RECOLLECTION AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF MEMORY AND DESIRE
– notes on the prayer maxim
‘Remember God constantly and call out to him with sighs’
in The Eleventh Treatise of The Third Spiritual Alphabet
by Francisco de Osuna

The corruption of natural memory
Osuna begins with some warnings about how the faculty of memory can be distorted and corrupted (11:1:292-293). He is referring here to the natural capacity to recall and retain in self awareness what has been sensed - or the ‘sensitive’ memory. He names from experience some of the ways that this natural ability, if its power has been disabled, will produce thought and desires that block spiritual recollection. This treatise builds on his earlier teachings on the destructive strategies of thought (Treatise 7) - but here examines more closely what has happened to the underlying psychological power of memory that causes inner conflicts by distorted remembering.
- remembering teachings in a way that distorts truth
- obsessive remembering what has already been let go of
- continually remembering hurts that then stirs vengeance
- hidden attachment to the symbols of pleasure/security/esteem
- continual preoccupation with evil

The healing of natural memory - from remembering the self to self forgetfulness
Osuna says the remedy for the ways that the natural memory has been obscurely co-opted for harm, is ultimately a spiritual one. The healing of the human capacity to recall and retain information that creates self awareness is now to be redirected to ‘self forgetfulness’. Osuna makes it quite clear that this self forgetting is only possible and true if it flows out of direct knowledge how beautiful and desirable the soul is to God. An openness to self forgetfulness is initially nurtured by recalling and retaining the scriptural promises that we are remembered by God in this way.
‘... to make the soul forget all this, it is promised that God, the eternal king, will desire the soul; that the soul will be not only received but also desired by God. As evidence that this desire by God is genuine, not feigned, great, not small, this line praises the beauty of the faithful soul, providing that beauty reason for the Lord to desire the soul, since we remember better that which we desire more, it is logical that the Lord will continuously hold in his memory the soul that loves him.’ (11: 1.293)

The spiritual transformation of memory.
Osuna’s reflects at length on the impact of spiritual recollection on the capacity to remember. Once purified by self forgetfulness the memory begins to operate in new and observable ways.
1. Memory that both retains and creates
The psychological faculty of memory is not destroyed in recollection but perfected by it. Osuna offers many images to convey the potential and fulfillment of memory that can consistently retain wisdom and truth without losing or distorting it, that is not merely retentive, but becomes creative and life giving. ‘Memory is the place wherein is stored the treasure of the wise; it is the ark of truth, the living book of man, the womb where the soul cherishes her sons to that they are not killed by forgetfulness,
which, as saint Gregory says, is a kind of death that removes from memory what once live there, just as death drives out from present life what it kills.’ (11.2.294)

2. Memory holds the true and essential identity of the self.
The idea for every single thing and the seminal reason for every possibility exists in his memory better than on a plan, so that even if something were to die in itself, it would not perish in God's memory where all things are recorded and comprehended in such a way that the angels can read as if from a perfect book what God wishes them to know. In that book alone the essence of individual people is found, and there they are immortal, participating in the immortality possessed only by God, to whom and through whom and in whom all things live.’ (11:2.295)

3. Memory needs to be trained.
The normal and natural ways of remembering are slowly transformed through the prayer of recollection. As an initial preparation Osuna recommends that we train our memory through exercises of spiritual remembering as we usually have little control over our memories. Some examples he gives are recalling our religious, recalling our baptism, recalling the passion of Christ, recalling religious experience, and recalling the action of God in daily life. (11:2.295-8) He then reminds us that these beginning spiritual exercises are limited as they are still reliant on the sensual memory. 'It is easy to remember visible things because, having been seen, they are carried impressed, as it were, on the memory, but God is invisible: man has never seen him nor can imagine him, hence the difficulty of remembering much about him.'

4. The highest purpose of memory is to awaken love.
Osuna then suggests a deeper purpose for these practices of remembrance - a theme implies in the second half of his prayer maxim - to 'call out' or 'sigh'. He quotes Saint Ambrose to make the point: 'The holy doctor asserts that such remembering effectively awakens our dormant love because the things of Divinity produce love and devotion to the Lord according to themselves.' (11.2.298) Remembering increases desire for the presence of what is remembered.

