A Primer for Forgetting

Getting Past the Past

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Begin Reading

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FOR PATSY

WHAT THIS IS

Many years ago, reading about the old oral cultures where wisdom and history lived not in books but on the tongue, I found my curiosity aroused by one brief remark. "Oral societies," I read, keep themselves "in equilibrium ... by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance." My interest at the time was in memory itself, in the valuable ways that persons and cultures keep the past in mind, but here was a contrary note, one that clearly stirred my own contrary spirit, for I began to keep scrapbooks of other cases in which letting go of the past proves to be at least as useful as preserving it.

This book, the late fruit of those gleanings, has turned out to be an experiment in both thought and form. The thought experiment seeks to test the proposition that forgetfulness can be more useful than memory or, at the very least, that memory functions best in tandem with forgetting. To praise forgetting is not, of course, the same as speaking against memory; any experiment worth conducting ought sometimes to yield negative or null results, and mine is no exception. Readers will surely find instances, as I did, where they'll want to draw the line and say, "No, here we must remember" (though, ironically, stirring up resistance to forgetting can itself be one of the uses of forgetting).

As for the form, I decided to build on my scrapbooks rather than mine their content for a more conventional narrative. I have written three long books—*The Gift*, *Trickster Makes This World*, and *Common as Air*—each of which spends over three hundred pages defending its central proposition. Having done that kind of work for years, I found myself weary of argument, tired of striving for mastery, of marshaling the evidence, of drilling down to bedrock to anchor every claim, of inventing transitions to mask the native jumpiness of my mind, of defending myself against imaginary swarms of critics.... What a relief to make a book whose free associations are happily foregrounded, a book that does not so much argue its point of departure as more simply sketch the territory I have been exploring, a book that I hope will both invite and provoke a reader's own free reflections.

The citations, aphorisms, anecdotes, stories, and reflections that are the stuff of my episodic form I have grouped around four focal points: mythology, personal psychology, politics, and the creative spirit. Most of the entries are brief—just a page or two—but once I got serious about making a book out of them, it became clear that several would need fuller elaboration. In "Notebook I: Myth," for example, there's an extended portrait of what happened in Athens around 400 B.C.E., when a legal form of forgetting—what we now call amnesty—helped secure the peace after a brutal civil war. Toward the end of "Notebook II: Self," I recount the story of a racially motivated double murder committed in Mississippi in 1964, one that left the victims' kin struggling to lay traumatic memory to rest.

Several of the political cases presented in "Notebook III: Nation" also called for longer treatment, from the struggle over how Americans both remember and forget their Civil War to the "truth and reconciliation" work that followed South Africa's many decades of apartheid. "Notebook IV: Creation" mixes episodes from spiritual life

and from artistic practice, the longer of these reflecting on the uses of forgetfulness in Saint Augustine, in Zen master Dogen, and in Marcel Proust (in whose work the famous moments of involuntary memory carry their redemptive force only because they have been at first forgotten).

I have also mixed a number of images into the book's otherwise prose collage. Having always been a bit jealous of artists and art historians who get to darken the lecture hall and adorn their ideas with a magic lantern show, I was led to invent my own imaginary Museum of Forgetting and to stock it with works of art, each accompanied by explanatory wall text.

Readers often ask what drew the writer to the work at hand, seeming to expect it to have arisen from some difficult personal history. To be sure, one sorrow from my own life—my mother's old-age dementia—figures in the book. So do some other marked events—the death of a sibling, my own connection to those Mississippi murders.... But none of these gave rise to this book. Its true roots lie in the enigma of its topic.

Memory and forgetting: these are the faculties of mind by which we are aware of time, and time is a mystery. In addition, a long tradition holds that the imagination is best conceived as operating with a mixture of memory and forgetting. Creation—things coming into being that never were before—that too is a mystery. Writers like me who work very slowly are well advised to settle on topics such as these, topics whose fascination may never be exhausted. Such authors do not simply tell us what they know; they invite us to join them in fronting the necessary limits of our knowing.

