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Un fait injustifiable: How else to approach memory and intentionality in Sartre?

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Abstract Involuntary memories raise worries for any notion of constitution of memorial experiences and of the relationship between subjectivity, the past, and intentionality. However, this does not mean they are wholly intractable for an intentional analysis of consciousness. To the contrary, if one avoids conflating the will withthetic or express intentional acts, the Sartrean notion of intentionality is well-placed to account for the most salient features of involuntary memories, without resorting to appeals to non-subjective memorial processes in which any sense of implication or investment in the content of involuntary memory seems difficult to locate. To make this case, two steps are taken. The first is to map out a Sartrean phenomenology of memory, by taking into consideration how his notions of intentional consciousness, absence, and lack play out at the level of memory. The second is to examine how the Sartrean model of intentional consciousness appears to be well-adapted to the phenomenal traits most salient to involuntary memories. The upshot of such an examination is a provocative phenomenological position on the nature of the resistance of the past and on doing justice to the past, that is, in regard to how memorial intentionality ought be conceived when involuntary memories contribute to the rule rather than merely being an exception in the experience of the past.

A cogent phenomenological theory of memory should be able to tell us not just about our access to past experience but also about any restrictions thereupon. The difficulty here lies in the different ways in which the past proves adverse to recollection. It is one thing for there to be a breakdown *tout court* of either semantic or episodic memory, such as when one becomes

simply oblivious to a previously encountered word, face, or event. It seems to be something else entirely when one struggles to recollect a moment or an item from the past — being on the verge of reliving it — which in psychological terms seems to indicate a kind of “metamemory.”¹ While both of these cases, which may occur in almost any situation where one works through the past, represent the limits of the subjective capacity to relive the past, only the latter may be counted as an instance where past experience resists being given anew, and yet signals its being forgotten.

To the extent that it constitutes a sort of heuristic failure of memory, the case of struggling to recollect or “metamemory” presents the phenomenology of memory with no small challenge; when one struggles to recollect what happened during a past event, something from the past is indeed given, albeit in an unfulfilling or inadequate fashion. How then to describe the experience of something on the verge of remembrance, which at the same time resists the subjective effort at recollection? Doesn't the fact that there can be such a heuristic failure of recollection force us to reconsider the role of and the restrictions upon intentionality in allowing for access to past experience?

A concern of this sort can be seen to underlie the motivations philosophers have had for looking at involuntary memories. Such memories prompt a reassessment of the primacy of intentionality in memory in particular, and of the aims of phenomenology of memory in general, insofar as they constitute an illustration of how there may be an experience of the past in spite of any subjective, intentional act. In other words, involuntary memories show how something from the past — be it a traumatic or apparently insignificant event — may appear independent of or even in opposition to any volitional, representational aims, for instance, to relive past experience. In involuntary memories, therefore, the success or failure of an effort to recover a lost or absent past would seem to be of little import; rather, involuntary memories are characterized by their foreignness to any will to recollect and their tenuous relationship to the context and situation within which they occur.

Involuntary memories hence raise serious worries for any notion of constitution of memorial experiences and of the relationship between subjectivity, the past, and intentionality. It is this last worry in particular that this paper shall attempt to question. Just how fatal are involuntary memories for the role of intentionality in recollection? Do they entail a wholesale

¹ Elizabeth A. Styles, *Attention, Perception, and Memory* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2005) 266.

diminishment of the primacy of intentionality in memorial consciousness, with important repercussions for other forms of consciousness as well? On the strength of their evidence, does one have no choice but to subscribe to Merleau-Ponty's critique of the role of "thetic" or express intentionality in experience in general,¹ which would especially apply to involuntary memories in particular? Must we simply accept with the stark opposition Deleuze sets up between voluntary — i.e. failed² — versus involuntary — i.e. successful — experiences of the past, and the complimentary implication that any intentional analysis of memory could only leave us on the wrong side of the 'force' and 'violence' of the involuntary without which "thought is nothing"?³

In taking up these questions, we shall explore a somewhat unusual perspective, namely by attempting to reconstitute a significant role for 'thetic' or express intentional consciousness in involuntary memories. This approach, if successful, shall point to some problems within those accounts of memory, like Merleau-Ponty's or Deleuze's, which may be said to privilege memorial institution⁴ above subjective constitution. The decisive issue will be whether the sort of intentional consciousness at work in memory is solely at the service of the stale, reflective, and voluntary reproductions of the type that enfeeble, if not distort, the recollecting of the past. If one avoids conflating

¹ The advance of this critique can already be seen in Merleau-Ponty's early subordination of what he calls "thetic" or express intentionality to "operative intentionality (*fungierende Intentionalität*)" and Heideggerian "transcendence;" see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, C. Smith (Trans.) F. Williams (Ed.) (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962, 1981) 418. In his later work, this is carried to the point of a practical effacement of intentionality as a phenomenal trait, such as when Merleau-Ponty claims that "the 'visual quale' gives me, and is alone in doing so, the presence of what is not me, of what is simply and fully." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," Carleton Dallery (trans.) in Ted Toadvine and Len Lawlor (eds.) *The Merleau-Ponty Reader* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964, 2007) 375.

² Deleuze claims that when memory occurs "in a voluntary form" — for instance in "the interpretations of signs of love" — it is "doomed to a pathetic failure," and thereby raises the question of how involuntary memories might "intervene" in its place. See Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, Richard Howard (trans.) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) 52-53.

³ Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, 95: "The great theme of Time regained is that the search for truth is the characteristic adventure of the involuntary. Thought is nothing without something that forces and does violence to it. More important than thought is 'what leads to thought'..."

⁴ That is, apparently non- or a-subjective events or processes of memory.

the will withthetic or express intentional acts, as is argued in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, then the notion of intentionality offers favorable prospects of accounting for the most pronounced features of involuntary memories, without resorting to appeals to non-subjective memorial processes in which any sense of implication with or attachment to the content of involuntary memory seems difficult to locate.

To advance this case — that the Sartrean conception of ‘thetic,’ intentional consciousness can be conducive rather than obstructive to a phenomenological account of precisely that sort of memory that proves resistant to willful or voluntary representation, the reliving of the past involved in involuntary memories — two steps are required. The first is to map out a Sartrean phenomenology of memory, by taking into consideration how to understand how his notions of intentional consciousness, absence, and lack play out at the level of memory. The second will be to explore how the Sartrean model of intentional consciousness proves particularly adept at plotting the distribution of phenomenal traits most salient to involuntary memories. The upshot of such an examination is a provocative phenomenological position on the nature of the resistance of the past and on doing justice to the past, that is, in regard to how memorial intentionality ought be conceived when involuntary memories contribute to the rule, rather than being the exception, in our experience of the past.

It is no straightforward matter to propose a Sartrean phenomenological account of memorial consciousness. On the one hand, this is because it requires some care to elaborate its links to his phenomenology of images and the Husserlian pedigree present in both. On the other, one cannot get around the fact that in Sartre’s writings, memory is not so much an object of systematic inquiry as a foil for his exploration of consciousness. Nonetheless, it is still possible to distinguish two predominant traits of his understanding of and remarks on memory, at least in his earlier, more explicitly phenomenological works. First, Sartre’s reflections on the nature of memory are notable for the status attributed to the past to which memory is related. Second, it is crucial to understand how Sartre’s phenomenology sets up an account of memory highly attentive to impassioned or engaged character of all recollecting of the past.

