the salt of the earth. But we have lost our savor, and wherewith we shall be salted, I do not know.

MEMORY AND IMAGINATION

by Patricia Hampl

A lecture delivered at MCTE, May 1981.
Dedication: For the members of the Memoir Class, Spring 1981, at the Loft (sponsored by the Loft and Metro State University)

When I was 7 years old, my father, who was handsome as a virtuoso and who played the violin on Sundays with a nicely tortured flair which we considered artistic, led me by the hand down a long, unlit corridor in the basement of St. Luke's School, a sort of tunnel that ended in a room full of pianos, where many little girls and a single sad little boy were playing truly tortured scales and arpeggios in a mash of troubled sound. Here my father gave over my small, still stupid hands to Sister Olive Marie, who really did look remarkably like an olive.

Her oily face gleamed as if it had just been rolled out of a can and laid on the white plate of her broad, spotless coif. Her skin was sallow, faintly greenish, olive drab, reminiscent of those especially assertive olives whose centers are drilled and then filled with a slash of pimento. She was a small, plump woman, so that the body and small window of face seemed to interpret the entire alphabet of olive: her face was a pale green olive placed upon the jumbo ripe olive of her black habit. I trusted her instantly and smiled, glad to have my hand placed in the hand of a woman who made sense, who provided the satisfaction of being what she was: an Olive who <u>looked</u> like an olive.

I was left by my father to discover the piano with Sister Olive the olive so that one day I would be able to join him on Sundays in mutually tortured piano-violin duets for the edification of my mother and brother who sat at the table spooning in the last of their pineapple sherbet meditatively until their part was called for: and they put down their spoons and clapped while we bowed, while the pale sweet ice in their bowls melted, while the music melted, and we all melted a little into each

other for a moment.

But first Sister Olive must do her work. I was shown middle C which Sister Olive seemed to think terribly important. I stared at middle C and then glanced away for a second, and when my eye returned it was gone, its slim white finger lost in the complicated grasp of the keyboard. Sister Olive struck it again, finding it with the laughable ease of an obvious genius. She emphasized the importance of middle C, its central position, a sort of North Star of sound. I remember thinking, "Middle C is the belly button of the piano," an insight that almost made me faint with its originality and usefullness--for the first time in my life I was astonished by metaphor. I hesitated to share this brilliance with the kindly Olive for some reason--and have never, until this moment of writing it down, acknowledged it to anyone.

Sunlight flooded the room; the pianos, all black, gleamed. Sister Olive, dressed in the colors of the keyboard, gleamed; middle C shimmered with meaning and I resolved never--never--to forget its location: it was the center of the world.

Then Sister Olive, who had had to show me middle C twice but who seemed to have drawn no bad conclusions about me anyway, got up and went to the windows on the opposite wall and pulled the shades down. The sun was too bright, she said. She sneezed as she stood at the window with the sun shedding its glare over her. She sneezed and sneezed, crazy little convulsive sneezes, one after another, as helpless as if she had the hiccups.

"The sun makes me sneeze," she said casually when the fit was over and she was back at the piano. I had never heard--never imagined--anything so bizarre. I associated sneezing with colds and colds with rain, fog, snow and bad weather. The sun, however, had caused Sister Olive to sneeze in this convulsive way, Sister Olive who gleamed benignly and who was so certain of the location of the center of the world. The universe wobbled a bit and did not seem quite so reliable anymore. Things were not, after all, necessarily what they seemed; appearance deceived: here was the sun acting totally out of character, hurling this woman into sneezes, a woman so mild that she was named, or so

it seemed, for a bland object on a relish tray.

I was given a red book, the first Thompsen book, and told to play the first piece over and over at one of the black pianos where the other children were crashing away. This, I was told--and it sounded alluringly adult--was called practising. The piece itself consisted mainly of middle C, and I excelled, thrilled by my savvy at being able to locate that central note amidst the cunning camouflage of all the other white keys before me. Thrilled, too, by the shiny red book that gleamed, as the pianos did, as Sister Olive did, as my eager eyes did. I sat at the formidable machine of the piano and got to know middle C intimately, preparing to be as tortured as I could manage one day soon with my father's violin at my side.

