Living in the Past:

A Meditation on Memory, Privilege, and the Coke-Bottle Doll

For Aline Jackson

Part I

The accent is on the living, not the past. Living in the past. For there is abundant life there, if only we know how to look, and also how to see what we find there: with wonder. St. Augustine knew this:

> All this I do inside me, in the huge court of my memory. In my memory are sky and earth and sea, ready at hand along with all the things that I have ever been able to perceive in them and have not forgotten. And in my memory too I meet myself – I recall myself, what I have done, when and where and in what state of mind I was when I did it…. From the same store I can weave into the past endless new likenesses of things either experienced by me or believed on the strength of things experienced; and from these again I can picture actions and events and hopes for the future; and upon them all I can meditate as if they were present….

Or – to slightly alter another Church Father -- in the past we live, and move, and have our being. Credo in unum praeteritum omnipotentem…

But wait a minute. Is all this Christianity going too far for me? Is it even relevant? "Things of the spirit", yes – but Christ Jesus doesn't necessarily have anything to do with it. Good guy – great guy; though not a very good

Jew (I can identify with that) -- but a little too forward-looking for my taste. Too providential, you could say. Proust is more my man. Or was, rather; but my Proustian acolythate is past. There was a time, though, back in my 20s, when Proust was pretty much all to me. The standard by which I measured my own powers – and so always came up short. I wrote about this once: "On Not Being Proust: An Essay in Literary Failure". But we're not going there now. We're going somewhere else. Not sure where yet. Though I know it has to do with life. Life, and hope, and faith. And the greatest of these is… (Hmm. That's a tough one.)

I confess to a weakness -- a little uncomfortable for me to admit -- for the New Testament, and also to an eccentric interest in the Church Fathers. I find that whole ancient world of emergent Christianity weirdly intriguing; and it gets me to thinking about something else. Do I maybe have a tendency to make a kind of religion of my own past? I really don't like the idea of worshipping anything, and I certainly want to get away from notions of worshipping the past – or "wallowing" in it, as the saying goes. But I don't like the forward-looking perspective implied by that aspersion, either. I associate it with another kind of providentialism – call it American providentialism. This perspective would have it that it's

OK – even encouraged – to fixate on the future; but to spend time poring over the past is self-indulgent, counter-productive, and even has overtones of uncleanliness. (To wallow, like a pig in mud.) Well, I reject all that, too.

In favor of what? A defense of the historian's vocation? No, not that's not what I'm about either. Senator, I am no historian, despite the books on history, the study of history – historiography – that sit (unread) on my bookshelves. For a while, I was big on historiography – or rather on the buying of books on historiography. It was part of another hope of mine. Hope of what? Of fortifying myself, perhaps. It was as though I wanted to administer to myself healthful, salutary draughts of scholarship in order to justify my autobiographical pursuit of egocentricity and self-indulgence. Even though I believe, in the realm of life-writing at least, that those things – egocentricity and self-indulgence – should and indeed do need no justification. For are these not the poetic licenses of the autobiographer? We life-writers are permitted – nay, required -- to indulge our self-preoccupation, in the name of whatever truths we can manage to come up with. Which maybe all boil down to the simple truth of wonder: a sense of continuing wonder that what we were, exactly <u>how</u> we were

– "how it was with us", to use a Heideggerian term (that son of a bitch; I wish I could dispense with him, but I can't) – how our past Being could be of a living piece with how we are now, and how we hope to be. The mystery of being (the phrase is Gabriel Marcel's – the Christian existentialist whose mother was a Jew; which I guess actually makes him more Jewish than me) – the mystery of being is surely, in part, the mystery of having been, and living to tell the tale of how it was.