First, as Sartre simply writes, “[t]he Past is,” which is to say, there can be little question of its non-being; the past manifests positive and demons-

trable traits of existence.¹ In cases of memory, then, the problem lies not with the being of the past, but with our access to it. While the past certainly affects every individual,² the difficult thing to understand is the particular way the past remains absent and resists becoming present in memory, rather than wholly giving itself over to the intent to remember.

Here, we can illuminate these issues surrounding memory as a relation to something absent by way of a comparison to Sartre's phenomenology of imagination.³ The imaginative intention, in order to attain a certain kind of intuitive fulfillment,⁴ has to be related to a kind of ground or sensuous basis that Sartre calls an "analogical representative of the intended object."⁵ Different sorts of things can function as this material basis for the image — the painting, the photograph, the carpet stain — all of which appear to be characterized by their *resemblance* to a particular object.⁶ Resemblance, however, is only ever a "neutral" relationship of something looking like something else according to Sartre, meaning that either a perceptual or imaginative stance may be adopted toward it.⁷ Resemblance is thus at best only a necessary but not sufficient condition for images, in particular because it cannot account for the phenomenon of "solicitation" or the 'expressiveness' of the sensuous material through which the imaginative intention reaches its object. That is, resemblance does not yet explain the "force," in Sartre's terms, with which the presence of the imagined object is evoked through an image thing like a painting or a sketch. What's more, the nuance

¹ "Between past and present there is an absolute heterogeneity; and if I can not enter the past, it is because the past is." Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, Hazel Barnes (trans.) (London: Routledge, 1958) 119.

² As ground of our living present, we "have to be [the past]," rather than having the past merely as 'a past.' See Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 115.

³ This is a connection encouraged in both *The Psychology of Imagination* and in *Being and Nothingness* (108).

⁴ That is, in what Husserl would call the inauthentic 'presentation' of the imaginative act. See Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations: Volume II*, J. N. Findlay (trans.), Dermot Moran (ed.) (London: Routledge, 1970, 2001) 226, 231-33.

⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination*, Bernard Frechtman (trans.) (London: Routledge, 1948) 20.

⁶ Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination*, 20.

⁷ Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination*, 22. Here we are following a definition of resemblance laid out by Kulvicki, where resemblance in a weaker sense means "looking alike" instead of in the stronger sense of judging two things "to be genuinely similar in that they share specified properties." John Kulvicki, *On Images: Their Structure and Content* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 82.

in Sartre's account lies in the suggestion that despite being founded in the sensuous traits of the thing, this analogical grounding or "intuitive basis" of the image is precisely *not perceived*.¹

These forms, these colors, so strongly organized, proclaim themselves as being almost the image of Peter. If a notion strikes me to *perceive* these elements, they resist. A picture offers itself spontaneously in relief to the imaginative consciousness, and the perceptual consciousness would have much trouble to see it as a flat surface.²

That is, the attempt to observe or study the traits of the 'material analogue' of the image, to explore its 'expressiveness,' conflicts with the intention underlying the imaginative act. As Sartre describes this conflict, it seems one cannot but move beyond appreciating the color relationships and the forms comprising the image thing to an appreciation of the immediate and spontaneous presentation of the absent object. By contrast, focusing on the perceptual or sensuous traits of the image-thing — for instance, in order to isolate just where and how the painting or the photograph incarnates the object — only confronts one with the elusive character of the grounding expressiveness of the elements of the painting, which Sartre describes as the "essential poverty in the material of the image."³ In a manner similar to the relationship between the eyes and the gaze of the other for Sartre, such evocative expressiveness allows the object *in* the painting or photograph to be intuited in its absence, without ever being *seen* as such.

When Sartre takes pains in *Being and Nothingness* to distinguish between the past as concrete, as lived,⁴ and the past as explicit object of investigation,⁵ he seems to be operating with closely-related phenomenological premises. Just as the sensuous richness of the material analogon is screened

¹ "The intuitive basis of my image can never be that of a perception." Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination*, 58.

² Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination*, 57.

³ Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination*, 58.

⁴ "(...) the concrete past — this supple, insinuating, changing knowledge which makes up the woof of our thoughts, and which is composed of a thousand empty indications, a thousand designations which point behind us without words, without images, without thesis (...)" Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 141.

⁵ "To be sure, the Past can be the object of a thesis for me, and indeed it is often thematized. But then it is the object of an explicit investigation, and in this case the For-itself affirms itself as not being this Past which it posits." Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 140-41.



out and thus hidden from what is actually given to the imaginative intention, so too does the richness of the past seem screened and hidden from we are actually able to remember. At some moments, our grasp of the past may be comparatively better than at other moments, but on the whole this grasp seems inadequate; the past through which we lived seems a far cry from the past we can now apprehend through memory. This is the defining quality of the concrete, lived past for Sartre, and it comprises not just the details surrounding the scars on one's body but all the previous relationships to and experiences of objects, persons, and situations that may have significance for one's behavior in the present.¹

The concrete, lived past can thus be understood as a form of absence at stake in memory in that it resists subjection to voluntary reproduction. In our basic, everyday relationship to the past, the concrete, lived past "haunts us at a distance without our being able to turn back and face it."² In that it lies "out of reach" and yet is still "pressing, urgent, imperious,"³ it constitutes the meaningful situation to which each intentional act of consciousness occurs as a spontaneous response. By contrast, as soon as one would voluntarily inspect one's past, just as one might try to isolate the evocative sensuous

¹ "Yet the Past is there constantly. It is the very meaning of the object which I look at and which I have already seen, of the familiar faces which surround me. It is the origin of this movement which presently follows and which I would not be able to call circular if I were not myself — in the Past — the witness of its beginning. It is the origin and springboard of all my actions; it is that constantly given density of the world which allows me to orient myself and to get my bearings." Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 141.

This Sartrean notion of a 'concrete past' (as opposed to the past as explicit object of memory) is congruent with what Merleau-Ponty denotes as the "primitive complicities with the world" that "underlie" knowledge and which bear upon the most basic forms of consciousness, such as perception; see Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1981) *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Colin Smith (Trans) (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul) p. 424. The crucial difference is that Sartre does not afford these "complicities" any unilateral primacy in the life of consciousness, and thusly eschews a reduction of 'unreflective' or involuntary sensuous perception to the mere "facticity of the unreflective;" see Len Lawlor (1998) "The end of phenomenology: Expressionism in Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty," *Continental Philosophy Review* 31: 15-34, 25. That is to say, Sartre does not subscribe to the notion that the phenomenological prospects of accounting for involuntary, unreflective awareness are exhausted by a focus upon a subjective passivity to and dependence upon the world and the structured givenness of its sensuous contents.

² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 496.

³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 496, 499.



elements in a painting by Matisse, such a voluntary form of memory takes on all the impoverished phenomenal traits that images possess according to Sartre — namely, a certain “feebleness, pallor, incompleteness, [and] contradictions with the givens of perception.”¹ Similar to how the “impoverishment” of images fails to do justice to the rich relationship of sensuous expressiveness or ‘resemblance’ upon which they are founded, the voluntary act of recollection falls short of the fecund significance of the past that it purports to recapture.²

Through this account of our access to the past through memory, Sartre is committed to showing that the resistance of the concrete past to apprehension or judgment constitutes a basic form of human finitude,³ namely the finitude of memory. Rather than primarily comprising an epistemic condition for knowing oneself and for making truthful judgments, the (re-)presence of the past in memory is a matter of being related to what fails to be evinced properly or adequately.⁴ On this account, the past to be relived, as the

¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 108.