But at the moment Mary Katherine Rielly was at my side, playing something at least two or three lessons more sophisticated than my piece. I believe she even struck a chord. I glanced at her from the peasantry of single notes with shyness, ready to pay homage. She turned toward me, stopped playing, and sized me up. Sized me up and found a person ready to be dominated. Without introduction she said, "My grandfather invented the collapsible opera hat." I nodded, I acquiesced, I was hers. With that little stroke it was decided between us--that she should be the leader and I the side-kick. My job was admiration. Even when she added, "But he didn't make a penny from it. He didn't have a patent"--even then, I knew and she knew that this was not an admission of powerlessness, but the easy candor of the true master, of one who can afford a weakness or two. With the clairvoyance of all fated relationships based on dominance and submission it was decided in advance: that when the time came for us to pay duets, I should always play second piano, that I should spend my allowance to buy her the Twinkies she craved but was not allowed to have, that finally, I should let her copy from my test paper and when confronted by our teacher, confess with convincing hysteria that it was I, I who had cheated, who had reached above myself to steal what clearly belonged to the rightful heir of the inventor of the collapsible opera hat.

And so on and so on.

There must be a reason why I have remembered this little story--if it is a story. Anyway, this moment. There must be some use, some reason that it is lodged clearly and absolutely in my memory and not some other, perhaps more amusing, more awful or significant, more edifying incident. I have not chosen to remember it--it is simply there, like a book that has always been on the shelf, whether I ever read it or not, the binding and the title showing as I skim across the contents of my mind. It just happends that today I have taken it from the shelf and paged through and found more detail, more event, maybe just a little more entertainment than I had expected. But the memory itself was there--and I knew it--from the start. Waiting for me.

Or was it? I've just re-read what I wrote about that first piano lesson--a piece I wrote with nothing but the pure driven intention of honesty and accuracy--and I have to admit a little sheepishly that I've told a pack of lies here.

I think it was my father who took me the first time for my piano lesson--but maybe he only took me to meet my teacher and there was no actual lesson that day. And did I even know then that he played the violin--didn't he take up his violin again much later, as a result of my piano playing and not the reverse? And is it even remotely accurate to describe as "tortured" the musicianship of one who began every day by belting out "Oh What a Beautiful Morning" as he shaved?

Sister Olive Marie did sneeze in the sun, but was her name Olive? It might have been Oliver or Olivia or Olivet or maybe it was one of those medieval Catholic names nuns used to have which perhaps sounded like or reminded me of a word like pickle or scallion, and by association I've thought of her as Olive. As for her skin tone--I would have sworn it was olive--like, I would have been willing to spend the better part of the afternoon trying to write a paragraph that would indicate the exact variety or imported Italian or Greek olive her face suggested. I wanted to get it right. But now, were I to write that passage over, it is her intense black eyebrows I would have to

describe, for suddenly they seem the central fact of that face, some indicative mark of her serious and forthright nature. But the truth is, I don't remember the woman at all. She's a sneeze in the sun and a finger touching middle C.

I'm sure there weren't a bunch of other children playing on pianos in the room of my first lesson and I know I didn't have the Thompsen book as my piano text--because other children did and I was envious of those red books with drawings of lamb-like Victorian children on the pages along with the notes. The belly button business is no memory--or rather my delight in a first metaphor is not true. But I do believe I've caught in that metaphor a genuine thought I did have somewhere on the periphery of my mind, a metaphor I was too conventional ever to ponder or take pleasure in. In other words, in writing that memory I have, for the first time, actually given myself the right to that little brave flag of a first self-made metaphor. And in creating this fictious history about my first metaphor, I suppose I've satisfied some unacknowledged desire to equip myself with a bit of personal history that explains why I ended up becoming a poet.

Mary Katherine Reilly didn't even go to St. Luke's School--and of course her name isn't Mary Katherine Reilly. I met her in Girl Scouts and later went to high school with her. Our relationship was not one of leader and follower, and, if anything, in the matter of piano playing, she thought me the better student. She certainly never copied anything from my test paper--she was the top student in school and didn't need to look to left or right. Though her grandfather--or someone in her family--did invent the collapsible opera hat, she didn't tell this to me on our first meeting (which I don't recall in any case) and it wasn't told as a deft move in the kiddy power play.

