the poem is also intent on presenting a personal history rather than enacting it. (Other book-length work of this sort, such as Robert Pinsky's *Explanation of America* and Alfred Corn's *Notes of a Child of Paradise*, have essay-like qualities and attempt a philosophical explanation of the past, of time; but none have the same concentrated intensity as does "Boardwalk.")

Such a poetry requires rhetorical strategies, persuasive devices, to make clear that the poem intends more than a lyrical recreation of

the speaker's life. Accordingly, Morris uses mnemonic devices of hypnotic resonance, such as incremental repetition and paralipsis to achieve these ends. This "mnemonic mode" is further enhanced by mannerisms not foreign to metaphysical poetry: a fragmentary line, an interruption of the poem's forward motion by a crowding of alliteration, an almost jagged movement from subject to subject that is underscored by abrupt transitions. It's also characterized by an introspection which throws the speaker back on himself. As I mentioned earlier in this essay, such techniques seem at odds with the metrical regularity of iambic pentameter; however, they are most effective when restrained by such regularity, when they push against the flow of blank verse.

Note how at the end of "Boardwalk" Morris works parenthesis into the flow of the poem, as though the subtext were erupting through the poem's wrought surfaces:

> Father will order cocktails from room service
> as the sky darkens; after naps and bath,
> we will descend once more to the first level,
> a balcony overlooking the lobby
> (Palm Terrace, the old operator sings out,
> as he slides the door back and we debark).
> From our window table we see the first stars,
> winter stars, brilliant, distant, ringed with ice.
> (I know the phases of the moon, the planets,
> names for the constellations, thanks to Father.)
> Mother wears a green frock tiered with black fringe
> and a choker of beads about her throat
> whose stones I ask the name for: opal, opal.
> Each night I ask, loving the music words make;
> in the mind the sound seems one with the stone.
> Dinner is served; night falls; the moon appears,
> a half-moon, like those circling Mother's cloche.
> To one side of the potted palms, a trio
> plays, has in fact been playing since we entered.
> (I seem not unaware that it plays,
> of what, even then, lights dimmed, candles lit,
> couples one by one, finding their way slowly
> to the dance floor, stars rising, music "Means.")

In this passage the contrapuntal textures weave a musical

theme into a poem that till now has been predominantly visual: it touches on a "ring" of motifs, and furthers the poem's symmetries and concentricities beyond the earlier conceit of the Chinese box. As the mother's neck is ringed with opals, so is the moon "ringed with ice," a half moon, "like those circling Mother's cloche." The speaker observes that he's not "unaware . . . what music means," and, clearly, at this point one makes the link between stars and music and hears Morris' barely audible reference to music of the spheres.

In order to understand this section, it should be related to the previously mentioned scene in the curio shop. The extended metaphor of the box — a dream-box, a kind of "dream palace" — fits beautifully into the poem's inclination to move from specifics to generalization, of concluding each dramatic portrait with the speaker's interpretation of that section. At the close of the stanza where the shop owner hands the boy the box the speaker remarks,

> The box may just do that, no more than that;
> Keep us for perhaps just a little longer
> open to astonishment, to surprise,
> accessible to what one understands
> dimly, imperfectly, or not at all,
> just a while longer, no more, just a while.

This bit of commentary prepares us for the final meditation on stars and music, reminds us that moments of intuitive insight are provisionally awarded us. The speaker carefully notes that the box, itself, is no more than a means through which we may become attuned to what we already know. Thus the speaker uses the snapshot, just as he used the box — to trigger in himself a state of wonder, astonishment. One would expect that the lyric poem — with its brevity, its focus on a fragment of time — would be the best vehicle for capturing this "astonishment." However, Morris's subordination of language to story contextualizes and modulates these moments by placing them within a story, providing them with a narrative perspective.

One comes away from "Boardwalk" with a sense of wholeness in design and structure, a seamlessness that goes beyond the adroit interweaving of lines and sub-sections and embraces the entire poem. It is a timeless poem, both in its subject of timelessness and in the execution of its subject. In "Boardwalk's" final stanzas, the speaker returns to the sea:

Through the main course I hear the surf, now muffled,
repeat, over and over, the same question,
over and over, the same answer,
neither of which a child of four deciphers,
though in time, with such mastery as promised,
such gists of understanding, of control,
such fluency, such vision, such command,
I may be able to have pieced together
some underlying principle pertaining
to questions and to answers, objects, words,
to one thing and another, separating
my brother from his shoes, dreaming from dying,
box from pure puzzle, puzzle from pure box,
nightingale from pine bough, goldfish from stream,
the border between paradise and China
(or provinces of each which lie between),
that faint line (tide? waves? salt? horizon? Boardwalk?)
indistinct in the dark from window tables
facing the night sea, rumored to divide them.

These last lines distance the boy's experience, address the final concern of the poem, the "underlying principle pertaining / to questions and to answers, objects, words . . ." The reintroduction of the brother further indicates that the question of dying — not yet a concept in the four-year-old's mind — is what, much later, when the speaker becomes poet, drives the speaker to write the poem, to bring together in narrative what has been lost to him — though now, if only for the moment, regained — through time.