² In this respect, Sartre’s analysis of voluntary memorial acts contrasts with the Husserlian view that there are no a priori obstacles to an intuitive recovery of one’s past. See Edmund Husserl, *Collected Works, Volume XI: Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory (1898-1925)*, John Brough (trans.), Rudolf Bernet (ed.) (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005) 368-69: “Every act can be reproduced; to every ‘internal’ consciousness of the act — the internal consciousness taken as perceiving — there belongs a possible reproductive consciousness, for example, a possible recollection (in which case the question is whether still another reproductive consciousness is possible) [...] What we call experience, what we call the act of judging, of joy, of the perceiving of something external, even the act of looking at an act (which is a positing act of meaning) — all of these are unities of time consciousness and are therefore perceived. Now to each such unity a modification corresponds: more precisely, a reproducing corresponds to the originary constitution of time, to the perceiving, and something re-presented corresponds to what is perceived.”

³ See Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 118, for instance, where in this line of thinking Sartre closely links the past with the facticity of human life.

⁴ “The Past as the unalterable being which I have to be without any possibility of not being it does not enter into the unity ‘reflection-reflecting’ of the *Erlebnis*; it is outside. Yet neither does it exist as that of which there is consciousness, in the sense, for example, that the perceived chair is that of which there is perceptive consciousness [...] Due to this fact there cannot be a thesis of the past, for one can posit only what one is not [...] Thus the past is not made a thesis, and yet the past is not immanent to the For-itself. It haunts the For-itself at the very moment that the

correlate of the memorial intentional act, is not just marked by what Sartre calls its “irremediable” character¹ — its unalterable and incontrovertible character. It is equally marked by its ambiguous co-existence with the present.² This means Sartre is not just interested in how, through memory, an intentional consciousness confronts the past’s sheer indifference to presence as yet another avatar of the brute “in-itself.” His interest lies equally in the difficulties faced by memorial consciousness in attempting to confront the ambiguous, hidden survival of the past.

This is only part of the picture, however. For certain reasons, a Sartrean account of memory cannot be seen to culminate in the claim that such finitude of memory is all that can be said about the resistance of the past, and about the need for memorial consciousness to overcome it. These have to do with the second chief feature of a Sartrean phenomenology of memory, namely that his approach disallows any *dispassionate* form of memory. This does not simply mean that memory is always played out within a subjective or perspectival dimension, that is, along the vector of an individuating and temporally localizing ‘now’ or ‘present.’ Instead, it means that for Sartre, memory is to be analyzed not just in terms of the intractability and removal of the past, but also in terms of the intentional relation that reclaims and allows consciousness to be inhabited by the past in the first place. As remains to be seen, with this second feature of memory, the key question is whether memory is amenable to being understood as an experience of lack.³ This would be the case insofar as acts of memory

For-itself acknowledges that it is not this or that particular thing.” Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 140.

¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 496.

² See also Jean-Paul Sartre, *War Diaries: Notebooks from a Phony War, November 1939-March 1940*, Quentin Hoare (trans.) (London: Verso, 1984) 214: “Thus ... the for-itself could not irrupt into the world without co-existence in the present with the totality of the in-itself and without a precise connection with a having that it simultaneously is and is not.”

³ This follows from Sartre’s efforts to analyze intentional consciousness with particular attention to its signal characteristic as a form of lack and desire: “Lack is not creative, but the for-itself constitutes itself in face of the in-itself as that which by nature lacks in-itself (...). In its negative guise, inasmuch as it is nihilated nothingness, lack is intentionality; consciousness in the Husserlian sense (...). Inasmuch as it is nihilation of the in-itself, lack in its positive aspect is desire;” Sartre, *War Diaries*, 233. See also Sartre, *War Diaries*, 232: “The for-itself’s irruption into the world is tantamount to an existential and constitutive auto-determination of the for-itself, as that which lacks in-itself in the face of in-itself.”

demonstrate the ‘lack of grounding’ or ‘being in question’ — the status of external unattributability¹ — that Sartre accords to all intentional acts of consciousness. Memory, on this analysis, would be a crucial instantiation of the excessive and unstable consciousness that for Sartre fall under the rubric of the “spontaneity” of consciousness as “for-itself.”



There is more to this second, impassioned feature of memory than a simple insistence that consciousness must be the autonomous *primum movens* instituting any relation to the past. In its favor, rather, Sartre disposes of a sophisticated phenomenological argument, which can be seen to amount to a kind of “nihilogical dualism.”² Something like a memory from one’s childhood can already indicate what this nihilological dualism consists in. Remembering a childhood experience, one can distinguish between no less than two ways in which the past is experienced as absent in memory. On the one hand, the past appears as absent *from* the present; one has to look back through time in order to recover that moment in one’s life. On the other hand, the past appears as absent *within* the present. The past that appears does not belong within the present and clearly seems opposed to it.



The distinction here is subtle but important. While the former form of absence has to do with the withdrawal and hiddenness of the past, as real but removed from ‘the now,’ the latter is a question of the distinctive irreality of the past’s appearance within the present.³ More specifically, this absence of the past ‘within’ the present should be understood as what Husserl, prior to Sartre, identified as the conflictual overlapping or phenomenon of *Verdeck-*

¹ That is, the intentionality of the conscious act is not attributable to anything outside the act itself.

² See Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 26: “The image must enclose in its very structure a nihilating thesis. It constitutes itself qua Image while positing its object as existing elsewhere or not existing. It carries within it a double negation; first it is the nihilation of the world (since the world is not offering the imagined object as an actual object of perception), secondly the nihilation of the object of the image (it is posited as not actual), and finally by the same stroke it is the nihilation of itself (since it is not a concrete, full psychic process).”



³ Here, we are using the term in the sense that the act of memory is a type of ‘presentification’ or *Vergegenwärtigung*, as Husserl would classify it, which does not mean it can be conflated with phantasy pure and simple. Despite being characterized by a certain kind of irreality or “nullity,” memory is distinguished from phantasy in that it is related to an actual past, whereas phantasy is directed to a sort of non-actual being.

ung with which the past appears just here, just now within this present of consciousness.¹

In Husserl's carefully elaborated phenomenology of memory and phantasy, the phenomenon of *Verdeckung* is one of the essential ways in which an appearing object acquires the status of a "nullity" or an absence.² Specifically, the *Verdeckung* describes how "what gives itself in isolation as a phantasy in fact conceals something in reality."³ If every intentional act has its corresponding 'field of regard,' that is, horizon of possible intentional objects, then we must note that in perception on the one hand and in memory and phantasy, on the other, these fields of regard exclude and 'cover over' each other.⁴ Accordingly, in phantasy or memory, as soon as one's attention is directed towards an irreal field of appearance, this intuition conflicts with and is set off from the perceptual field in which one continues to be bodily embedded. One cannot attend to the one without leaving behind the other; the appearing of the absent or non-present involves a vanishing or hollowing out of the sensuous, perceptually present field of regard within the stream of consciousness.⁵ In terms of memory, this means the 'intuited absence' of what appears in memory is not tantamount to the temporal absence of a past moment of time with respect to the present.