NOTEBOOK I

Myth

The Liquefaction of Time

The Aphorisms

Every act of memory is an act of forgetting.

The tree of memory set its roots in blood.

To secure an ideal, surround it with a moat of forgetfulness.

To study the self is to forget the self.

In forgetting lies the liquefaction of time.

The Furies bloat the present with the undigested past.

"Memory and oblivion, we call that imagination."

We dream in order to forget.

TO THE READER. "Whoever wants really to get to know a new idea does well to take it up with all possible love, to avert the eye quickly from, even to forget, everything about it that is objectionable or false. We should give the author of a book the greatest possible head start and, as if at a race, virtually yearn with a pounding heart for him to reach his goal. By doing this, we penetrate into the heart of the new idea, into its motive center: and this is what it means to get to know it. Later, reason may set its limits, but at the start that overestimation, that occasional unhinging of the critical pendulum, is the device needed to entice the soul of the matter into the open," says Nietzsche.

MIRACULOUS. Replying to a question about the effort he put into composing with chance operations, John Cage said, "It's an attempt to open our minds to possibilities other than the ones we remember, and the ones we already know we like. Something has to be done to get us free of our memories and choices."

Or he once said, "This is ... why it is so difficult to listen to music we are familiar with; memory has acted to keep us aware of what will happen next, and so it is almost impossible to remain alive in the presence of a well-known masterpiece. Now and then it happens, and when it does, it partakes of the miraculous."

In a nod to his long interest in Buddhist teachings, Cage once released an audio disc titled *The Ten Thousand Things*, that phrase being the formula by which the old dharma texts refer to the whole of existence, to the fullness of what is, as in the teaching of the thirteenth-century Japanese Zen master Dogen: "To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to become one with the ten thousand things."

Note the sequence: First comes study, then forgetting. There is a path to be taken, a practice of self-forgetfulness.

THE TWIN GODDESS. Every act of memory is also an act of forgetting. In Hesiod's *Theogony*, Mnemosyne, the mother of the Muses, is not simply Memory, for even as she helps humankind to remember the golden age, she helps them to forget the Age of Iron they now must occupy. Bardic song was meant to induce those twin states: "For though a man have sorrow and grief..., yet, when a singer, the servant of the Muses, chants the glorious deeds of men of old and the blessed gods who inhabit Olympus, at once he forgets his heaviness and remembers not his sorrows at all."

Both memory and forgetting are here dedicated to the preservation of ideals. What drops into oblivion under the bardic spell is the fatigue, wretchedness, and anxiety of the present moment, its unrefined particularity, and what rises into consciousness is knowledge of the better world that lies hidden beyond this one.

I MANUMIT. I HIDE. Let us imagine forgetting by way of two etymologies. The roots of the English "forget" go back to Old High German, where the *for-* prefix indicates abstaining from or neglecting and the Germanic **getan* means "to hold" or "to grasp." To remember is to latch on to something, to hold it in mind; to forget is to let it slip from consciousness, to drop it. All things grasped by mistake (a wrong impression, a hidden wasp) or by nature slippery (the eels of the mind) or overworked and confined (mind slaves, caged birds) or useless mental furniture (old phone numbers, hobbyhorses) or worn-out attitudes (self-importance, resentment)..., in every case to forget is to stop holding on, to open the hand of thought.

Greek terms present a different set of images, not letting go, but erasing, covering up, or hiding (the trail washed away by rain, the love letter thrown in the fire, the buried scat, the wound scabbed over, the gravestone obscured by vines). Forgetfulness in Greek is *lethe*, in turn related to *letho*, *λήθω* (I escape notice, I am hidden), ultimately from Proto-Indo-European **leh*$_2$- (to hide). The privative or negative form of this word, *a-lethe* or *aletheia*, is the Greek word usually translated as "truth," the truth then being a thing uncovered or taken out of hiding. In terms of mental life, all that is available to the mind is *aletheia*; what is not available is for some reason covered, concealed, hidden.

