

**“it had something to do / with death... it had something / to do with love”:
The Eroticism of Memory in “This Room and Everything in It”**

Li-Young Lee’s “This Room and Everything in It” explores human memory as inherently erotic, in other words, as grounded in the restless vicissitudes of human desire. The act of memory figured in Lee’s poem involves the desire to transcend desire so as to reach a state of perfection in which the fundamental connection between love and death can be remembered. In the end, though, desire slips through memory’s fragile constructions and resumes its pre-rational primacy in the “room” that is human life.

The principle trope at work in “This Room and Everything in It” centers upon the ancient art of memory, the practice of utilizing a multifaceted, imaginatively complex *topos* in which to store various items or facts wished to be remembered. The memorial *topos*, in addition to featuring a “room” of some sort – an internal dwelling through which the person practicing the art of memory could move in imagination, associating the items to be remembered with the unchanging characteristics of the room – also commonly involved a fully-developed cosmology in which various divine figures were utilized as mnemonic objects. This ancient art reveals the inherent bi-directional connection between imagination and memory: humans imagine so as to remember and remember so as to imagine. In Lee’s poem, however, the art of memory, “the one thing I learned / of all the things my father tried to teach me” (49), proceeds in a seemingly inverse manner. Rather than starting with the general and unchanging, and imaginatively associating concrete particulars with it, the speaker in the poem *starts with* fleeting, individual erotic moments – the very moments that one would think *would need to be remembered* rather than would serve as the imaginative ground for an art of memory! When the speaker proclaims

that “I am letting this room / and everything in it / stand for my ideas about love / and its difficulties” (49), the room and everything in it is not an architectural but an erotic space:

I'll let your love-cries,
those spacious notes
of a moment ago,
stand for distance.

Your scent,
that scent
of spice and a wound,
I'll let stand for mystery.

Your sunken belly
is the daily cup
of milk I drank
as a boy before morning prayer. (49)

In the traditional art of memory, various “ideas about love,” personified as gods or goddesses, would often serve as mnemonic devices; in Lee’s poem, though, ideas about love are the items that the poet wishes to remember: specifically, “distance,” “mystery,” and some idea figured in “the daily cup / of milk I drank / as a boy before morning prayer.” By reversing the associative direction of the art of memory, Lee’s poem seems to suggest that if memory itself arises out of desire, then desire can only be remembered in the form of “ideas” that allow memory the means of getting beyond its own ground so as to articulate it.

The speaker’s art of memory ostensibly comes about so that “one day, when I need / to tell myself something intelligent / about love, / I’ll close my eyes / and recall this room and everything in it” (50). On a deeper level, though, the speaker’s activity seems to be in service of fixing (i.e., making permanent) the exultation of desire that is possible in physical love: “My body is estrangement. / This desire, perfection.” In other words, the speaker marshals various “ideas about love” so as to remember the longed-for self-oblivion of physical love: the speaker longs to remember that at times of physical passion he is capable of forgetting himself. *This* is

the “greater idea” that the speaker seeks to inscribe in and through his various ideas of love. If memory succeeds for a moment in remembering the mystery of physical passion – a mystery that “ha[s] something to do / with death... something / to do with love” – soon enough the memory is gone and must be re-discovered. This necessity of re-membering physical passion stems, according to the insight offered by Lee’s poem, from the inherent eroticism of memory, from its inseparability from human desire.

Now I’ve forgotten my
 idea. The book
 on the windowsill, riffled by wind...
 the even-numbered pages are
 the past, the odd-
 numbered pages, the future.
 The sun is
 God, your body is milk...

useless, useless...
 your cries are song, my body’s not me...
 no good... my idea
 has evaporated... your hair is time, your thighs are song...
 it had something to do
 with death... it had something
 to do with love.

By the poem’s end, memory appears scattered, forgetful of or at least blurring its prior associations: both the lover’s cries and thighs become song. Desire seems to have collapsed the formerly clear ideational associations that memory had made vis-à-vis physical passion, and thus desire must in a sense remember itself anew.