¹ On the irreal and conflictual character Husserl attributes to both memory and imagination, see Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory*, 34-35: "A thoroughly vital phantasy, the emergence of a very clear memory, as sometimes falls to our lot when our faculties are alert and when dispositions are particularly favorable, barely gives rise to the consciousness: this is a mere image. [...] Looked at more closely, however, this use of the phrase "we actually feel ourselves to be" is surely analogous or indicates a quite momentary deception. What is there is always only representation and not being present."

² In this respect, Husserl might be said to go beyond Sartre in advocating a "nihological pluralism," i.e. not just a dualism of the nullity or absence in appearances.

³ Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory*, 579.

⁴ "It is clear that a phantasy field is not related to the perceptual field as, say, the visual field is related to the auditory field, or as one part of the already objectified field of regard is related to another part" (Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory*, 75).

⁵ See Bernet *et al*, *An Introduction to Husserlian Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 149: "A *unity* of simultaneous intuition in relation to perceived and remembered or phantasized objects is thus not possible. In intuition I am either turned toward the present or the non-present. However, there exists 'among all immanent experiences of *one I*, a temporal unity' [...]."

There are different places in Sartre's phenomenology that evince his adherence to this kind of nihilological dualism, and more specifically, his endorsement of a view that would distinguish something approaching the phenomenon of *Verdeckung* from other ways in which an appearing object can be qualified as absent.¹ It is reflected, for instance, in the understanding of absence proposed in his account of imagination, where he distinguishes between the following:

- (a) the neutral, 'quasi-absence' of an image-object (a chair) from an image-thing (a painting), which falls under the rubric of "resemblance"² and which is subject to what he calls "quasi-observation."
- (b) the 'intuitive absence' of an image-object from the imagining consciousness, which Sartre describes as the "nothingness" proper to the image.³

Likewise, it surfaces in his description of how the past is related to the present⁴ as both "surpassed" and gratuitously given for itself.⁵ In memory, as

¹ One could also correlate this distinction with the two senses of absence at stake in Sartre's attempt to distinguish between "internal" and "external" negation in *Being and Nothingness*. See Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 174-75.

² "The material of our image, when we gaze [*regardons*] at a portrait, is not only a jumble of lines and colors [...] It is, in reality, a quasi-person, with a quasi-face, etc." (Sartre, *Psychology of Imagination*, 22 [translation changed]). This perceptually-constituted form of absence is that upon which "knowledge" comes to bear in the Sartrean account of the structure of the imaginative act. This is, moreover, the sort of absence at stake in the sensitivity to perceptual forms, for instance when someone has pointed out the shape of a cloud or a stain and one responds "I could see that." On Sartre's account, such perceptual forms and their sensuous elements are "neutral" in terms how they may be apprehended. This is to take nothing away from the depictive or pictorial power of such forms, but only to insist that they alone do not suffice to conjure up an imagined presence of an object.

³ Sartre, *Psychology of Imagination*, 13.

⁴ That is, can be "for itself."

⁵ "The For-itself as the foundation of its nothingness — and as such necessary — is separated from its original contingency in that it can neither get rid of it nor merge with it. It is for itself but in the mode of the irremediable and the gratuitous (...) But in so far as it is For-itself, it is never what it is. What it is is behind it as the perpetual surpassed. It is precisely this surpassed facticity which we call the Past. The Past then is a necessary structure of the For- itself; for the For-itself can exist only as a nihilating surpassing, and this surpassing implies something surpassed." Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 137-38.

with imagination, the Sartrean perspective would not allow us to establish the priority of the one form of absence over the other. Rather, it cautions us against the dangers involved in any attempt to reduce them both to a single, more basic form of absence. On this view, one can thus question whether a univocal conception of absence can suffice to account for the conflict and irreality of the past within the present by which memory seems distinguished.

How then does this nihilological dualism furnish evidence of the impassioned, that is, intentionally invested, character of memory? Indeed, is such a distinction between two forms of absence experienced in memory even warranted? Here's the issue; as soon as one concedes the heterogeneity and co-originary¹ of the past with the present — as Sartre does — one faces a challenge concerning the givenness of the past in the present. In memory, the present opens onto the past that is heterogeneous to it; the past is 'not' the present and is thus an absence or nullity with respect to the present. In what does this nullity or absence of the past, antithetical to the being of the present in which it appears, consist? As has been pointed out via Husserl, the givenness of the past in the present is distinguished by the way, in memory, a "clash" occurs in consciousness, and this so in two senses.² In opening onto the past, the act of memory marks a break with the preceding course of one's experience, as well as with the attention given to one's own perceptual environs. Apart from its temporal determination as 'not now,' therefore, the past given in the present of consciousness is thus absent in a particular sense — its absence is in part determined by a "separation of the perceptual and phantasy fields" in the course of present experience of consciousness.³

¹ Like Deleuze, Sartre too insists on the co-originary of the past alongside the present, and so goes beyond the mere thesis of the co-existence of past and present. See the comments on the phenomenon of birth in Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 138-39.

² "Attention to the one *clashes* with a simultaneous attention to the other." Bernet *et al*, *An Introduction to Husserlian Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 149.

³ "[...] no difference exists between a physical image appearance and a perceptual appearance, and yet, through conflict with the given field of regard, a difference in characterization emerges: the image object turns into a figment. Is such a difference to be found, then? According to our position, by virtue of the separation of the perceptual and phantasy fields, the difference cannot be the same as it is in the case of the common image object. However, is there not a distinction of a different sort that nevertheless functions in a similar way? I certainly think so" (Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory*, 74).

If these descriptions are accurate, then the phenomenon of *Verdeckung* at stake in memory attests to a way that consciousness impassions itself or is caught up in intentionally recapturing the past, namely by clearing away the perceptual world and our sense of embodiment within it in order to welcome the appearance of the past. In other words, to attribute all the impetus behind memory to the sheer remoteness and inaccessibility of the past thus seems to run the risk of a deep phenomenological incoherence, at least regarding the question of the present's investment in or involvement with the past.¹ The way present consciousness opens onto and directs itself toward the past — what we have called the impassioned character of memory — cannot merely stem from the past's irreducibility to and concealment from the present. This would be to confuse the conditionality of memory — the interlocking of the past with the present — with what we might think of as the 'effective causality' evinced in the nullity of the *Verdeckung* phenomenon, which seems equally at stake in any appearing of the past. Something more is needed, in the sense that in the act of memory consciousness reclaims the past and allows itself to be inhabited by that appearance of the past.

Admittedly, the strength of this argument from nihilological dualism rests in the robustness of the descriptions of this nullity, clash, and separation of the *Verdeckung* that we have claimed demonstrates the impassioned and intentional character of all, and not just some, forms of memory. For his part, Husserl appears to link this clash or conflict to a kind of freedom, namely a freedom to 'live' in a phantasy world that "devours" the perceptual world and its stable, intentionally-motivating interconnections.² On his side, Sartre

¹ This distinction seems linked to Deleuze's worry whether a co-original, contemporaneous, and co-existent past that *grounds* its givenness can also *drive* its givenness in the present, or whether something more is indeed involved in memory. See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, Paul Patton (trans.) (London: Continuum, 1994) 110-11: "The Ideas nonetheless remain the ground on which the successive presents are organized in the circle of time, so that the pure past which defines them is itself still necessarily expressed in terms of a present, as an ancient mythical present [...] The shortcoming of the ground is to remain relative to what it grounds, to borrow the characteristics of what it grounds, and to be proved by these (...) Just as the ground is in a sense 'bent' and must lead us to a beyond, so the second synthesis of time points beyond itself in the direction of a third [...]"