So what am I doing here? Simply giving you an example of the curious relation a fiction writer has to the material of her own life? Perhaps. And that's an interesting enough thing to consider. But, to tell the truth (if you even believe I'm capable of telling the truth anymore), I wasn't writing fiction. I was writing memoir with a pure and earnest heart. I wanted

to get the facts down, I wanted to serve forth a freshly written memory so that, using it as an example, we could consider the uses of this form, the uses of memory itself. And I don't want to wrap the creative process--mine anyway--in wads of obscuring cotton. I want to understand myself, my tendency to lie and call it art, my habit of fabrication which I call memoir. I am not satisfied by conveniently misty mystical notion that all writers use "poetic license" to "make the story better." For, as an opposing cliché says, "Truth is stranger than fiction," anyway. My desire is always to be accurate, and that desire is rooted in the simple belief that the truth of things is more interesting than any fiction I could concoct.

So why have I told these lies--if I wasn't writing fiction and if, as I say, I really was writing memoir? And why do I know for a certainty that every time I set about the act of retrieving a memory and setting it down on paper I will lie again--quite blithely. And--this is the oddest part--that all the while I will truly believe I'm telling the truth?

The one indication my little story about my first piano lesson gives about this conundrum is that it is packed with detail. I have been driven once again, as I was when I wrote A Romantic Education, which is a memoir, to the power of detail, the overwhelming insistence of small particles of life for their place, their right to thrive like some other-worldly plant that goes right on blossoming without benefit of soil. Or--here's a more accurate metaphor--these fragments and details are like those branches people bring inside in December and place in a jar of water and which, amazingly, unfurl their tiny leaves in imitation of spring.

"Caress the details, the divine details," Vladimir Nabokov has said. Which is, I suppose, a classy way of saying what every composition teacher who ever lived has said: "Be specific." Memory is specific. It's hardly anything else. Its specificity is so intense and ravenous for detail that it will--as we've seen--create color, texture, conversation, even emotion, where there was none. The curious thing about these odd, unruly details that refuse to give over to an orderly view

of things, that demand attention, is that by giving them their place, by putting our loyalty into our mixed bag of unsorted details, we are given--as a reward perhaps for our loyalty to our own view of things--the satisfaction of form. The reason my memory of that first piano lesson is full of lies, as I've admitted, is that my allegiance was to specific details, to the compelling divinity I feel--we all feel--towards the bright moments that refuse to lie down and play dead. This form is neither anything as simple or brittle as "fiction" or any other "genre." It is the powerful and satisfying sense of living in a world rather than a chaos. The detail of life, sorted into memoir, ceases to be malignant and drenched in self-absorption. It begins to gain the glow of the world, even--if I may use a splendid, maybe too splendid word--it begins to glow with the eternal.

Looking repeatedly into the past, you do not necessarily become fascinated with your own life, but rather with the phenomenon of memory. The act of remembering becomes less autobiographical; it begins to feel tentative, aloof. It becomes blessedly impersonal.

The self-absorption that seems to be the impetus and embarrassment of autobiography turns into (or perhaps always was) a hunger for the world. Actually, it begins as hunger for a world, one gone or lost, effaced by time or a more sudden bruality. But in the act of remembering, the personal environment expands, resonates beyond itself, beyond its "subject", into the endless and tragic recollection that is history.

We look at old family photographs in which we stand next to black boxy Fords and are wearing period costumes, and we do not gaze fascinated because there we are young again, or there we are standing, as we never will again in life, next to our mother. We stare and drift because there we are...historical. It is the dress, the black car that dazzle us now and draw us beyond our mother's bright arms which once caught us. We reach into the attractive impersonality of something more significant than ourselves.

We embrace the deathliness and yet we are not dead. We are

impersonal and yet ourselves. The astonishing power and authority of memory derive from this paradox. Here, in memory, we live and die. We do "live again" in memory, but differently: in history as well as in biography. And when these two come together, forming a narrative, they approach fiction. The imprecision of memory causes us to create, to extend remembrance into narrative. It sometimes seems, therefore, that what we remember is not--could not be--true. And yet it is accurate. The imagination, triggered by memory, is satisfied that this is so.

