Voices from the past: Memory and desire in Marina Warner's radio play Brigit's Cell

by Valentina Castagna*

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This article examines Marina Warner's radio play *Birgitta's Cell* (BBC Radio 4), later published as *Brigit's Cell* (2010) focusing on the themes of memory and desire. By drawing on Jan Assman's theories on collective memory, the article shows how the two time levels Warner builds in the radio drama succeed in creating a fresh connection between women in the past and in the present as well as between individual and collective experience. The analysis of Warner's work focuses on the dramatization of the story, taking into account the results offered by the use of the spoken word, fragments of dialogues, interior monologues, silences, enhanced, by its initial destination for the radio.

Keywords: radio drama, orality, collective memory, women and desire.

Introduction

In "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity", while discussing Maurice Halbwachs' concept of communicative memory, Jan Assman (1995) connects collective memory to oral history when he claims that communicative memory is based on everyday forms of oral exchange. He shows how everyday communication holds among its main features the reciprocity of roles: «Typically, it takes place between partners who can change roles. Whoever relates […] a memory, […] an experience, becomes the listener in the next moment. There are occasions which

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more or less predetermine such communications, for example, train rides, waiting rooms, or the common table […]» (ivi, p. 127). Assman claims that the memory which is shaped via this form of oral communication is socially mediated and that it relates to a specific group as every single individual memory exists only «in communication with others» (ivi, p. 127). He continues by asserting that the "others" are to be considered as people forming groups who conceive their unity and specificity through a shared image of their common past. Besides, when Assman moves forward into the field of objectivized culture, and starts demonstrating his idea of cultural memory, he claims that it aims at showing the close connections between three points: memory (seen as «contemporized past»), culture, and the social group.

Drawing on these ideas, this article intends to show how the story of the fictional anchorite Brigit Torval told in Marina Warner's radio play *Brigit's Cell* (2007) succeeds in preserving the «store of knowledge» shared by women from the past and the present as a group of people who by narrating become aware of their common struggles concerning sexual desire and desire for knowledge. We shall be focusing on the main characters in the radio drama, Annie and Brigit, so to discover how the two voices heard in the play denounce the annihilation of women's desire for bodily and intellectual pleasure within English society across the ages. Specifically, we shall be examining how Brigit's ghostly voice, coming from her tomb, and Annie's interior voice come together acoustically gaining strength. We shall be emphasizing the ways in which the transit from silence and whispers to a loud voice conveys their mutual wish to interrupt the transmission of maiming gender roles and behaviours carried about by patriarchal ideas of femininity both in the Middle Ages and in the mid-20th century.[1] These are the two historical and cultural contexts the characters belong to and although they are so distant in time and ideas, the author creates a tale where past and present voices meet and bear witness to the crushing of the life of women who transgressed Christian (Brigit) and Catholic (Annie's mother) moral codes.

[1] At the basis of my view on gender is Simone de Beauvoir's central idea that «one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman». Although, published in the 1950s, de Beauvoir's essay is still vital and central to literary criticism in the field of Women's and Gender Studies as it suggests that the biological difference between the sexes is «neutral in itself» (Fraser and White: 1994); gender is to be considered as a construction of social and cultural discourses (ivi) which can be studied from a historical and historicist perspective.

1. Voicing the contemporized past

Award-winning cultural historian, short-story writer, novelist, and mythographer[2], as well as fellow of the British Academy and President of the Royal Society of Literature, Dame Marina Warner is considered as a «key feminist thinker» (Marso 2016) thanks to her deep and seminal analyses on the one hand of female mythic figures and their impact on society (Warner 1976; 1981) and, on the other, for her extensive research in the field of fairy tales and in particular on the role of women as storytellers (Warner 1994; 2011; 2014). Her creative work is extremely cultivated with sources and inspiration willingly weaving together different cultures and roaming freely from Ovid to the Bible and the Qur'an, from European fairy tales to the *Arabian Nights*, from Shakespeare to Angela Carter, always with an eye to contemporary cultural, political, and social issues. As a matter of fact, her fiction is deeply imbued in her research work and her retellings show how pervasive myths and tales are as they work as filters of our experience within our minds and imagination; as Sellers puts it discussing the point, Warner's theory on myth, reflected on her creative writing, «endorses Roland Barthes' view that myth's 'secret cunning' is its pretence to present things as they are and must always be, and like him, she disputes the idea that this means they are therefore immutable» (2001: 7). Stories like her *Cancellanda* or *Sing for Me* show how powerfully a story (from the Bible in this case; respectively Lot's wife's and Salome's) can be retold tackling contemporary history, current cultural debates and social struggles preserving all the communicative and imaginative strength which characterizes a myth or a tale.[3] Her tales build a renewed telling connection between past and present: her stories represent and shed light on the way a well-known myth influences our understating of the world and at the same time they offer a way to make sense of present conflicts unveiling the ideologies hidden within the texts she retells. Even though *Brigit's Cell* is not a retelling of a legend or the life