² "I can also depict the house in phantasy, and now I actually do it. However, I can depict the phantasy only up to the point at which this house comes in. While I am now actually perceiving the house, I cannot have a complete phantasy in which this perception of the house, exactly as I am having it, functions as a component. A tension exists there, a mutual exclusion. For example, I must turn my glance away:

sees a remedy to this worry in observing a form of *Unselbstständigkeit* — insufficiency, inadequacy — not rooted in the inaccessibility and resistance of the past, but rather stemming from within consciousness itself.¹ To understand why Sartre might claim that in memory there is a sense of lack related to the past, but which does not stem from the past, one needs to see how Sartre instates a principle of privation at all levels of experience, which thereby comprises the phenomena of memory.

The plausibility of such a description turns on the reversal effected by Sartre; typically, experiences are associated with forms of evidence, albeit usually empirical ones. With Sartre's claim, on the other hand, that "each particular for-itself (*Erlebnis*) lacks a particular and concrete reality,"² a rather different picture of experience emerges.

Sartre's phenomenological argument for why experiences are forms of lack or 'being in question' at their core can be summed up as follows:

- (a) Insofar as each experience involves intentionality, which is to say a directness or relatedness toward something, each experience fails to be fully situated or grounded in that of which it is the experience.³

Naturally, while I am perceiving, I can daydream, dream with my eyes open. The phantasy images belong to another world, and in a way the perceptual world is swallowed up. Now the perceptual world does not actually disappear, but I 'live' in the phantasy world, not in the perceptual world [...] One devours the other, so to speak: but they do this successively and, in a certain sense, to be sure, together as well" (Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory*, 540).



¹ "For my part, I put a new type of *Unselbstständigkeit* on the side of consciousness" (Sartre, *War Diaries*, 240). In other words, each act of consciousness lacks self-sufficiency and is at the same time experienced as such, because of the fact that each consciousness involves non-thetic self-awareness: "It is just so difficult to live without being in any way justified" (Sartre, *War Diaries*, 65). It is thus this observation of an "*Unselbstständigkeit* on the side of consciousness" which leads Sartre to see in each intentional relation to an object both a self-apprehension regarding the unjustifiability of consciousness and a minimal form of desire to remove from consciousness that very lack of intentional justification: "A for-itself, whatever it may be, grasps an aspect of the world only as an opportunity to annihilate in the in-itself the lack that it itself is" (Sartre, *War Diaries*, 214-15).

² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 95.

³ For example, the origin of the feeling of heat is not exhausted in the physical emanation of heat from the stove to my finger, thirst does not culminate in dryness of the mouth, and so on. "Concretely, each for-itself is a lack of a certain coincidence with itself. That means it is haunted by the presence of that with which it should coincide in order to be itself" (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 100).

- (b) All experience involves an awareness of itself,¹ namely as unjustifiable lack of ground.²
- (c) Insofar as each experience fails to be sufficiently grounded in that of which it is the experience and is aware of itself as lack of ground, each experience is simultaneously the pursuit of such a basis for itself, i.e. as the givenness or appearing of something.³

In other words, what experience “(...) lacks, in all events, is what it makes itself to be at each precise instant.”⁴

Lest this sketch of Sartre’s position foster a misunderstanding, it should be noted that when we say that for Sartre every form of intentional consciousness involves a feeling of lack, such an awareness of lack (concomitant with the experience of the intentional object) in no way distracts or detracts from the reality of what is experienced. For example, in Sartre’s description of what it is like to suffer, when he writes that “[o]ne suffers and one suffers from not suffering enough,”⁵ there is no insinuation that the feeling of suffering has somehow been buffered or lessened by an awareness of lack. Sartre’s claim that “[t]he suffering which I experience (...) is never adequate suffering”⁶ is thus directed neither at the veridical status of the suffering — i.e. *whether* there is the suffering — nor at its veridical degree — i.e. how real or imagined it is. Rather, the question of lack and adequacy arises at the level of the givenness of the suffering, of the conditions under which it appears.⁷ In other words, the fact that the suffering seems inadequate at the moment of its experience is for Sartre a matter of its veridical *quality*. It is the quality with which the suffering is felt, as real, as intense to this or that degree, that calls into question or creates a sense of lack

¹ “The being of consciousness qua consciousness is to exist at a distance from itself, as presence to itself” (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 78).

² “To be for itself is to lack (...) and to lack is defined as to be determined as not being that of which the existence would be necessary and sufficient to give one a plenary existence” (Sartre, *War Diaries*, 232).

³ “(...) the for-itself is effectively a perpetual project of founding itself qua being and a perpetual failure of this project” (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 620).

⁴ Rudolf Bernet, “Sartre’s ‘Consciousness’ as Drive and Desire,” in *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 33: 1 (January 2002) 5.

⁵ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 91.

⁶ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 92.

⁷ “Concretely, each particular for-itself [Erlebnis] lacks a certain reality, which if the for-itself were synthetically assimilated with it, would transform the for-itself into itself” (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 95).

regarding the disclosive adequacy or phenomenal justification of the intentional experience in which such suffering is given.

This connection between lack and intentional experience is made especially clear in Sartre's ascription of a normativity of self-justification to experiences and feelings:

A feeling, for example, is a feeling in the presence of a norm; that is, a feeling of the same type, but one which would be what it is. This norm or totality of the affective self is directly present as a lack suffered in the very heart of suffering.¹

Sartre's argument here seems to be that since the suffering cannot be isolated in any one of the aspects towards which experience is directed when it is felt — the grimace of the face, the convulsion of the body, the interruption of clear thought — an uncertainty or uneasiness as to the *appropriateness* of the givenness of suffering is immediately made apparent in the experience. When Sartre thus speaks of how there may be a certain lack of surprise in the suffering,² it is not that one can willfully distance oneself from it, in order to contemplate its onset or its regression. It is rather a case of perceptual faith undermined; the awareness of suffering harbors suspicions or qualms about the justifiability of its givenness. The apparent passivity of suffering is immediately belied by the potential superfluity of our awareness of it, and indeed by the seeming *inadequacy* of our response to it.³

When transposed back into the context of memory, then, this intrinsic connection between lack and intentional consciousness has to be seen to underlie Sartre's attribution of a form of desire to memorial experience. This is, namely, a desire in response to the inherent lack or inadequacy of experience, that is, a desire to be an *appropriate* givenness of the irremediable, resistant past. As Sartre writes:

(...) memory presents to us the being which we were, accompanied by a plenitude of being which confers on it a sort of poetry. That grief we had —

¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 91.

² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 92.