Maybe it was the need to tell this tale – the tale of the truth of the past, or my infinitesimal slice of it – that once attracted me to historiography. The idea of historiography, rather than its reality. Because, as I mentioned, I never read any of those books I bought. I have them still, and still haven't read them, and probably never will. Their titles beckon from the bookshelves, with an Emersonian alienated majesty: Visions of History; The New History and the Old; What Is History?; The Nature of History Reader; History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century. (I like the idea of them, as contained – promised – in their titles; but that would appear to be all that I like.) You see, I am not really interested in history, or the study of the writing of history. Never was. I suppose I just hoped that my abiding fondness for my own history –

the memories of how it was with me, how it had been, in the pleroma of my past (more New Testament; see also the Neoplatonists) – might somehow be illuminated, perhaps even justified, by the historian's quest for the truth of Ranke's "how it really was" ("wie es eigentlich gewesen"). An attempt, perhaps, to escape – or at least atone or make up for – my guilty sense of egocentricity and self-indulgence as a retrospector. But I couldn't do the reading. I couldn't make myself care about the issues or details of historiography. And it gradually became apparent to me that I really cared only for the history of my own past – the mysteries of my own past being: of how I had lived, and moved, and had my own being.

But if I was never quite able to crack historiography, I have, on the other hand, become an aficionado of biography. Literary biography in particular. There, at least, I have done the reading. There, it seems to me, the secrets lie. How it really was for the particular writer, in his or her particular life and times. I can trace the start of this interest to the top-floor study of my grandmother's house in New York City, in January of 1980 – January, that cleansed, austere month! How I welcome it, in all its pared-down forswearance, and wishful resolutions of virtuous endeavor. And in its resumption, too, of

"serious business", and therefore also of immanent, everyday being, which has lain in a kind of suspension during all the fuss the holidays. That top-floor study where, in January of 1980, I read Lionel Trilling's "Introduction" to his one-volume abridgment of Jones' three-volume biography of Freud. The Introduction where Trilling describes Freud as a "conquistador". For some reason, that made a lasting impression. I think that book was the start of my serious interest in biography.

Is this true? Actually, it isn't. The real start was a year and a half earlier, in the house in Pacific Palisades – the house I grew up in – where, in the summer of 1978, I read Painter's two-volume biography of Proust, given to me for my 24th birthday by my friend Ned, who'd inscribed it (appropriately, for a book on Proust), "From one master of hyperbole to another". That was also the summer I was writing my first novel -- which (unsurprisingly) turned out to be (embarrassingly) influenced by my rereading of Proust, which Painter's biography had occasioned. Rereading Proust as I was writing my first novel -- what a mistake that was. The abortive end of my career as a novelist, almost as soon as it began.

But some good was to come of it after all. It was my introduction to biography. (Those who can, write novels. Those who can't, read biographies of novelists.) After Painter, and before Trilling's Jones's Freud, came Leon Edel – his five-volume, "magisterial" biography of Henry James (the last volume of which is aptly titled "The Master"), bought together with a selection of James' short stories from "the major period", or "the major phase" (thus were they labeled on the front cover): "The Beast in the Jungle", "The Lesson of the Master", "The Figure in the Carpet", etc. The purchase of these books (I well remember that November evening, at the long-since defunct Westwood Books, hard by UCLA; I'd just signed the contract for my novel, and was full of great expectations and contemplations) – the buying of those books, along with James' last novel, The Golden Bowl (unreadable; I've tried several times), began, in turn, my (ongoing) investment in the idea of a "major period" – of someone, anyone (but especially myself) having a "major period" in their lives. Yet it was also clear to me even at the time that not just anyone could have a "major period". That title could only be conferred on someone worthy of it. An artist. Only an artist could have a "major period". And I, an acolyte then of James as well as Proust (and later of Wordsworth, and

Wallace Stevens – "masters of consciousness" all, as I styled them) – I too aspired someday to have (and even more to be deemed to have, by the powers that bestow such honors, i.e. critics and biographers) a "major period".