[2] The term mythographer, with which the writer defines herself on her website, refers to scholars who deal with mythology in its most varied aspects. Referring to the Barthian definition of mythologies, Laurence Coupe shows how Warner, as a mythographer, constantly relates historical-cultural contexts and myths through fiction (see Coupe 2006: 1-2).

[3] On Warner novels, stories, and her use of rewriting see Corona (2001; 2007), and Castagna (2014). Besides, for further reading on the connected theme of women's rewriting of history in women's contemporary writing, see Heilmann and Llewellyn (2007).

of a saint, it draws on figures of medieval mystics and hermits which are familiar to the British audience and the reading public. At the same time, Brigit is inspired by a folktale from the *Mabinogion*, about the Flower Maiden, Blodeuweed (see Corona in Warner 2010).

Marina Warner wrote this radio drama for BBC Radio 4 where it was broadcast on 14 January 2007 under the original title of *Birgitta's Cell.* It was interpreted by the quite famous Northern Irish actress Zara Turner (as Annie) and by English actress and voiceover artist Clare Corbett (Birgitta).

The play was commissioned for "I Want to be Alone", a radio programme which included plays by other authors among which we remember Bernardine Evaristo and Jenny Diski, and which was meant as an opportunity to reflect on being alone, either in chosen isolation or in forced conditions of loneliness. *Birgitta's Cell* was published under the title *Brigit's Cell/La cella di Brìgit* in Italy in 2010, along with the Italian translation, and, in the United Kindgom and the USA, in Warner's latest collection of stories, *Fly Away Home* (2014), however no audiobook has ever been published.[4]

The radio play enacts the story of a school teacher, Annie, taking her class of 12/13-year-olds to visit the Norfolk Broads. During their trip they stop at an ancient town famous for its flower market and for some traces of its ancient history («since the Stone Age», via Romans and Anglo-Saxons to Normans and Dutch p. 20). By the Friday Market Square, the teacher points out to the pupils at the wall of a church where a horizontal slit and a plaque reveal the story of the anchorite who spent several years walled up in penance. The time and the place in which Warner has located Brigit's story might easily make us think of Dame Julian of Norwich (1343-1416?), the medieval mystic author of *Revelations of Divine Love*, who spent about twenty years enclosed in her cell. By a humorous and witty twist, Warner might have played with the theme of the divinity of love and the usually physical and visual language used by medieval mystics to create a very young anchorite who had been fervently «curious» (Warner 2010: 30) to learn everything she could about material love by cheating on her husband (however, Julian's writings are considered more orthodox than her contemporary's *The Book of Margery*

[4] Unfortunately, not many of the radio plays broadcast by the BBC get published with a great loss of interesting literary works and their recorded performances. A good amount of them, however, if not still available online as podcasts, can be listened to at the British Library thanks to the BBC Sound Archive which is being digitalized and kept there.

Kempe or the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing*). As a penance for her extreme desire to know (like Eve), Brigit Torval was led by her confessor to repent and spend the rest of her life walled up in a cell.

The theme of isolation is enucleated in the aural evocation of the cell created by the ghostly voice of Brigit and it is continuously addressed by Annie and Brigit thanks to the occurrence of terms related to the semantic field of aloneness: «I was *alone* at last» (ivi, p. 34); «[…] my mum […] brought me up *on her own* […]» (ivi, p. 28); «she should be *shunned*» (ivi, p. 38); «And I decided to live here in the wall, *isolated* like an owl» (ivi, p. 40); «all other living things will *shun* you» (ivi, p. 40); «speak to you from my *solitude*» (ivi, p. 42)[5].