MID-AUGUST AT SOURDOUGH MOUNTAIN LOOKOUT

Down valley a smoke haze
Three days heat, after five days rain
Pitch glows on the fir-cones
Across rocks and meadows
Swarms of new flies.

I cannot remember things I once read
A few friends, but they are in cities.
Drinking cold snow-water from a tin cup
Looking down for miles
Through high still air.

—Gary Snyder

IN THE DESERT. Paul Bowles says that as soon as you arrive in the Sahara you notice the stillness, the "incredible, absolute silence," especially if "you leave the gate of the fort or the town behind, pass the camels lying outside, go up into the dunes, or out onto the hard, stony plain and stand awhile, alone. Presently, you will either shiver and hurry back inside the walls, or you will go on standing there and let something very peculiar happen to you, something that everyone who lives there has undergone and which the French call *le baptême de la solitude*. It is a unique sensation, and it has nothing to do with loneliness, for loneliness presupposes memory. Here, in this wholly mineral landscape lighted by stars like flares, even memory disappears; nothing is left but your own breathing and the sound of your heart beating."

A STORY OUT OF PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*. A soldier by the name of Er was killed in battle. Days later, as his body lay on the funeral pyre, he came back to life and told of all he had seen in the Land of the Dead.

When his soul had arrived in the otherworld he was told to watch and listen so that he might return as a messenger to the living. He then witnessed the punishing of the wicked and the rewarding of the just. And he saw how all these souls convened to be born again, sometimes after having journeyed in the underworld for a thousand years.

He saw how all were given a chance to choose their lot in life and how they did so according to their wisdom or their foolishness. Their lots having been chosen, and the Fates having spun the threads of each one's irreversible destiny, they proceeded together in dry and stifling heat across the desert of Lethe. In the evening, they camped by the River of Forgetfulness, whose water no vessel can contain. Great thirst drove them to drink this water—those without wisdom drinking especially deeply. As each man drank, he forgot everything.

Then they slept. During the night, an earthquake came, and thunder, and all were swept up to their next life like a showering of stars.

At the River of Forgetfulness, Er himself was forbidden to drink. He slept, and when he opened his eyes, he found himself lying on the funeral pyre, the sun rising.

"A MUSICAL INSTRUMENT REMINDING YOU..." The myth of Er fits neatly with Plato's theory of knowledge, in which the unborn soul, following "in the train of a god," comes to know the "absolute realities," the ideal forms such as beauty, goodness, justice, equality. This knowledge is lost at birth, however, the soul having met "with some mischance," become "burdened with a load of forgetfulness," and fallen to earth.

Born into this life, those who seek to recover their lost wisdom need to find a teacher whose task is not to directly teach ideals but rather to remind the student of what the soul already knows. "What we call learning is really just recollection," says Socrates in the *Phaedo*. It's *anamnesis*, or un-forgetting, the dis-covering of things hidden in the mind.

Just as when I see a guitar in a shop window and suddenly remember a dream that I forgot when I woke up, so too the student is directed to the particulars of this world that they might trigger recollection of the previously known noble ideals. "At last, in a flash, understanding of each blazes up, and the mind ... is flooded with light."

TO SECURE AN IDEAL, surround it with a moat of forgetfulness.

AMERICAN EPISTEMOLOGY. An early chapter of Herman Melville's *Confidence-Man* describes an encounter between a man wearing mourning clothes (the con man himself) and a country merchant. When the man in mourning introduces himself as an old acquaintance, the merchant protests: he has no recollection of their ever meeting.

"I see you have a faithless memory," says the con man. "But trust in the faithfulness of mine."

"Well, to tell the truth, in some things my memory ain't of the very best," replies the puzzled merchant.

"I see, I see; quite erased from the tablet," says the con man. "About six years back, did it happen to you to receive any injury on the head? Surprising effects have arisen from such a cause. Not alone unconsciousness..., but likewise—strange to add—oblivion, entire and incurable."

He himself, the con man says, was once kicked by a horse and couldn't remember a thing about it, relying on friends to tell him what happened. "You see, sir, the mind is ductile, very much so: but images, ductilely received into it, need a certain time to harden and bake in their impressions.... We are but clay, sir, potter's clay."