Such were the early seeds of my penchant for "biographization" – for imagining my life proleptically, as though it were already the subject of a later (probably posthumous) biography. As though the seeds of a later fulfillment were already present in it. I have written about this too ("On the Desire for Future Biographers"), and so will not repeat myself here, in the vain (and not a little delusional) hope that my future reader may someday – perhaps even through the efforts of my future biographers -- have access to that essay. Suffice it to say that this essay (and its sequelae – for this is a conceit – nay, a fixation -- I cannot easily let go of) proposed the wishful idea of "biographical vindication" – the conferral of "biographical validity" through a retrospective authority (say, a biographer), whose job it is to discern the germs of one's future achievements in one's early beginnings. (Cf. the great Richard Holmes' Coleridge: Early Visions; followed by the second volume, Coleridge: Darker Reflections -- another of the great literary biographies.) To chart, in other words, one's development as an artist.

O vanity of vanities! (O.T., for a change.) All is indeed vanity in this matter of one's future biographers. But humor me for a moment, reader. According to such a scenario – the "biographical scenario", let us call it – one receives posthumous recognition not only for one's achievements, but (even more important) for one's errors, which are seen, in the future, to have been formative. (The future perfect is the natural verb tense of biographization.) One is "allowed", "permitted" one's mistakes by the generous eye of future critico-historical judgment. One's mistakes are even necessary, because formative – for how was one to have developed precisely as one did without them? Of course, you could say that everyone's mistakes are formative; but the writer's, the artist's mistakes, you see, are sanctioned and even privileged by the authority of critico-biographical judgment. One is allowed one's self-indulgences not only through the special operation of artistic license, but also through the process of biographical examination and vindication. One receives the "biographical imprimatur". So the late-adolescent fantasy goes – or so, at any rate, went mine.

But when my faux-Proustian first novel died upon publication, and there was no second novel forthcoming, and

I got a job synopsizing scripts at a movie studio (Warner Bros.), and got my second stomach ulcer (the first one was in college), and then went on to graduate school, I gradually came to entertain a much humbler and more realistic idea of myself: the failed novelist as graduate student – later to become the failed novelist as professor. That is, until the fourth-tier college where I professed for 19 years went bankrupt and belly-up two years ago. Now I am a part-time adjunct English instructor, teaching composition at a community college across the country. To quote a bumper sticker I once saw in Worcester, MA, ca. 1995: "And what a strange journey it is."

And, on a billboard in that same city, this: "'It is never too late to be what you might have been.' George Eliot." The message was – and is – not only cheering and hopeful on the face of it; it also seems to me now to convey a kind of biographical sanction, on the order of the following: "We life-critics [I love the idea of "life-critics"!] are watching, paying close attention, and we give you our encouragement, understanding and allowance." Or am I reading too much into what was, after all, just a benevolent public service message on a railway overpass? Maybe I am; but it's that conditional perfect tense – that "might have been" – that evokes something else for me as

well: not only a quality of pathos redeemed – what "might have been" could still be! It is never too late! – but also the "biographical perspective": a mutual apprehension of the life, shared by the subject himself and also the (inferred, by me) biographical authority. A synecdochic understanding of the whole in the parts – of the big picture, with all the separate different pieces now in place, comprehended at last, through the eyes of a justificatory, retrospective benevolence. (It doesn't hurt, either, that the eyes are those of a Victorian Sage, George Eliot.)

I find them comforting, the Victorian Sages. I find comfort in the density of their prose, as much as anything else. Especially the prose of Matthew Arnold (Trilling's man – and it was Trilling's biography of him, bought for me by my father on a trip to Dutton's Books in North Hollywood for my 32nd birthday, Summer of '86, that first introduced me to Arnold). Comfort in "density of prose"? Well, yeah. Of course it is more than that, too. It is also the quality of "Mind", as Trilling would say, in Arnold that pleases me: its power of distinction and discrimination; its unabashed morality; its high literary feeling; its nobility (to use another unfashionable word, and one that Arnold himself applied to translating Homer). Arnold is a

thinker of the past that I can really connect to – though I also recognize the ground here was well prepared by Trilling. But I do experience comfort in the density itself of Victorian prose (and in the book-length bibliography, Victorian Prose: A Guide to Research, ed. David J. DeLaura, which I have been known to dip into, from time to time), as exemplified by the sages Arnold, Ruskin, Newman and Eliot. (Carlyle not so much; I have tried to get into him, but never quite succeeded. Not sure why.)