Isolation, together, as we shall see, with the themes of desire and memory, is therefore at the centre of *Brigit's Cell* and is loaded with different meanings: constraint, choice, punishment. Annie reflects on the motivations behind isolation/removal as an effect of sexual behaviour deviating from common social norms: «I thought of Brigit's shame and of those times when you couldn't be up and off on the boat for Liverpool, not like my mum who brought me up on her own with Nan's help…» (ivi, p. 28)[6]. Following the characteristic feature of her fiction, where reference to myths and fairy tales is intertwined with crucial issues of the present, Marina Warner creates an oral connection, a nearly telepathic one, between the voice of the dead woman haunting the church and the voice of the teacher visiting the town. Annie's voice has a double tone: on the one hand, we hear her louder voice as she speaks with the children while, on the other, she speaks to herself (we hear her interior voice) as she compares Brigit's experience of (adulterous) "transgressive sexuality" (blamed like this by the priest who confesses her) to her mother's pregnancy out of the marriage, which led her away from her home (Northern Ireland).

It is useful to remind here the way in which Michel Foucault (1978: 103) conceptualized sexuality as a «dense transfer point for relations of power». His still relevant study on sexuality remains a cornerstone in identifying the different strategies in which sexuality and eroticism were used to play off the relationships «between men and women, parents and offspring, […] priests and laity […]», according to structures of inequality (ivi, p. 103). Women's relationship with sexuality and eroticism is hidden in most of the representations of female figures within the Christian discourse (mystical texts for example often

[5] The emphasis is mine.
[6] The emphasis is mine.

circulated in "purged" versions, see Castagna 2011 on *The Book of Margery Kempe*). Mary Magdalene whose sexuality is spoken of in the Bible is simply portrayed as a prostitute and so connected to the transgression of normativity. However, in her radio drama, Warner unveils such «patriarchal attitudes» (Figes). If Brigit and Annie (for her mother) on the one hand denounce the marginalization they suffered because of their sexual choices and behaviours, on the other hand, it is by starting from such margins that they build their presence through their voices. Brigit's voice from the past can affirm its own agency at least in the present by debunking and transgressing the normativity of the image of female desire. Her story has an impact on contemporary discourse as shown by the attention that our contemporary, Annie, pays to Brigit's whispers. The connection of these two time levels succeeds in intervening on the ideas on men-women sexual relationships (which were commonly accepted at the times both Brigit and Annie's mother lived in) that Hélène Cixous (1976: 877) famously defined in terms of hierarchical discoursive "colonization".

Thus, the bond Annie perceives between her own mother and Brigit («I was thinking this, and I swear I began to hear Brigit whispering to me from inside the wall…», ivi, p. 28) pairs them as partners in oral communication (to go back to Halbwach's and Assman's terms). The alternations of Brigit's fragments of monologues (audible to the teacher alone) and Annie's interior monologues show how the experience of two women so chronologically distant form a single group whose experience needs to be said out aloud and shared with the women who belong in the same group. The juxtaposition of medieval times and mid-20th century points out at the long history of silencing that women's sexuality has undergone through the sublimation of women's bodies through the normative representations of saints' lives, or mother characters (the Virgin Mary)[7]. Warner creates a story aimed at offering contemporary women (the new listeners of the play) the memory of unknown stories covered with lies and silences, showing how the conception of the women-sexuality relationship has remained substantially unchanged over time, even though the solutions of transgressive sexual behaviours recalled here are different: «That hadn't changed much with the years: my Mum was a wicked girl, they told her, who had led astray a good man – oh a man like my father'd not have sullied his immortal soul if it hadn't been for her wicked wiles…

[7] See Warner (1976; 1981) on the myth and cult of the Virgin Mary and of Joan of Arc.

she should be shunned, an adulteress like her» (Warner 2010: 38). Brigit's voice is still relevant: a real life person, she needs to be heard and transmit to the present (Annie) and the future (her pupils and, on another level, the listeners of the play) the memory of real experience of her enclosure as punishment and self-punishment of transgressive behaviour, modifying the image that history had conveyed of her.