Drawn in, the merchant confesses that, yes, he once suffered a brain fever and lost his mind for quite some time.

"There now, you see, I was not wholly mistaken. That brain fever accounts for it all," replies the man in mourning. How sad that the merchant has forgotten their friendship! And, by the way, would he mind loaning "a brother" a shilling?

★ ★ ★

The whole of *The Confidence-Man* is a Platonic dialogue for a fallen age. Every episode hangs on the question, should we or shouldn't we have confidence in the story being told? How are we to know the truth? In the case at hand, the con man's key move is the erasure of memory; that allows him to detach his claim of old acquaintanceship from the world of empirical knowledge whereupon its veracity becomes a matter of faith. Having accepted the con man's suggestion—yes, there was brain-fever forgetfulness—the merchant is left with little to go on but the story at hand. And the con man is an artful storyteller. In another country and another time, he could have been a great novelist, but he is on the Mississippi River in the mid-nineteenth century and he's given himself over to toying with the locals.

Having severed the merchant's ties to his own recollections, the con man moves in close. "I want a friend in whom I may confide," he says, and begins to unfold the sad story of his recent grief. Before too long the country merchant finds himself moved beyond the solicited shilling: "As the story went on, he drew from his wallet a bank note, but after a while, at some still more unhappy revelation, changed it for another, probably of a somewhat larger amount."

In Melville's America, it's not light flooding the mind that's the mark of true belief; it's money changing hands.

TO SECURE A LIE, surround it with a moat of forgetfulness.

CIRCLES. Dinner at the round mahogany table that Mother and Father bought in London fifty years ago. Father has read a book about the erosion of ocean beaches on the East Coast. Mother says, "That book never mentions the hurricane of '38." She was nineteen that year and in college at Mount Holyoke. "I don't know how I knew it," she says, "but I knew there was an eye to the storm, and so I made my way to Safford Hall." Two minutes later she says, "That book never mentions the hurricane of '38. I don't know how I knew it, but I knew there was an eye to the storm, and so I made my way to Safford Hall." Later she says, "That book never mentions the hurricane of '38. I don't know how I knew it, but I knew there was an eye to the storm, and so I made my way to Safford Hall."

"You're going in circles," Father says. They say the CAT scan showed some atrophy of her frontal lobes, but the old material is still there. She is very much her old self. Her verbal tics and defenses remain. "Well, now, Mrs. Pettibone," she says to herself, staring into the refrigerator before dinner. "We'll cope." "We'll get along." She is the shell of her old self, calcified language and no organism alive enough to lay down new layers.

Would it be possible to live in such a way as to never acquire habits of mind? When my short-term memory goes, I don't want to be penned up in the wickerwork of my rote responses. If I start being my old self, no heroic measures, please.

REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE. Says Jorge Luis Borges, "I should say I am greedy for death, that I want to stop waking up every morning, finding: Well, here I am, I have to go back to Borges.

"There's a word in Spanish.... Instead of saying 'to wake up,' you say *recordarse*, that is, to record yourself, to remember yourself.... Every morning I get that feeling because I am more or less nonexistent. Then when I wake up, I always feel I'm being let down. Because, well, here I am. Here's the same old stupid game going on. I have to be somebody. I have to be exactly that somebody."

THE TWO WATERS—AN ORACLE. In his second-century *Description of Greece*, the historian Pausanias tells us that a certain Trophonios—perhaps a hero, perhaps a god, but in any event a power (the name means "Nourisher of the Mind")—had an oracle at Labadie. Any man wanting to inquire about the future would descend into Trophonios's cave having first purified himself for several days, bathing only in the river Herkyna and making sacrifices, especially the sacrifice of a ram whose entrails would reveal whether the inquiry would be graciously received.