What accounts for this sense of comfort? I think partly – maybe largely – it is for me with the Sages as it is with historiography: I get pleasure in the mere idea of them: the idea of comprehensiveness, and scholarship, and mental effort, and orbicularity, and definitiveness. Dense Victorian prose is something hefty, weighty, substantial, difficult, and lofty of endeavor (lofty in both their process of composition and my process of reading them); and these things seem to me salutary, and maybe even a little – or more than a little – salvific. Salvific how? Well, they promise to make me better. A better person: smarter, more thoughtful, more wise, more educated. They promise to save me, rescue me. From what? From shallowness, I think. From the shallowness to which I was born, and in which I grew up. The shallowness of my past life. The shallowness

of having grown up in suburban Los Angeles (L.A. being the shallowest of great American cities. But I wonder: Is it possible for a city to be both great and shallow at the same time? Great perhaps in its almost deliberate embodiment of shallowness, emptiness, hollowness, those emblems of our age?), as an only child, amid the sterility of (relative) wealth and privilege. Victorian prose, it is my hope, can somehow help save me from all of these things -- the monkeys on my back. The sense of sterility that comes from growing up privileged, in the lap of luxury, in a place where the sun shines too much, and sad creatures like me are sheltered from the harsh (read "authentic") realities of life.

Poor little rich boy, I know. Please don't hate me, reader. Though how could you not, when I so obviously sort of hate myself? But you see, Victorian prose – critical Victorian prose no less; we're not even talking fiction here, but nonfiction; and even though George Eliot wrote mainly fiction, her fiction is reflective and philosophical and even sententious enough to sometimes blur the lines between fiction and nonfiction; she is not unlike Proust in that regard (though for some reason Proust's sententiousness is more tolerable than Eliot's, perhaps because his narrator is so much more vulnerable in his

preachiness than hers is; there is something annoyingly Olympian and untouchable about her narrators that is never quite the case with Proust's) – Victorian critical prose represents a kind of intellectual penance for me. Its difficulty absolves me of self-accusations of superficiality and triviality and meaninglessness; it restoreth my soul. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of emptiness, I will fear no hollowness, for the Sages are with me. The rod and the staff of their dense, difficult prose comfort me. Their rigors will compensate for my sense and memories of excessive ease and privilege in Zion (aka Pacific Palisades). The considerable effort required to read them, and to reflect on their meaning, will redeem me from the specter of existential fluff, and I will dwell in the house of Marcel forever.

My problem, I know. It's all my problem, my weight to carry, my cross to bear; why should I burden you with it? I must wrestle with my paltry demons – the demons of paltriness -- myself. Writing about it helps, though – and so does reading difficult prose. It's all therapeutic. So is that what this is all about, finally? Just my own self-therapy? Self-medication through reading and writing? If so, then I suppose one can think of worse ways to cope.

But I am too much of a writer, for better or worse, to be satisfied with that answer. I must also answer to a voice other than my own. To your voice, reader – and I can hear it growing impatient. You want me to deliver the goods. And I do, too. Whatever they turn out to be, the goods must be delivered.

