

Memory Frames: Contemporary Poetry and Memory

Esemplastic Memory

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Esemplastic Memory

- Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote about the importance of memory 200 years ago in his autobiographical work, *Biographia Literaria*.
- The importance of these musings is not memory as most people think about memory—the memory that recalls facts and figures and other miscellany—but the esoteric, intuitive spark that reaches beyond the physical brain.



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- The inner voice of “Fancy” that frees the will and transports human consciousness beyond the boundaries of the material world is the inspiration that Coleridge attempts to capture and explain.

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- In his work *Creative Evolution*, Henri Bergson provides his ideas about the intellect, thought, illusion and his concept of “*élan vital*” (vital force or impulse of life) for which he is best known.
- *Élan vital* supports his concept of “pure memory” - an intuitive source of spirit.

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- “Fancy” or the “*nisus vitalis*” in the words of Coleridge
- “*Élan vital*” as described by Henri Bergson

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- Chapter XIII of *Biographia Literaria* is where we find the origin and definition of the word “esemplastic” as Coleridge relates,
- “I constructed it myself from the Greek words, eis en plattein, to shape into one; because, having to convey a new sense, I thought that a new term would both aid the recollection of my meaning, and prevent its being confounded with the usual import of the word, imagination” (Coleridge, ch. X).



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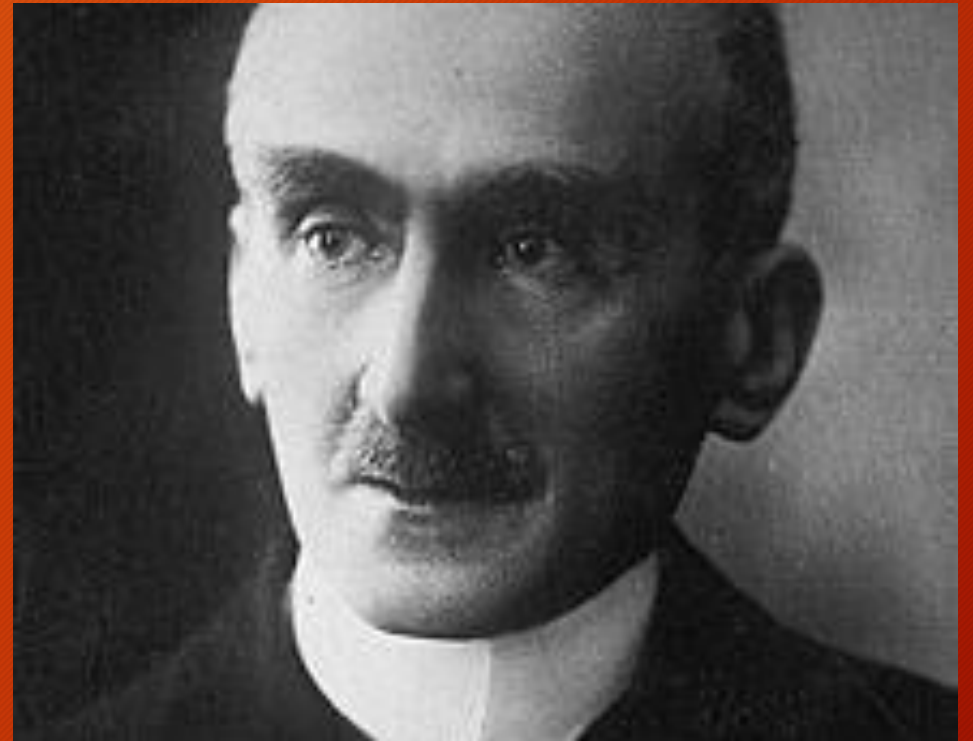
- “the way in which the memory works . . . [using the brain which] actualizes the useful memories . . . [and] keeps in the lower strata of the consciousness those which are of no use” (Bergson, CM 114).
- “Pure memory” is that in which “Spirit borrows from matter the perceptions on which it feeds, and restores them to matter in the form of movements” (Bergson, MM 134).