We trust memory against all the evidence: it is selective, subjective, cannily defensive, unreliable as fact. But a single red detail remembered--a hat worn in 1952, the nail polish applied one summer day by an aunt to her toes, separated by balls of cotton, as we watched--has more real blood than the creatures around us on a bus as, for some reason, we think of that day, that hat, those bright feet. That world. This power of memory probably comes from its kinship with the imagination. The Kingdom of God, the nuns used to tell us in school, is within you. We may not have made a religion of memory, but it is our passion, and along with (sometimes in opposition to) science, it is our authority. It is a Kingdom of its own.

Psychology, which is somehow our science, the claustrophobic discipline of the century, has made us acknowledge the value of remembering--even at the peril of shame. But the problem for most of us is not shame. Most lives, though really of potentially tragic, are short on melodrama. It is difficult for us to reach back into our lives, into what we see as merely insignificant fragments, into a family life where, it seemed, nothing happened. To break through what seems unimportant and as anoymous as dirt a great sense of worthlessness must be overcome. At least shame is interesting; at least it is hidden, the sign of anything valuable. But for a past to be overlooked, discarded because it was not only useless but simply without interest--that is a harsher heritage. In fact, is it a heritage?

This generation has written its memoirs early: we squeezed

every childhood lemon for all it was worth: my mother this, my father that. Our self-absorption was appalling. But I won't go back--not yet--on that decade, the period when my generation as "a generation" was most political.

Nor will I go back on my loyalty to the oddly disjointed details of my life--or of your lives. The notion that in the dense bundles of memory we know are our real lives we carry the meaning of life itself is the great gift of literature. literature, which honors the vividness of detail above all else. When Mrs. Nash in the fourth grade at St. Luke's, when Sister Mary Reginia and Sister Mary Gertrude at Visitation Convent, and Richard Foster at the University said helplessly but steadfastly the old cri de coeur of English teachers, "Be specific", they were doing the essential work of civilization, I think. And the essential work of the imagination. They were attesting to the legitimacy of the detail, to the ethical mandate that resides within our own experience and to the creative spring which allows an ordinary human being to feel, for a moment, divine. Like all spiritual truths it is a paradox: when we caress the lowly details, we touch briefly our own divinity, our union with others and the great world. The more loyal we are to the curious fragments of our memory, the greater chance we have to link arms--in affection, in solidarity--with others, even with those we will never know. We cease to be alone, even as we enter the absolutely private room of our own version of the past.

Memoir is not the art of the self, but the art of the detail. There is no whole story, no whole self-there doesn't need to be. Profound attachment to the fragments, the shards of the past, are--or can be--the old gold that each of us has, the heritage of broken bits with which we can approach the beast, the world. If Nabokov was excessive in calling the detail divine, maybe the poet Jane Cooper was more judicious when she spoke of "the sanity of observed detail." Whether it is divinity or sanity that the pondering of one's own life provides, it seems to me we have need of both. For me, writing a memoir was an act of faith, faith in the detail to shine out of its terrible, self-shattering insignifiance into a relation I

longed for but feared might not exist. I wanted to matter--and I was afraid I did not matter. And that my family did not matter, nor my town, nor my sex, nor anything I had ever experienced. Memory provided what neither good intentions nor ambition could. The divinity of my details, anyway, has to do with humility, as I suppose all details do - the humility that is strangely fearless and celebratory, the humility that delights in dancing around the small occasions, the minor feasts of its life--that sings about a nun with a vegetable name, that crows that its father played the violin, that it has been alive and kicking from the start.

The poet Louise Bogan says of the strange, disjointed memories we each have that "such memories, compounded of bewilderment and ignorance and fear" are ones "we must always keep in our hearts. We can never forget them because we cannot understand them, and because they are of no use." But this is where she and I part company--for they are of use. They provide us with our first--for some of us our only--opportunity to place the self in the world. To acknowledge memory, the scruffy, disorderly details, the disjointed moments of a life, is to acknowledge both the private self and the huge world. It is also, as every liar and memorist knows, to feel the exhilarating delight of an imagination doing what it was intended to do: filling in all the blank places.

USING FILM COMEDY IN THE CLASSROOM

by David Robinson

Most English teachers, at both secondary and college level, have used film in their classrooms. Generally, however, they employ it as "background" material to a period or piece (e.g., the Encyclopedia Brittanica series) or present their students the "film version" of the novel/short story/play under examination. In either case, they are not viewing the film as a piece of literature in itself. I have no quarrel with either