They come packaged, these goods. They come in a package of antique prose – a box of memories not unlike the exquisite, whimsical boxes of Joseph Cornell. Or, for that matter, the all-encompassing world of St. Augustine's memories that I invoked at the beginning of this essay. His "court of memory". I love that passage. (I should give due credit here to the autobiographer James McConkey, who used some of that passage from Chapter 10 of the Confessions as the epigraph to his beautiful memoir, Court of Memory. I had long been a fan of the Confessions, but it was McConkey's book that really brought the memory passage home to me.) And one of the reasons I love it is because it conjures up the idea of a perfect, self-enclosed world. I am reminded of the wild-animal dioramas at the Museum of Natural History in New York City, and also the 3-D Viewmaster of my childhood: beckoning, alternative worlds one longs to inhabit. When I was a kid, and my grandmother – on my trips to New York with my parents – would take me

to the Natural History Museum, I used to wonder what it would be like to actually be transported into the worlds inside the dioramas in the galleries – into specific locations, at specific times of year, as labeled on the frames below the windows of the magic boxes: the Canadian Rockies, in June; the Adirondacks, in October. (The North American gallery was always my favorite; not sure why.) The specificity of the settings was for some reason comforting to me, as were the timeless, suspended worlds captured by the artistry of the dioramatists. The representation of a total world in itself, perfect and unchanging. Sterile, too, I suppose: frozen in time, and static, and hermetically sealed. (Not to mention full of dead and stuffed animals.) But I could ignore the deathliness of the environments in favor of their evocativeness: they were closely based, after all, on real-world settings, studied and recreated by naturalists and artists whose job it was to bring us into another world – a world within a world, within a world. The world of the diorama, within the world of the museum, within the world of New York City: a sort of trifecta of transport. The transport was the main thing; but almost as important – and really part of the transport, when I come to think of it -- was the awareness of simultaneity, of being at once in the

museum, in New York, and also being somewhere else: inside the perfectly imagined and achieved world of the diorama. (Or, back at home, inside the Viewmaster. And what was the Viewmaster, really, with its modeled clay environments and figurines, but a series of dioramas, which you had the sensation of being projected into, through the magic of the stereoscopic viewing mechanism?) This double awareness, of both transport and security, was part of the feeling of comfort I received. And the possibility that I could return, in my mind, to the memory of the diorama, was like the knowledge that I had available to me, whenever I wanted, at the touch of a finger on the lever, the perfect and unchanging and continually and mysteriously fetching alternative world of the Viewmaster. It was something both here and there. And therein lay its fascination, and the mysterious sense of reassurance that it conveyed. Reassurance of what? The reassurance of escape-and-return. The transport was both reliable and temporary. Not unlike Disneyland, another scene of my childhood – and itself a sort of giant, living diorama.

In this way, I see now, the dioramas and the Viewmaster were sort of like the past – my past – and even memory itself: something intricate and boxed and self-contained and recreated, and always reliably available.

Alternative habitats that fetched the imagination somewhere utterly else, and then held it there in a state of mild rapture, while at the same time making you feel unaccountably safe and secure. This double awareness – or more precisely, the awareness of a double presence to hand for me -- filled me with a sense of mysterious richness. The richness of being.

And maybe it's this richness of being, together with the richness of Victorian prose – richnesses that are, after all, imaginary (but no less, and maybe more, real for all that) – that helps to counteract, at least in part, my feelings of shallowness and superficiality, arising from the privileges, and relative material wealth, of my childhood. Who knows? I do know, though, that repairing to these imaginary places brought comfort and – later, with the Victorian prose – a sense of edification. Over against the shallowness and hollowness of spirit, intellectual and even spiritual edification.

Things of the spirit, these too.

