

Report on the Chichele Essay, 2008.

The topic set this year was 'Memory'. I hoped that this title would allow equal scope to those who were studying science subjects, as well as to those more familiar with writing essays for arts subjects. It may be that recalling my own efforts to write for three hours on this subject in the All Souls Prize Fellowship Examination had something to do with the choice as well. Despite such self-indulgence, it seemed likely that 'memory' would generate more than reminiscence, and I hoped that answers might deal with literary, historical, and scientific descriptions and uses of memory. Better answers might be expected to go beyond description of instances of remembering or forgetting to consider more profound questions that depend in some way upon memory, such as the social construction of communities or the differences between humans and animals (or, indeed, between humans and machines). Along the way, I expected to see references to educational tall stories and mythical displays of photographic memories, although I was fairly confident that nobody would set out to demonstrate possession of such a tool-kit by copying out for me, sight unseen, the Tonbridge telephone directory. There were indeed no prodigious feats of that kind, although one or two candidates did produce those attempts at their memoirs that I had optimistically hoped to avoid. These did little to change my opinion that autobiography is best left for somebody else to do after one's death. One aspect of these accounts of personal experiences was, however, cheering. They revealed not only that schooldays are the best of one's life, but also that those fortunate enough to pass those days at Tonbridge have the advantage of teachers who are memorable for their teaching, rather than anything else. I can't answer one candidate's rhetorical question 'will my most lasting memory be of a lesson with "Doc T" casually translating some Plato?', but it seemed that this was meant to be a pleasant recollection, rather than the nightmare that construe might once have been.

There were 17 answers submitted for the Chichele Essay Competition this year. I found it very hard to tell which had been written by arts students and which by scientists: in that sense, the choice of topic worked. Many essays made the link between memory and personal identity, though rather fewer explored it through considerations of memory loss or false memory. Several were able to produce literary or cultural examples, such as the work of Sebastian Faulks or John Buchan, or the film, 'Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind', to make their arguments more concrete, but, in general, it was surprising how few detailed references of this kind seemed to come to mind. The move from the rose-tinted to the blood-soaked, attempted by one candidate who shifted from 'the Victorian House' to Kurosawa's 'Rashomon' in his consideration of trust in memory, was perhaps a little abrupt. In general, where examples were used, candidates placed more faith in their reader's understanding and recall than could perhaps be justified. Although most essays were well paced, candidates were perhaps too used to expecting their examiner to know the answer already. They tended to offer tantalising glimpses of the hand that they were holding, rather than playing it out carefully, card by card. Despite this, the general opinion appeared to be that learning by rote had had its day.

Several of the best essays developed their thoughts about memory and identity to embrace the question of what it might be to be human. There were some interesting comparisons of the capacity of humans and animals to remember, although at times memory seemed to be getting rather too much of the credit for instinctive behaviour. Many candidates thought that animal behaviour is not only shaped by memory but also marked by a sense of identity that is different from human identity only in degree rather than in kind. These are controversial areas, and it would have been nice to see greater reference made to the sources that candidates were relying on. The strongest essays extended their consideration to a comparison between human and artificial memory, and were able to ask what it was about human memory that made it special in this setting as well. Most of those who took this tack argued by example or from analogy: although there was at least one half-remembered reference to Descartes, nobody sought to set out a case through the logical deployment of propositions and definitions.

The youth of the candidates may explain the faith that many seemed to display in memory and its powers. For most, however, memory remained an individual thing. Some candidates did argue that nations had memories, but there was very little discussion of how cultural memory of this kind might be created or sustained beyond the lifetimes of those who had participated in particularly memorable events. There was consensus, however, that nostalgia was a bad thing, even amongst those who indulged in their own reminiscences. To be young is to remember; the old wallow in nostalgia. Forgetting may have something to do with this, of course, but there was relatively little time spent on it in these essays. For one candidate, those who say that they have forgotten something are almost always lying (I wish!). Another, more charitably, suggested that 'to understand is to remember; to innovate is to forget'. Striving for novelty may explain but does not entirely excuse the spelling mistakes that candidates surprisingly often made.

The average standard of the essays was, as one would expect, high. Most essays made at least some good points, and many wrote persuasively as well as topically. Opinion may have masqueraded as evidence from time to time, but arguments were sustained and developed at length in the better answers. It was relatively easy to group answers together by quality, but hard to rank individuals within such groupings. Three answers seemed to me to be a cut above the rest, and their authors deserve to be named: James Baillie, Charles Simon, and Paul Merchant.

James Baillie wrote with a light touch about the relationship between memory and intelligence, a topic ventured by relatively few. He managed to forge a link between individual and collective memory, and to explain, with reference to disease, how important memory is to identity for the individual and also for the group. To make the last part of this argument, he made good use of historical examples, particularly the writing of Sassoon and Owen. He also discussed the way in which memory may condition future behaviour for both individuals and groups. This was an economical and impressive essay, but it was spoiled slightly by confusing presentation, which made it hard to be sure that one had always followed arguments correctly.

Charles Simon's essay was exceptionally assured and presented its judgements succinctly and clearly. Although the author evidently knew his own mind, he was unusually careful to signal where knowledge might be uncertain. He was able to stand back from his own arguments and thus move the discussion on quickly from level to level. He showed an exceptionally acute ability to see the consequences of what he was arguing and to debate with himself. Although he deployed reminiscence, this was of a generic kind that provided the subject for philosophical analysis; there was no wasting of words on mere stories. He was unusual in considering the range of meaning that 'memory' may have in everyday usage, and interestingly asked which senses were strongest in memory. He was able to distinguish clearly between memory and instinct, and thus to set out what might be special about creatures that can remember. Despite this, he was careful not to claim too much, and, although enthusiastic about scientific progress, he remained wary about the social implications of further research into memory. This excellent essay seemed to me to be a very strong contender for the prize.

In the end, however, I decided that the winning entry in the Chichele Essay Competition was that of Paul Merchant. One reason for this was the fluent and often elegant style that Mr Merchant displayed in his answer. His essay was tightly structured and clearly thought through from beginning to end. It began with a consideration of the effects of artificial memory on our perception of human memory, before thinking carefully about the nature of memory loss and the information about memory that can be derived from this. The connection between memory and identity was made without fuss and differences were pointed out between human memory and animal instinct. The essay then moved to a more advanced level by discussing the themes that it had introduced in a number of literary and cinematic examples, which allowed Mr Merchant to explore carefully topics such as invented memories and the sudden recovery of memory. Deft judgements of style and effect in the works under discussion were mixed with conclusions that drove the argument about memory on. This turned to forgetting, where Mr Merchant was careful in his claims, and advanced some interesting ideas about the role of the subconscious. The essay's conclusions, that memory had played an important role in human evolution, and that memory might lie behind not only human individuality but also the identity of humans as a species, seemed particularly well wrought. The combination of careful scientific argument, based on well-chosen examples, with a detail of literary analysis that was not matched by any other essay swayed me to choose Paul Merchant's essay for the prize.

Scott Mandelbrote