³ "At the point of being made one with itself, it escapes, separated from itself by nothing, by that nothingness of which it is itself the foundation. It is loquacious because it is not adequate, but its ideal is silence — the silence of the statue, of the beaten man who lowers his head and veils his face without speaking" (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 92).

although fixed in the past — does not cease to present the meaning of a for-itself, yet exists with the silent fixity of the grief of another.¹

The implication here seems to be the following; while that particular detail or aspect of the past seems to have much to say to us — this is its plenitude, its “poetry,” its meaning — the appropriateness or adequacy of its experience — this is the “silent fixity” of the past’s givenness in memory — remains disproportional, inadequate. That is, in memory there seems to be the inherent risk that its intentional givenness may do injustice to the past in a similar way to how we run the risk of an inappropriate or inadequate response to the grief and suffering of another.

Once properly elaborated, then, a Sartrean analysis of memory would seem to enable us to appreciate more fully the way absence is at work in memory, in two distinct forms:

- (a) in terms of the *finitude* of memory, which is to say, the indifferent, irremediable past as *gone* or removed from the present;
- (b) in terms of the lack intrinsic to the intentional character of memory, which is to say, the uneasiness in and of intentional experience that institutes a desire to reclaim not just the past but equally the very grounds for its givenness in and through the present.²

Moreover, if we consider the bigger picture for a moment, the take-home point regarding this Sartrean account of memory is that it dovetails very nicely with Sartre’s efforts to understand what can be called the heteronomy of desire. The Sartrean concern with desire centers on the fact that desire is not simply “auto-determinative”³ or autarchic, but that it has two governing principles. On the one hand, desire signifies coming under the sway of a

¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 119.

² Our claim regarding two sorts of absence in memory also seems in line with Sartre’s criticisms of Heidegger in the *War Diaries* for reducing lack to finitude. See Sartre, *War Diaries*, 239: “One must never try to explain nothingness by finitude, since finitude taken in itself alone seems a characteristic external to the individual under consideration.” See also Sartre’s criticisms of Heideggerian angst in Sartre, *War Diaries*, 131: “But it is true that for Heidegger anguish is anguish-at-nothingness, which is not Nothing but as Wahl says ‘a cosmic fact against which existence stands out.’” See as well Sartre, *War Diaries*, 239: “Anguish at the nothingness of the world, anguish at the origins of the existent — these are derived and secondary ...”

³ Sartre, *War Diaries*, 232.

particular object; the object seems appealing for certain reasons, and as we know these reasons can be quite ambiguous and complicated. On the other hand, the heteronomy of desire has to do with how the experience of desire seems to leave no room for what is lacked or missed by it to be productive of the desire.¹ As Sartre himself puts it:

For there to be desire, it is necessary that the desired object should be concretely present — it and no other — in the innermost depths of the for-itself, but present as a nothingness, or more accurately, as a lack. And this is only possible if the for-itself is susceptible to being defined by these lacks. Which means no lack can come from the outside to the for-itself.²

That is, despite the apparent ‘force’ of that to which form of desire may be related, such as the past to be explored and recovered, the desire seems to recognize no source other than itself.

One way to relate to this claim is think of what it is like with children at the dinner table; no matter how appealing the food, no matter the precedent, as soon as there is a hint of coercion, their appetite begins to wane. To threaten their sense of choice is to infect the very food before them, and a similar sort of point could be made here with respect to love relations. Examples such as these then seem to undermine the basis for insisting sheerly upon either force, finitude, or passivity in order to account for the phenomenological characteristics of desire.³ Rather, this heteronymous quality of desire seems to bear all the traits of the intentionality without self-justification about which the early Sartre writes the following: “In its

¹ The lack constituting desire for Sartre “does not belong to the nature of the in-itself” and “appears in the world only with the upsurge of human reality. It is only in the human world that there can be lacks.” Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 86.

² Sartre, *War Diaries*, 231.

³ See Sartre, *War Diaries*, 231, on the “absurdity of a Nietzschean ‘will-to-power’” as explication of lack or desire; in the end these are only forces or more precisely ‘states of force’ which may meet with “antagonistic” states of force. As Deleuze similarly appears to show with respect to the “eruption of needs” and the source of desire in the unconscious, these forces are phenomenologically ambivalent. They may signify as much a surfeit as a deficiency on the part of the existent (like the fatigue), neither of which allows one to understand what might be missing or what might need to be appropriated or reclaimed by such ‘force-of-will.’ Deleuze draws the conclusion that desire is then not about appropriation, nothingness, or lack, whereas Sartre attempts to look for its source in yet another type of finitude (i.e. one inherent to consciousness alone, and not derived from the co-limitation of forces, essences, etc.); see Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 98, 131.

negative guise, inasmuch as it is nihilated nothingness, lack is intentionality; consciousness in the Husserlian sense.”¹

There is reason, however, to go a step further than this correlation of lack, intentionality and desire in Sartre. The further contention here is that a Sartrean account of memorial intentionality can prove adept at handling one particularly vexing case of memory, namely those fascinating instances of so-called involuntary memory.

In an exploration of Proust and subjectivity, Roland Breeur draws attention to the foreignness or strangeness of involuntary memories; “the involuntary memory comes to me from the outside (involuntary means: ‘I have not chosen it’) while being from the inside (of memory).”² All the same, when Breeur remarks a few pages later that “I do not know what attracts me to it nor why it affects me,”³ we are reminded that the apparently foreign character of involuntary memories is tempered by a sense of connection to what they present, under the form of an attraction to or investment in something inviolable and unchanging *about* oneself. As Breeur puts it,

What is striking about the involuntary memory is not only the recalling of the past in spite of one’s forgetting, but also the fact that despite the irreversible character of the past, ‘what is essential’ about myself [‘l’essentiel’ de moi-même] was not born away with it.⁴

Involuntary memories are, in other words, captivating due to the special access they grant, not to a hidden dimension of experience, but to a sort of self-awareness unaffected by the passing of time and unassimilable with the sense of self typically derived from voluntary memories. If and when they appear, they are thus difficult, if not impossible, to ignore. In the following, I would like to build upon these and other aspects of Breeur’s discussion of involuntary memories — which, to be clear, is explicitly concerned in that work with Proust and not Sartre — in an attempt to address the following question: just how is one to understand the provenance of such memories in relation to intentional consciousness, in light of their mixed phenomenal

¹ Sartre, *War Diaries*, 233.

² Roland Breeur, *Singularité et sujet: Une lecture phénoménologique de Proust* (Grenoble: Editions Jerome Millon) 153. [The translations presented here are my own.]

³ Breeur, *Singularité et sujet*, 159.

⁴ Breeur, *Singularité et sujet*, 167.

traits¹ as both intrinsically foreign to any type of behavioral control and yet essentially vested by a form of interest, attachment, or desire?

There seems to be at least one thing that is easy to agree upon — such memories can be readily defined as ‘involuntary’ because their institution does not seem to be the product of a force of will. Such a definition, however, does not seem sufficient to claim that they involve no intentionality whatsoever. We may note furthermore, without yet invoking notions of either passivity or activity, that if it is true that such memories seem unusual, this is in part because in them there is a conscious relation to the past with great detail and intensity. Such memories thus distinguish themselves by their stark contrast with the stale or bland character of voluntary memory. The question is this: do they also distinguish themselves by an utter passivity and a dearth of intentionality in regard to their experience? If we take into consideration Sartre’s distinction between will and intention,² can we say that the way involuntary memories are clearly devoid of will entails that they are also devoid of intention?