Part II

The idea of edification – of edifying things and experiences -- seems rather quaint nowadays. The reasons

for this are probably connected with the problems of status and privilege. Only those with sufficient material resources have the time and opportunity to pursue intellectual and spiritual edification. And the assumption of material sufficiency – or superfluity – bespeaks a sense of privilege that has now come under question. And rightly so. Candy-ass upper-middle-class white boys -- from Pacific Palisades, say – are starting to have their heretofore unquestioned status and privilege interrogated and challenged. And no amount of dense Victorian prose is going to persuade anyone otherwise. Quite the opposite, Senator. The fact that I find it, and dioramas, and the Viewfinder, edifying and even quasi-spiritual experiences, is probably going to make the less-privileged not only not give a shit, but maybe even want to make me go away and "never talk again". (This last was once said – and afterward forever immortalized -- by a friend of my son Zack, after another friend of theirs said something really stupid.) I can sympathize with this view; however, I'm afraid I cannot comply with it. Because, in a sense, my writing is predicated on my privilege -- in the sense that my privilege is my guilt and shame, and it is my guilt and shame, at least in part, that drive my writing. And so as long as I am feeling privileged, and therefore also ashamed

of and guilty for that privilege – in other words, as long as I am alive – I will be writing in order to at least partially attempt to atone for these things.

The subject, though, was edification; and I don't pretend that edification is a subject only for the privileged. Edification is a universal value. Religion, art, education, culture (including the study and writing of history) – they all testify to our need for edification. And I include personal history – biography and autobiography – under the category of history. Some might feel differently, and put them instead under the category of literature. But it doesn't really matter how we categorize these kinds of life-writing. What seems important is to note the particular kind of experience that the remembering and contemplation of one's past life comprise. Of course, the experience of past-life-contemplation (Is there a German word for this? Did Heidegger invent it?) is different for each individual. PLC, let us call it, for the man who grew up in Compton, or East L.A., or El Segundo, is different from the PLC of the man who grew up in Pacific Palisades. One man's over-privileged mild rapture may be another woman's underprivileged pain and suffering.

For instance, the childhood doll of our housekeeper Aline Jackson, who grew up in the impoverished countryside outside Houston, and later moved to Compton, consisted of a Coke bottle tied to a rope, which she would drag through the dirt of her front yard. As far as I know, Aline never had a Viewmaster; judging from her doll, I don't think she had a whole lot of toys of any sort. I wonder what she made of my 5-foot-tall toy closet, into which all manner of board games and battery-operated playthings and stuffed animals were crammed to the gills. But I never asked her -- nor, growing up, would it ever have occurred to me to do so, nor even to consider the question.

I do remember, however, one particularly egregious instance of my cluelessness where Aline was concerned. Once Christmas, when I was either in high school or college (I would prefer to think it was in high school, but it may well have been when I was in college), I bought a black ventriloquist's doll for my mother, in joking reference to the fact that she had always been terrified of ventriloquists' dummies. I named him Chester. Mom immediately consigned Chester to the back of her closet – but not before Aline saw him. I remember at the time being a little queasy about this; and yet my queasiness was easily outdone by my feeling of cleverness at having found,

for my mother, such a signal example of camp. So clever, so campy, so resourceful. "Play that funky music, White Boy!" (Aptly enough, Aline once mentioned that song to me, remarking on how "mean" the tone of the singer was. I laughingly agreed – while secretly noting that his mockery was aimed precisely at people such as myself.

Over the years since she died – in June of 1995, only a few days before my mother; in fact, my father and wife and I were at Aline's funeral when Mom died – Aline has become a kind of touchstone for me: the painful memory touchstone of a funky-music-playing white boy's guilty conscience. Actually, Aline's touchstone power long predated her death, by around 10 years. Starting in 1986, when I began graduate school at USC, I also began swimming in their outdoor pool, next to the new gym. When I swam, I would find myself thinking for some reason of Aline, and the intersection and contrast of our lives. Partly I think it may have been because University Park, where USC is located, is not all that far from Compton. A redoubt of still-mostly-white privilege, surrounded on all sides by poorer, darker neighborhoods. As I swam leisurely outside in the sunny afternoons after classes, or long stints in the library, my mind would drift to Aline, and all the differences in our histories and circumstances. I don't