Annie's mother and Brigit suffered the consequences of the choice to live their sexuality beyond the social dictates that regulate it. Warner reflects on the effects of the opposition between private perceptions of the body and widespread stereotypes about the body and sexuality which deny pleasure. Such opposition creates silences and the punishment for transgressing sexual prohibitions is in one case expulsion («That's why we all came over to England,» says Annie, «I was born soon after. *All on the quiet*»,[8] ivi, p. 26) and in the other case isolation («she was walled up», ivi, p. 36). In both cases, the consequence is alienation and estrangement.

2. The voice of desire

On several levels, the story recalls, explicitly («Brigit's cell really belongs in one of those stories that are old and plain and get inside your head from when your Nan used to tell them to you […]», ivi, p. 26) and implicitly (through folkloristic and mythological motives), those stories in which the sexual transgression made by women like Brigit, is punished with isolation and, at the same time, denied through the renaming of imprisonment as hermitage, seen here also as a 'forced' choice, says Brigit: «And I understood. And I decided to live here in the wall, isolated like an owl» (ivi, p. 40). The task that Annie entrusts to her pupils by the wall, to discover the meaning of the word "anchorite", can then also be interpreted as an exhortation by the writer so that the story of the hermitage is reread in the light of the testimonies of the women who lived inside a wall and who, as in the case of Brigit, died there.

It is essential then that here this young anchorite speaks on her own, utters her tale in her own voice, that her experience is not narrated by others and that the sphere of corporeity emerges from her story in non-religious terms, as in the case of mystics or saints, but rather in a clearly profane key (interesting is the reference to the knowledge of 'nature' as a field of knowledge which was then connected with magic and therefore considered as evil).

[8] My emphasis.

The original destination of the work for the radio, with its dramatization through dialogues and interior monologues, has made the function of recovering and transmitting the point of view of "silent" female figures even more significant. The rhythm of the dialogues, certainly enhanced by the actresses but marked by the clear "stage" directions provided by the author and her use of silences, gives the narration a strong visual quality, creating a «theatre of the mind» (Verma 2012) where we imagine the teacher and the anchorite on either side of the wall silently communicating through mental connection. The precise and clear description of the square where the action takes place, of the cell where the anchorite was locked up and the dialogues between the characters are easily focused and vivify the scene, making it materialize in our mind: that «imaginary place» that Michel Chion (1999: 3) defines as a darkened «proscenium».

It is indicative that Brigit's voice rises from the silence of her cell/tomb («it's a real living tomb», Warner 2010: 24) in light whispers that become stronger and stronger. The author's directions for the actresses go from «*undertone, very low, and sounding as from a tightly enclosed space*» (ivi, p. 22) and «*whisper*» (ivi, p. 24) to « slightly less whispery, with a hint of excitement» (ivi, p. 26) and then on reaching the same tone and volume as Annie, demonstrated by the lack of further indications in introducing Brigit's subsequent lines (from p. 30).

This coincides with the moment of acquisition of awareness and agency, the moment when Brigit, at first under the authority of the family («they presented me […] to the man I was to be married to, the one my father chose for me», ivi, p. 30) becomes an active subject (at least temporarily before being punished for that) and not functional to the maintenance of the social role attributed to women. This process of empowerment passes through the knowledge of one's own body and sexuality:[9] «[…] I can't tell why what happened later happened or why I did what I did except that I was young and curious: Was the happiness we enjoyed like the happiness of others? Did other couples feel love differently? Could *I* experience the same things in another way?» (ivi, p. 30).

Although *Brigit's Cell* is the result of fiction (without reference to any specific historical figure), the point of view carried out in the story echoes that strategy of restitution of the word (the objective of Women's Studies since the 1970s; see Corona 2001 and 2007) that

[9] On the use of agency and empowerment concepts in Women's and Gender Studies, see Fortunati, Golinelli and Monticelli (2004: 15).

historically for women has been silenced or domesticated, as well as their sexuality.

It is interesting, then, that the dialogue in the short story unravels on two intertwined planes, underlined also by the silences shown in the written version by the punctuation dots, but also the teacher's repetition of her pupils' comments not directly stated. On the one hand, there is the direct interaction between the teacher and the pupils; on the other hand, there is an alternation of the interior monologues of the 'spirit' of Brigit and Annie herself. This coexistence of voices creates a genealogical link between different generations. The voices of the two women come into contact and connect past and present, personal experience and collective experience.