On the night of his descent, the petitioner would be taken to the river by two young boys who would wash and anoint him with oil. Priests would then lead him to two fountains standing near each other. From these he would drink the Water of Lethe so as to forget his past and the Water of Mnemosyne so as to recall all he saw during his descent. Dressed in linen, he would then climb a ladder down into the chasm, lie on his back, thrust his legs feetfirst into a hole, the rest of his body being swiftly drawn in like that of a man pulled under by the current of a fast-flowing river.

Later, having learned of the future, he would be swept upward again, his feet darting first out of the same opening. The priests would set him on the Chair of Memory, where, paralyzed with fear and unaware of himself and his surroundings, he would speak what he had seen and heard. Then he would be given over to his relatives, who would care for him until he recovered the ability to laugh.

The two waters of Trophonios's oracle differ from those of the Petelia tablet and other Orphic poems giving instruction to the dead. In the Orphic case, a choice has to be made: forgetfulness must be avoided, memory alone offering a path out of this world. In the case of this oracle, on the other hand, the two waters appear in a sequence and are complementary, not contradictory. They bespeak the conjoining or the ambiguity of Forgetting/Not-Forgetting, Covering/Discovering, *Lethe/Aletheia*, each power inseparable from and shadowed by the other. Supplicants do not choose between the two but instead become vessels in which the waters are held in a single solution.

What is the sign or the mark of those who have drunk that blend of Memory and Forgetting? Here it is laughter.

IT DISAPPEARS. "To study the Buddha Way is to study the self," writes Dogen Zenji, thirteenth-century Japanese Zen master. And "to study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be verified by all things." "To study" could be translated as "to become intimate with." Translating the second line has its own complications. Some say that forgetting the self is "to become one with the ten thousand things"; some say it's "to be enlightened."

In the Chinese version of Dogen's original text, the character for "forget" is made of two elements: the lower half indicates "heart/mind," while the upper half means "to become invisible, perish, lose." The oldest rendering of this upper part, found on oracle bones dating back three or four thousand years, is a bit of a pictogram: it inserts a vertical line beside the sign for "person" so as to indicate a person hidden behind something and thus invisible.

When something is forgotten, the heart/mind no longer sees it. You could therefore translate Dogen's "self-forgetting" this way: "When we study the self ... it disappears."

"INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE COOK." Zen master Eihei Dogen, the man whose writings include the aphorism "to study the self is to forget the self," was born in Japan in the year A.D. 1200. He entered a monastery when he was about thirteen, eventually working with a teacher who had been to China and knew the lineage of Chinese Zen. In 1223, Dogen himself traveled to China. The journey was rough, and Dogen got sick, so he stayed onboard to recover after reaching the port.

One day, the cook from a local monastery came to the ship to buy Japanese mushrooms for a noodle soup he was going to make for the monks. The man was old, he had walked a dozen miles to make his purchase, and ahead of him lay a long return journey. Dogen suggested he spend the night; surely his kitchen duties could wait. "Why don't you study the words of the ancient masters rather than troubling yourself by being the cook?" Dogen asked.

The man laughed. "Good man from a foreign country, you do not yet understand practice or know the meaning of the words of ancient masters."

Dogen felt ashamed. "What are words? What is practice?" he asked.

"If you penetrate your questions, you can't fail to become a person of understanding," the cook replied. "The sun will soon be down. I must hurry." And he left.

The revelation for Dogen was that Buddhist practice does not consist in studying the sutras and staying up all night enjoying subtle points of doctrine. Every mindful action is practice—walking a long distance, making noodle soup, buying mushrooms.

Dogen's later discourse, "Instructions for the Cook," clarifies the lesson. Every action can express the Buddha Way, no matter how ordinary. To be a monastery cook "is a buddha's practice." All that's needed is the presence of the Way-seeking mind—the one that does not make a drama out of its likes and dislikes or amuse itself with words. "Do not arouse disdainful mind when you prepare a broth of wild grasses; do not arouse joyful mind when you prepare a fine cream soup.... If this is not yet clear to you it is because your thoughts run around like a wild horse and your feelings jump about like a monkey in the forest."

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*Please note some of the links referenced throughout this work may no longer be active.

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