Instead of stressing their supposed passivity or foreclosure of any ‘active synthesis,’ it seems possible to make a rather different case for understanding the most pronounced phenomenal characteristics of involuntary memories. The following questions in particular merit examination:

- (a) involuntary memories as forms of consciousness;
- (b) the astonishment involved in involuntary memories;
- (c) the fascinating vividness of involuntary memories.

What I hope to show is that upon closer examination, each of these traits may speak for rather than against a significant role of intentional consciousness, as understood by Sartre, in involuntary memories.

For starters, we should spell out the sense in which involuntary memories may be thought of as strange or foreign occurrences in the flow of consciousness. Concerning this foreignness, Breeur specifies that “the involuntary memory evokes a separation (*écart*) that is already latent, a separation that is nestled within the separation articulated by memory,”³ and goes on to clarify that while every sort of past experience may be invoked in

¹ Breeur refers to these contradictions in the involuntary memory in terms of the way their “independence is not absolute;” they are unable on their own to support the meaning of the past they evoke (Breeur, *Singularité et sujet*, 157).

² Sartre, *Psychology of Imagination*, 18, 22.

³ Breeur, *Singularité et sujet*, 160

them,¹ the involuntary memory does not seem to be subject to itself.² This would suggest that the involuntary memory is not easily assimilable with the temporality of consciousness, which might lead one to postulate that such memories are then unconscious and thus non-intentional in character.

Against this view, however, it must be argued that involuntary memories are about a confrontation with something from the past that is both “unsurpassable” and “inalienable,” as Breeur also writes.³ To that extent, it must be insisted that involuntary memories do involve a form of consciousness or awareness; it would be a hard sell to try to argue that such a confrontation with the past could remain unconscious or unknown. However uncommon they may seem, such involuntary memories are nonetheless to be approached in terms of what they share and indeed define in terms a holistic view of conscious experience. If this point can be conceded, then an understanding of their relationship to the intentionality of consciousness seems ineluctable; we cannot simply operate under the assumption that they represent the mere negation of all intentionality. Rather than being seen as a case to be excluded from intentional consciousness, they may rather be seen as the exception that defines the norm, guiding our understanding of intentional consciousness.

One might still be skeptical on this question. For instance, in focusing upon the specifically conscious character of involuntary memories, one problem spot could be the astonishment or surprise we may feel in experiencing them. This astonishment seems to be another important reason behind their classification as ‘involuntary’ rather than ‘voluntary’ memories, insofar as such involuntary memories evince the finitude of our memories, which is to say, the fact that we are not accustomed to having such memories in such detail, and can find little reason for the fact that we are having them now, in this way, at this time. For instance, when walking past a house I once lived in, I may have a profound memory of something someone said to me in passing or something of which I had taken little note. Yet I have walked past this old house of mine a number of times — why is it that at just this time, I can surprisingly remember my friend speaking to me so clearly? The temptation once again surfaces to see such astonishment as a sign of a

¹ And thus not just “exceptional events” or moments of “suffering, regret,” etc. (Breeur, *Singularité et sujet*, 160).

² “(...) the very experience of the involuntary memory (and thus of an excess of meaning) is not in itself the subject of a subsequent involuntary memory” (Breeur, *Singularité et sujet*, 160).

³ Breeur, *Singularité et sujet*, 156.

fundamental form of passivity — i.e. dearth of intentionality — underpinning the involuntary memory.

All the same, the unanticipated character of the involuntary memory — the fact that nothing seems to have anticipated or motivated it in the prior course of one's experience — appears at least to allow for more than one understanding of it. Unanticipated things happen to us all the time — and in that respect it may be said that such events reflect a certain passivity and finitude on our parts. However, there still seems to be a viable phenomenological distinction between such unanticipated events, as subject to an 'external' perceptual consciousness, and the sort of unanticipated mental events that involuntary memories are. This is because, in contrast to involuntary memories, unanticipated events in external perception are typically never recognized as such. Such sorts of unanticipated events are rather distinguished by their post-factual character; it is only after the fact of their occurrence, for instance, on the basis of perceptual observance of their repercussions, that we may exhibit surprise, incredulity, or disbelief of their happening. A rather different sort of awareness seems involved in involuntary memories, insofar as in them the givenness of the past seems both groundless and unmotivated and is immediately recognized as such. That is, in a similar fashion to extremely realistic dreams, what seems most astonishing about involuntary memories is the utterly convincing presence of what is *given here and now* in the involuntary memory, rather any question of how the distance to the past experience has been commuted. In this way, the astonishment involved in involuntary memories seems more susceptible to description as an unjustifiable intentional consciousness of the past — a consciousness which precisely nothing seems to motivate or impel, a consciousness whose occurrence is able to do justice to the vibrancy of the past experience precisely because it has no reason to be a givenness of the past, to be an overcoming of the typical resistance, removal, and absence of the past.

However, insisting upon the vibrancy or vivid nature of involuntary memories still raises quite a tangle of issues. Isn't that vividness of the involuntary memory evidence of how, in them, something is given about which there can be no question of choice or control, whose givenness in other words has in no way been selected by an intention? This aspect of involuntary memories could motivate their denotation as forms of passivity and hence as cancelations of intentional life. In the way the past seems to intervene or force itself upon us, involuntary memories would seem to confront us with a *hidden* past which had never been as present or as vivacious as it now appears in the involuntary memory. Would such vividness of the past not then indicate a chiasm of the richness of the past and the

present — an ‘institution’ of memory as Merleau-Ponty might refer to it¹ — in which consciousness is swept up in the involuntary memory?

Closer consideration, however, raises certain hesitations about such conclusions. The vivid nature of involuntary memories has to do with the sharpness and the sensuousness of what is given — in the memory, for instance, I hear my friend speaking to me with great clarity, and with a clear sense of the precise circumstances in which this occurred. Does this vivid nature of the involuntary memory simply reflect passivity on the part of the remembering subject, or might it not evince a form of intentional relation to the past? After all, with the sensuousness and sharpness of the involuntary memory the point is that certain things *stand out*; in a novel manner, we are immediately concerned with and fully focused upon certain aspects of an object or state-of-affairs rather than others. The *presence* of a certain object, in a certain way, is above all else what matters most in the involuntary memory. In such a guise, as Breeur suggests, “that which evokes the memory hides nothing,”² or in other words, does not draw our attention to any concealed dimension of the past.

In this sense, it would be hasty to suppose that the involuntary memory is about exposure to the force of the past or a confrontation with an a-subjective cycle by which the past comes to presence. To think as much would be to attribute the vividness of the involuntary memory to a hidden power and economy of the past, underwriting both its givenness in memory and our fascination with it. It would be to suppose, in other words, that an exposure to the force of the past, in either its magnitude stretching out behind the present or in its cumulative weight bearing down upon the present, lends intensity to involuntary memories, because what is vivid in them is the way the past moment of experience suddenly becomes revealed or unconcealed. However, a distinction needs to be drawn here; irrespective of whether one sees involuntary memories as involving an experience of the hidden, their vividness must be understood to derive from an entirely different feature of involuntary memories. Their vividness has to do with the way something so real, so clear is re-lived *through memory*, that is, *through* a recollecting or reminiscing consciousness, with such sharpness and focus. As Breeur points out in regard to Proust,³ such vividness rather seems to indicate the clarity of

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l’invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964) 224-25.