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- “Fancy” or the “*nisus vitalis*” in the words of Coleridge
- “*Élan vital*” as described by Henri Bergson
- Coleridge’s “Esemplastic”: “to shape into one”
- Bergson’s “Pure memory”: “Spirit borrows from matter”

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- This all-seeing, all at once, is indicative of an “esemplatic” memory according to Coleridge or “pure memory,” as defined by Bergson.
- Bergson provides his theory of memory through the dualism of spirit and matter.
- Both philosophers postulate that these opposite forces share a certain commonality, a unification or “esemplastic” memory where imagination and intuition are joined with reality.



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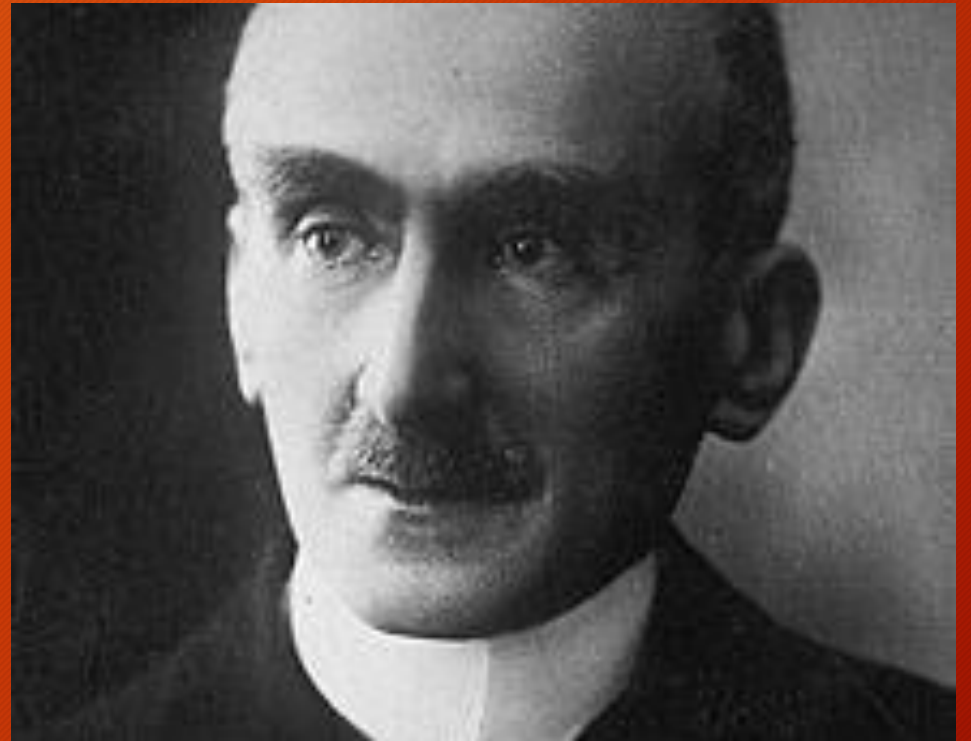
- “Literature is the creation of points of view beyond the body or present . . . for once we have created a literary voice or perception it is no longer grounded in a feeling and moving body . . . and becomes one with the flow of life” (Colebrook 85).
- This transportation is evident in the description of memory by Bergson as he relates that when “we pass from pure perception to memory, we definitely abandon matter for spirit” (Bergson, MM 127).

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- “the poet and the novelist who express a mood certainly do not create it out of nothing” (Bergson, CM 112).

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- In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge informs the reader of his past and his philosophies in his own words or word, literally -- esemplastic.
- His grasp of language, as well as philosophical, scientific, and theological theories is coupled with his often random and chaotic poetic voice.
- Bergson tells us that “[t]here comes a moment when the recollection thus brought down is capable of blending so well with the present perception that we cannot say where perception ends or where memory begins” (Bergson, MM 56).





- *Biographia Literaria* provides an opportunity to better understand the consciousness from which creative energy flows.
- This understanding helps one appreciate the “esemplastic” meanderings of Coleridge at a deeper level.

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