The immediacy of the story thus contributes to linking a common contemporary life scene (the school trip) with the past, opening new points of view and prefiguring a transmission into the future of Brigit Torval's problematic image. The author questions this experience of seclusion seen not so much as a choice of solitary meditation and prayer, but rather as punishment and stigmatisation of sexuality seen as mere sinful carnality. And, as Carol Braun Pasternack and Lisa M.C. Weston say, «the discipline of enclosure of the body within cell [...] act[s] to (re)construct virginal bodies» (Braun Pasternack and Weston 2004: xxxiii). The story tends, then, to emphasize the questioning of the spirituality/sexuality dichotomy by suggesting that this form of enclosure was rather linked to the frustration of desire and pleasure on the part of medieval Christian society.

The writer has repeatedly stated that one of the main aims of literature is to «[...] make reckonings with the past in order to talk with the present [...] and even with the future» (Dabydeen 1992: 122). The "telepathic" communication between Brigit and Annie – who represent the past and the present respectively – and the connection with Annie's pupils – the future – dramatize the recovery, through the centuries, of the voice of those female figures who, like Brigit, were «watched over and punished» for having adopted sexual behaviours that transgressed patriarchal laws. The reception by the new generations, girls and boys, of Brigit's perspective, supported by Annie, is expressed in positive terms as underlined by her empathic commentary on Brigit's fate: «Well, Jason, it is a bit gruesome» (Warner 2010: 38).

The link between memory and desire, at the centre of recent cultural debate (see Locatelli and Ziarek 2009), also finds ample space in our radio play. In the representation of a young generation rediscovering popular culture and the history of their country, there emerge the

relationships of exchange that have determined local culture over time. Warner also refers to the Germanic tradition, as well as the Celtic one, and it is no coincidence that this work is set on a Friday, the day of the week named after the Germanic (Nordic) goddess Freya or Frigg: «[…] Friday meant Freya's day… Friday, Frigg, Freya, the Venus of the North» (Warner 2010: 20).

The writer's intention to give voice to these forgotten divinities is also recorded in Annie's description of the old hospice: «Over there are the old Hospice and Almshouses – the Lottery gave a lot of money to convert them into a Centre where we can bring back the past so we can all experience it as it was. So we can see how everything was different then» (ivi, p. 22).

This rediscovery of historical events leads to the recovery of the existence of a plurality of traditions in this area and consequently of its legends and the different contexts with which the history of Brigit has been intertwined: «The Vikings sailed across the North Sea to this part of England, and landed here and imported their gods and goddesses. But there've been traces of human activity since the Stone Age, as well as Romans and Anglo-Saxons and Normans and, nearer our times, Dutch» (ivi, p. 20).

The project to bring young people into contact with such different cultural traditions, at the basis of their own culture, is aimed at revealing how the process of cultural sedimentation has transformed certain figures, preserving only given aspects[10], as it happens in myths (see Sellers 2001).

In the interweaving of the desire to possess another man (leading to the murder of her husband) and the sense of guilt, this character seems to recall, albeit implicitly, that of Medea. In the evocativeness of the almost magical stratagem to enchant the bees and make them direct them towards her husband, like a dark art, the symbolic complexity that characterizes Warner's prose emerges, through the use of metaphors used to describe the girl and her 'natural' arts[11].

[10] The divinity, still famous today in the UK and USA, was considered the goddess of passion, sensual love, and fertility but also of wisdom/magic and war. Freya is described as a warrior (often at the head of the Valkyrie) whose power is equal to that of the god Odin (warlord). The goddess not only learned the magical arts and the art of potions and remedies (which she in turn taught to other gods) but also acquired knowledge of runes, that is writing. See Davidson (1998: 155-156).