think Aline ever learned how to swim. She was morbidly obese – with diabetes – and any kind of exercise was hard and maybe even dangerous for her. What came easily to me – swimming in the Olympic-sized outdoor pool at USC – probably wouldn't have even been on her radar. There was something a little uneasy that happened in my stomach when I thought of this: My energizing, healthful back-and-forth in the sun-filled pool, in contrast to the diabetic life she lived in the cramped, dark little house in Compton, not too far away. (Aline worked for us four days a week for thirty years, schlepping the 25 miles each way, back and forth, on the Harbor and Santa Monica Freeways, between Compton and Pacific Palisades. But I had been to her house only twice in 30 years: once after the funeral of her mother, Katie, and once with my friend from New York, Nick, on our way to or from Watts Towers. Two white boys on a sightseeing tour of the ghetto, would be an uncharitable but not inaccurate way to put it.) And I can't even say that what I felt when I thought about her as I was swimming was entirely composed of guilt and shame, either -- at the sense of unfairness and social injustice in our respective lots. I think there was something less benign than that in it as well. It was, if I am to be completely honest with myself, a feeling also of gratitude – gratitude for all

that I had, that she didn't. A "there but for the grace of God go I" -- except without the God. Gratitude for being on the right side of the luck of the draw. The white boy with the jam-packed toy closet, instead of the black girl with the rope-and-Coke-bottle doll.

These are hateful things now to think about. And I knew at the time that they did me no credit – nor Aline no good. It was as if the healthful swimming in the sun-filled pool were at once an occasion and an attempt at cleansing myself of these thoughts. An eruption of the same thing that was to be purged. Except it never got purged, because it couldn't be. It could only be repeated. And it was. Over, and over, and over again, almost every time I swam.

"The unpurged images of day recede…." Does the reference to Yeats serve to mitigate or only enforce my shame? Probably more the latter; yet that line somehow got stuck in my mind years ago, and stayed there. I used it for the title ("The Unpurged Images") of one of the several abortive novels I began after the first one was published. And it seems also a good descriptor for the recurring dreams – recurring most nights now, for many years – I have of the house on Vance St., where I grew up, and where Aline worked. The house of the dead, now, populated by memories

of those who inhabited it: my mother and Aline (d. 1995), and then, nine years later, my father and Diane, my first wife (d. 2004). Almost every night I dream of the house on Vance St. All of the rooms – my bedroom; my parents' bedroom (where just last night, in fact, I dreamt that I slept next to my father, in my mother's place; what would the conquistador make of that?); the living room; the dining room and the kitchen, scenes of countless meals, with and without Aline; the walk-in pantry connected to the kitchen (where a rusted can of Nestle's Strawberry Quick mix, with a cartoon of a goofy rabbit that I used to feel sorry for on the label, stood for at least 20 years, so that it became a kind of heirloom); behind the kitchen the laundry-room, and then the service porch, where Aline's cleaning supplies were kept; beyond that the garage, scene of all my childhood model- and skateboard-building; beyond the garage the guest room, where Diane and I would sleep when we came with Zack to visit (Zack slept in my old room); and above the garage, the inner sanctum of my father's study and library, which for some reason – some dream-reason that only the conquistador (and his minions) can know – keeps changing its contours and layout, sometimes featuring tall book- and/or rope-ladders, which it never had in real life (though it did have a spiral

staircase leading up to it). Vance St., scene of privilege; scene of memory; scene of ghosts. And scene now also of almost-nightly dreams, so that every morning my wife, Julie, asks me if I've dreamed of Vance St. again, and I am occasionally pleasantly surprised when I am able to answer in the negative. Pleasantly because not dreaming of Vance St., for a change, seems to testify to the ability of my imagination sometimes to escape, at least for a little bit, the hold of the past, where I seem increasingly to spend my nights. A prisoner of Vance St., in my dreams. Not always a happy scenario. But I can't seem to get away from it. My inner life, my deepest inner life – the life of my dreams – is inescapably tied to Vance St., and all that transpired there. Or rather, all that didn't transpire there, but that I only dreamed did. These recurring dreams seem to me also to lay bare the growing impoverishment of my aging imagination, the confinement of my dream-life. Julie, though – an acolyte of the conquistador – thinks otherwise. She feels I am trying to work something out. She may be right. It doesn't feel that way – it feels more like a kind of imprisonment than a problem-solving – but she may well be right. I hope she is. That is a happier scenario: liberation rather than

claustration. The unconscious as a Wordsworthian "field of sleep", rather than a "prison-house".