5. Memory transcending recollection.
Although the natural memory has been engaged and gathered into the process of recollection, the spiritual memory presupposes and transcends it.
'The perfect memory of God about which I would like to advise you here is a much loftier more important devotion than the one I have explained and is very suitable to those who practice recollection. This kind of remembering presupposes recollection: if memory of God is to be perfect, it must go beyond recollection if memory of God is to be perfect, which it imbues with even greater life. Hence, the memory of God based on recollection is a spiritual resurrection.' (11.3.300)

6. An empty memory - a way of transformation of the whole person.
This memory of God causes all interior and exterior things of man to function because it provides them a simple operation that is compatible with recollection, an operation that consists of representing God in his pure essence. This memory is based on recollection and is infused into man, seemingly raising him from death to life and vitalizing his innermost being and heart and eyes so that he lives for naught else but God because his memory is of naught else but God' (11.3.301)
7. Memory capable of spiritual knowledge
This memory of God that we are to have is not of the sensitive nature: intellectual memory operates her rather than sensitive memory. Sensitive memory retains the image of things on a particular level, with the special qualities appropriate to them, whereas intellectual memory retains the image on a general, universal level without being fragmented into particularized qualities. In a lofty way, we remember God as unlimited being, immeasurable kindness, beginning without beginning, end without end, fullness that leaves nothing empty, invincible power, knowing that ignores nothing. ‘(11.3.301)

8. Memory strengthens the will
‘If we clearly remember something good, we usually desire it eagerly: thus the memory of some good moves our will to desire it. Our letter having cautioned you always to remember God, it now advises you to call out to him with sights so that memory may serve the will, which is the power nearest to God and most intimately in communion with him.’ (11.4.304)
Osuna offers many images to capture the impact of this spiritual memory on the will - it is like a breeze enkindling a fire, a drop of vinegar penetrating soil, a fragrance that makes us yearn for its source, a ray of sun that melts wax.(11.2.304-5)

The practice of remembering God - aspiratory prayer
As always Osuna wants to not only describe transformation but to encourage the spiritual exercises prayer which prepare for it. The last chapters focus on this practical approach - ‘how one ‘calls on God’ and ‘how sighs must join with remembering’
For Osuna ‘to sigh’ is a form of prayer - usually in the contemplative tradition referred to as aspiratory prayer. Aspiratory prayer is contemplative prayer of the will - it is a simple and repeated expression of spiritual desire. Osuna encourages the use of brief sentences of prayer that we can use as ‘deeply intimate, loving sighs from your inner being’.. to ‘penetrate and attract and inflame desire’

The practice of aspiratory prayer is more an evocation of good than intercession in the usual sense. We are reminded that the desires spoken of here are not desires of the self - for any thing, any one. They are inarticulate and general desires which relate to spiritual good.
‘Although there is no doubt that these desires originate in the heart, the heart is not their primary cause, for the heart is secretly moved by one who can move it: by God, in whose hand it rests. He moves the heart to feel desire, but the heart itself does not comprehend what that desire is; yet from just the mood or disposition produced by such desire, it sees clearly that the desire relates to what is good, although it does not know precisely what good thing it is not can it determine or understand where its sighs are directed.’ (11.5.309)

In the practice of offering aspiratory prayers awareness is directed beyond the self to ‘where it loves rather than where it simply has bodily life, for it goes to the beloved in accord with its best part, that which is most purely spiritual, while remaining in its lesser operation, which is to animate corporeal existence.’ (311)
this sense aspiratory prayer is ecstatic prayer.

The truest form of aspiratory prayer is the expressing of desire of what we already have. These desires rise up spontaneously and have a spiritual source. Qualitatively these pure spiritual desires are different from the felt experience of wanting an experience of God, they are in fact accompanied by not wanting and an inner awareness of being in possession of God, albeit incompletely - 'God must be present, therefore, to sigh for him, and if love is in my heart, you need not tell me to sigh for him because my heart will move to sigh on its own. Now there is this Love of God, there is a difference between travellers who taste God and those who know him perfectly: travellers always taste him with desire to taste more whereas those who know him, though not sated, feel no desire. The latter feel all desire satisfied because they are filled with all good things, but travellers receive only a portion of what they believe to be whole and entire. (11:5.312)

The marker of the deeper practice of aspiration will be noticed in a new indifference to conflicts and consolations in prayer - these purer desires are unqualified by the sensual nature 'If a person who desires to approach God only for the pleasure of him is given some taste of the Lord, his desire ceases, or if he desires in order to escape persecution, the desire vanishes as soon as the tribulation is over, but when desire is infused or caused by pure love, it does not cease until satisfied and the Lord extends his most merciful golden staff to order him draw near to gaze on his face resplendent with grace.' (11:6.314)

In the deeper practice of aspiration memory, will and understanding work together in a radically different way of remembering, desiring and understanding: 'and then God will be found in such a way that they will think they have discovered him as for the first time, and, finding him, they will lose all fear of losing him and thus will even come to the throne of his glory saying: Now I have what I desired.' (11:6.313)

(V S 06/08)

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ii Treatise 11, chapter 1, pages 292-293. This referencing is used throughout.