[11] Brigit's mastery of this knowledge seems, in my opinion, to recall Freya's character once again. Davidson argues, in fact, that in medieval times there must have

These characteristics of her prose also emerge in the use of the term «dappled» (Warner 2010: 28) in the description of the first encounter between Brigit and her husband, for example, leads back to the sphere of animality, with a symbolic metamorphosis[12] evoked by the narration of instincts and the implicit reference to their sexual encounters within which, however, it is the husband himself who leads Brigit to the transformation: «[…] the sunlight slanted across the floor through shutters and dappled his body – I laughed at the sight of him and he caught me up into the patch so I was dappled too» (ivi, p. 28). This term recalls, in fact, the coat of these animals for which it is the male who has total control over the female. Similarly, in her relationship with her husband, Brigit (according to the conventions of the time in which the text is set) has no freedom of choice, is led by her family into marriage and left in her husband's care. From this to her only act of transgression, Brigit passes to the control of the priest from whom she goes, however, voluntarily, to confess: «She went to the priest here at the church on Friday Market, and confessed. He wouldn't bless her» (ivi, p. 38).

As she had done in the above mentioned essays, Warner also focuses in this account on the power of worship of such Christian female models. Their "mythical" power has been exploited by patriarchal culture to impose its ideology on all social levels.[13] Brigit is remembered in her city as an anchorite, not much information can the pupils acquire from official sources, that is, from a simple commemorative plaque. The woman's voice rises from the walls of the cell and tells her story from her point of view. The slight initial whisper, as mentioned above, acquires strength as the story progresses. The acquisition of voice corresponds to the affirmation of one's own identity which takes place thus through the recovery of sexuality. Women's studies have helped to focus on the way in which the moralising and pedagogical function of Christian-Catholic institutions over the centuries has produced that social marginalisation and that «historical invisibility»[14] which continues to have an influence today, as Warner herself has shown.[15]

been a long female tradition that maintained the link with the role of the goddess as healer (Davidson 1998).

[12] For an interpretation of all the metamorphic connotations referred to Brigit, see Corona's afterword to Warner (2010).

[13] See Bastida Rodríguez (1999: 17).

[14] See Bastida Rodríguez (1999).

[15] For quite recent studies unveiling the role of women in society and in reli-

The lives of the saints transmitted by traditional hagiography, in the same way as the Virgin Mary and Joan of Arc, have been used as myths and consequently converted into models of behaviour in which the main virtue is the negation of physicality and sexuality: the holy body is sublimated in the depiction of the heroic endurance of martyrdom. The woman's body, reduced to mere carnality, and sexuality (and her sexual behaviour) are considered sinful since Genesis:[16] Eve brings sin into the world and for this she is punished with expulsion, exclusion. The relationship between female sexuality and sin (with the consequent link between disobedience, punishment and guilt), underlying the Church's misogyny, emerges in *Brigit's Cell* in the comparison between the young woman's voice and the words of accusation of the priest who accuses her of impudence («'You belong to the dark and all other living things will shun you. You are abhorrent to creatures of light and air, to all that is made of colour and laughter. Screeching will be your music, and others' leavings your nourishment. You will foul your own nest.'»; Warner 2010: 40).

The fault that the Church representative accuses Brigit of in Warner's account is more that of having denied male authority and of having fulfilled her desire than that of having killed her husband.

The superimposition of Brigit's voice with the priest's words and above all with the comments of Annie and the pupils has the function of revealing the deceptive ideology underlying the "mythical" celebration of Brigit's isolation in a cell as small as a tomb. It reveals how this discourse is rooted in the cultural and historical context of the time (13th century A.D.), depriving the narrative of that universalizing power with which the myths are imbued.[17]

The reciprocity of the roles that the communication between Annie and Brigit constitutes allows them to exchange roles and us to build a comparison between to different historical contexts. By listening to the telling of their memories of isolation and removal and being witnesses of the actions that caused them, as listeners and readers we impress in the darkened proscenium of our minds a fresh way of looking at stories of women who have been removed from their home because

gion at times when Christianity was still central in Western culture, see Watt (1997) and Mullini (1999) for the Middle Ages; and Wiesner-Hanks (2008) for the Early Modern Age.

[16] See Castagna (2007).

[17] On the demystifying value of feminist revisitations of texts that can be defined as mythical, see Larrington (1992).

they dared to experience their desire freely. It is by being in literary «communication with others», to borrow Assman's words (1995), that the single memories of a medieval anchorite and a 21st century teacher keep existing. Thanks to the correlation between their stories as belonging to individuals from a specific social group (women), we can conceive their unity as based on the sharing of a common past, in spite of their historical distance, so that through the bond between memory, culture and social belonging the voice of collective memory resonates in the theatre of our minds.

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