There is a passage from "Tintern Abbey" that serves as another kind of memory touchstone for me. (You have only to substitute "dear old Vance St." for "O sylvan Wye".)

> How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee,
> O sylvan Wye! thou wanderer through the woods,
> How often has my spirit turned to thee!
> And now, with gleams of half-extinguished thought,
> With many recognitions dim and faint,
> And somewhat of a sad perplexity,
> The picture of the mind revives again;
> While here I stand, not only with the sense
> Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts
> That in this moment there is life and food
> For future years.

These lines resonate with the idea of the nourishing power of memory – "life and food for future years" – that I would like to claim for my own memories of Vance St. But instead of nourishment, I seem to be undergoing a kind of ensorcellment by my dreams – Coleridgean rather than Wordsworthian in its imaginative force.

> Weave a circle round him thrice,
> And close your eyes with holy dread,
> For he on honey-dew hath fed,
> And drunk the mild of Paradise.

It was at USC that I came to study the Romantic poets; it was after those graduate literature seminars, and the hours in the Doe library, that I came to swim in the sunny pool. And I wonder now: what about Aline's dreams? Did she dream

of the dirt yard, and the rope-and-Coke-bottle doll? And how could she not? Our attachments, after all, are not based on our privileges; they are formed out of the material that was inalienably ours. No doubt there was much shame and pain for her connected with the dirt yard, and the doll; just as there is, for me – a very different kind of shame and pain, granted – in Chester, and the toy closet, and all they represent.

But there is a great difference between memories you like to remember, and those you want to forget. Who am I to decide that there was "life and food" – as much as for me, or even any at all -- for Aline in the memory of dragging her Coke-bottle dolly through the dust? How can I presume to know anything about her inner life – let alone her dreams? I can't. It may be only the privileged view that looks kindly on one's past. How can I say? What do I know? Que sçais-je? (Motaigne's famous question.)

At the beginning of Thomas Hardy's novel The Return of the Native, he describes the somber scene of Egdon Heath near twilight. It's a description that has always spoken to me. He says: "Men have oftener suffered from the mockery of a place too smiling for their reason than from the oppression of surroundings oversadly tinged." The house in the impoverished East Texas countryside where

Aline grew up was hardly Egdon Heath; and who am I to say whether there was anything dear to her in the dirt, or in the doll? Maybe there was, and maybe there wasn't. I never thought to ask her. (I learned about the doll from Diane, after Aline told her about it; she never mentioned it to me, or even to Mom – who would have told me about it if she had.) The fact that the doll has become an kind of emblem for me – in a way, the absolute antithesis of Chester: an emblem of her stark poverty, in contrast to my campy, ironic, and cluelessly (if inadvertently) racist privilege – says nothing about what it might have meant to her; though very likely her one sad doll meant more to her – and to anyone, really, who thinks about it -- than my whole toy chest full of stuffed animals meant to me. Pain and depth; pleasure and shallowness. I am inclined to equate them; though maybe this is just another one of my delusions, like "biographization", and the redemptive power of difficult prose. Suffering ennobles – or so goes the romantic ideology. And maybe this whole meditation is just another instance of the romantic ideology. (A term coined by one of my teachers at USC, the great Jerome J. McGann, to denote a certain kind of literary false consciousness.) If so, then it is an honest mistake, committed by one who has always been apt to confuse the categories of literature

and life. I call on the spirit – which is to say, the memory -- of Aline to set me straight.