² Breeur, *Singularité et sujet*, 156.

³ “The insignificant detail evokes, in addition to the past, the fact that in me something has not acquiesced and that I continue to love the being that my memory had already abandoned” (Breeur, *Singularité et sujet*, 157). See also: “Contrary to a

a *detail* from one's past, yet whose pastness is the least important or least significant attribute. The vivid trait of involuntary memories would thus seem to speak to a relatedness or a 'directedness' rather than a passivity on the part of the memorial consciousness, which would present an argument for seeing a form of intentionality at work in the involuntary memory.

This same point may be reinforced if one focuses upon another facet of the vividness of involuntary memories, namely, that a form of fascination seems bound up with them. The question is; how should such fascination be understood? On the one hand, taking up my example once more, what seems fascinating about such memories is the way that they present to me what had been gone, up until the memory. The involuntary memory would be fascinating, in other words, because of the manner in which it grants access to a past both determinative of my present yet far removed from it, as if furnishing a confrontation with a missing piece of the puzzle of ourselves. I was that person who heard my friend speaking, in that situation, in that place, and yet I no longer knew this, prior to the involuntary memory. In the involuntary memory, things that had been hidden, for instance things about myself, become revealed in unprecedented fashion.

Again, this account of the fascination at stake in involuntary memories may be only part of the story. The question raised earlier seems pertinent here; how is it that the lost, hidden, and past moment of experience can so affect me in the present, as to instill this deep sense of fascination? If one claims that the loss of the past is what is so fascinating in the present, involuntary memory, is this not to suppose that such fascination solely derives from the object of fascination, which is to say, the lost, irremediable, and resistant past? Such a description, however, seems to clash with the way the involuntary memory is in fact engrossing; as Breuer puts it, "its presence is more of a surprise than a reprise."¹ That is, to say that the fascination with what had been absent prior to the involuntary memory is more about an appearance *despite* the past rather than one intrinsically bound to it. Breuer's description is poignant on this point:

My so-called involuntary memories instate a distance with the past in which a distance in myself is expressed. The distance is not solely the evocation of the time that separates me from a former version of myself (time as articulation of

'totalizing' conception of memory, the detail or the impression brings to light something that does not allow itself to be incorporated by the meaning possessed by the totality of the past, and in which memory comes to be ensconced" (Breuer, *Singularité et sujet*, 157).

¹ Breuer, *Singularité et sujet*, 168.

a separation), but the evocation of something in me that time cannot affect (separation within the temporalizing separation).¹

Considered in terms of a Sartrean account of memory, and more generally, of the heteronomy of phenomena of desire, a different understanding of such fascination seems to open up here. This would be to see the fascination at work in involuntary memory as not *solely* being about a lack or loss of the past, but equally, as being about a lack in and of the present, namely to vindicate the excessive, detailed, intense givenness of the past in the present, as the present of the involuntary memory. In other words, the fascination in the involuntary memory can be seen as a fascination with what impels the startling givenness of this richly detailed past, which is to say, as a fascination with the excessive, disproportional *present* givenness of a long-hidden past. We are fascinated not only with our separation from the resistant past — how, as it were, the distance is commuted — but also with the disproportional basis for such givenness of the past *in the present*.

In conclusion, then, Sartre's emphasis on the resistance of the past, on the excessive and disproportional character of intentional relatedness, and on the heteronomy of desire underlying such intention relations all seem to point to useful and precise distinctions and questions for further thought, when it comes to understanding those sorts of memory — involuntary — which some might be disposed to use against him. More specifically, on the merits of a Sartrean analysis of memory, Sartre thus appears able to level a criticism at both Heidegger's translation of intentionality as openness or transcendence² and Merleau-Ponty's reduction of all givenness to "a dehiscence of Being," to "the concretion of a universal visibility, of one sole space that separates and unites, that sustains every cohesion."³ The question is whether such

¹ See Breuer, *Singularité et sujet*, 161.

² This may be observed in Heidegger's philosophy in the following: "We have a twofold task: (1) to conceive intentionality itself more radically, and then (2) to elucidate its consequences for what we have called the 'transposition' of the Dasein over things [...] It will turn out that intentionality is founded in Dasein's transcendence and is possible solely for this reason—that transcendence cannot conversely be explained in terms of intentionality." Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, Albert Hofstadler (trans.) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982) 162.

³ "The 'visual quale' gives me, and is alone in doing so, the presence of what is not me, of what is simply and fully. It does so because, as a texture, it is the concretion of a universal visibility, of one sole space that separates and unites, that sustains

openness to absence and presence, founded upon an over-arching transcendence or *écart* of being, fully captures all the experiential features of an intentionality for which something is not merely absent, but that is lacking or missing.

The aim in the preceding, however, was not simply to argue for the internal coherence of Sartre's account of memory and intentionality, and for how well they fit within the greater framework of a phenomenology of desire, for instance by highlighting what might be called Sartre's 'nihological dualism' of intentionality and desire. Instead, the claim has been that a Sartrean account of both intentional consciousness and memory proves adept at mapping the various phenomenological traits of involuntary memories, above all because of the crucial way that Sartre makes room for a nuanced understanding of the intuition of *absence(s)* in such experiences. Moreover, on the strength of this analysis of involuntary memories, the lesson to be drawn concerning the *resistance of the past* is that it ought not be conceived as a way of the past enforcing, from a distance, a form of finitude on consciousness or the subject. That is, the resistance of the past is not an external condition imposed upon memorial experience; it is not an obstacle or force against which memorial recall, and the vibrancy and detail thereof, may be measured as frail, indistinct, etc. Rather, resistance of the past, as Sartre would understand it, stems from an internal condition upon memorial experience, imposed in and by intentional consciousness itself. This condition is namely the *conflict* within all such intentional consciousness to confront the absence within itself — its own absence of ground — from which stem its spontaneous, at times even gratuitous seeming relationships not only with the world and its situations, but equally to its own experience and the qualities and truths of the world encountered therein.

The inference here may be that such a Sartrean account paints human experience rather darkly or bleakly, for instance by depicting the human motives in dealing with, recalling, and recovering the past as solely being about a desire for appropriation of ground. In other words, any question of justice in dealing with the past, via one or other form of memory, would

every cohesion (and even that of past and future, since there would be no such cohesion if they were not essentially parts of the same space). Every visual something, as individual as it is, functions also as a dimension, because it is given as the result of a dehiscence of being. What this ultimately means is that what defines the visible is to have a lining of invisibility in the strict sense, which is makes present as a certain absence." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," Carleton Dallery (trans.) in Ted Toadvine and Len Lawlor (eds.) *The Merleau-Ponty Reader* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964, 2007) 375.



seem to be debarred from the outset by Sartre's account, insofar as it is all simply a matter of how the individual looks to what appears of the past for apt or suitable solutions to its own (selfish) existential or metaphysical unease. One could counter this view, however, by arguing that one of Sartre's goals from the outset is to render possible a conception of justice or fairness, insofar as he attempts to avoid all the "tricks of stoicism"¹ — for example by not pandering to any values or norms of self-assurance from which justice is to be dispensed — in light of the phenomenological evidence of the adversity and complexity of human life, imposed not just from the outside, by the world, but from within consciousness itself.

¹ Sartre, *War Diaries*, 65.