The Communicative Value of Forgetting

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that sights of objects in the world and its representations makes time disappear into space, same as the oblivion of time. The main purpose of the paper is to show the dialectic of memory and forgetting within individual consciousness. Forgetting is not the loss of memory but an essential component of memory itself. Forgetfulness like memory embodies also its temporality: the three temporal figures of forgetting are the return, the abeyance and the recommencement. Among the diseases of memory we distinguish partial and global amnesias, and hypermnésias. The phenomenon of illusion of memory or ‘false memory’ shows the insufficiency of the naturalistic or cognitivistic theory of memory. In this respect we have to evaluate the theory of forgetting as the effacement of traces. The paper defends rather a pragmatic approach by studying the ‘exercise of memory’ in all its forms, especially blocked memory, manipulated memory and commanded memory.

KEYWORDS

Space and the oblivion of time, diseases of memory, the cognitive and pragmatic conception of memory, labour of memory, forgetting and communicating.

SPACE IS THE OBLIVION OF TIME

I contemplate the spectacle of things around me, sitting at my desk, my computer, my antique souvenirs, my library, a few photographs, an urban landscape, the trees with yellowing leaves in a park across my window and the radiating sun. This contemplation is a descent into duration. From the sun and its billions of years, from the age-old trees, from the 19th century street, from my photographs and books collected throughout the last four decennia, from my one year old computer, a time scale plunges on my shoulders and...
runs, like a waterfall, towards me. There is spatial stability in this everyday spectacle that surrounds me but there is also a dense and bewildering temporal profundity. The duration conditions the theatrical decorum around me, the geography unfolding in this stable space, but one does not notice it. One does not realize that the sun, the trees, the street, the books, my computer are temporal layers, an entire history that goes from billions of years old for the sun and the surrounding universe to my merely one year computer. The sight of objects in the world and its representations makes time disappear into space, dissolving, dissimulating it. The theatrical scene of spatial presentations covers the intuition of duration. Space makes us forget time and, nevertheless, this space is a mosaic of diverse temporalities, rhythms and tempos. The time of days, seasons, years, these different and heterogenous times are domesticated by inert space. These fragments of reality, each of a different age and time, freeze, stacked and mixed together in a synchronic spectacle. Time loses itself into space. Space is the oblivion of time.

Our own body, in its biological properties, and the bodies of others occupying one and the same space, has the age of everything that is inherited from other generations and that, layer after layer, stratum after stratum, is pushed more and more into the past! There is a tremendous slowness of the composition of our body and its long chains of molecules. Who, when experiencing his or her own body, is aware of the diachrony of the gestation of corporeal matter? The body, in a way, is as old as the Earth. One cannot think the "instant" of the body without referring to its duration. The body includes thousands of watches, cardiac, digestive, nervous, which, as one knows, go off balance during a time difference. Disoriented by a long flight, the time of the body's watches is maladjusted. Here is a real experience of the time of our body that the four great philosophers of time – Aristotle, Augustine, Husserl and Bergson – never had, since they never flew across the ocean … And some aesthetic experiences make us descend into the immemorial duration of our bodiliness: listening to a sonata, a quartet, for one's pleasure, brings temporality into the space of our body, appealing to the internal, proprioceptive sense of the body. Descend further in oneself to rediscover the time buried in the spatio-bodily cover and to provoke the awakening of idle memories. Listening to music makes us remember the duration that cannot be reduced to space. It is a remedy against the spatializing amnesia that turns us blind to the temporalities inscribed in the body and in nature.

Space as the oblivion of time, as a certain oblivion of time, a certain amnesia, a certain loss of memory. It's about genotypic memory, profound in a different sense than my personal or even collective memory, and different than the memory of cultural objects. The fact that space generates the oblivion of time means, first of all, the great narrative of the time of nature and of the body. But the theme of this paper is less "cosmic", less "biological". The issue is not the time of the combination of hydrogens in the proteins of my cells, nor the tempo of the billions of years of the universe. Indeed, one should keep in mind that nature is a place of memory, just like our living organisms are. But let me look now into the direction of more humanly socio-psychological phenomena. Let me rather discuss the memory of my childhood and of my first love affairs, a peculiarly dark region of forgetting. A personal, subjective treasure that goes back just a few decennia. This memory is still different from the memory that is grafted into the cultural collectivity, dispersed on objective supports, vestiges, skeletons, rests and tools, books and archives, the memory that makes me take part in social life and in human history. This collective
memory is not about a few decennia as it is the case with my personal memory but rather about centuries and millennia: Lascaux, Lucy, Machu Picchu and Abou Simbel, Stendhal and Debussy. The first memorial treasure I introduced, the genotypic memory, awakens the world, nature and the body; the second memorial treasure awakens the surrounding cultures while the third memorial treasure awakens the intimate time of the individual consciousness. This paper will be dedicated especially to the dialectic of memory and forgetting within the individual consciousness, or, even better, to memory as the faculty of forgetting.

“MEMORY IS A FACULTY THAT FORGETS” (BERGSON)

In the case of memory, the contrary is part of its significance. Remembering means “not to forget”. The shadow of the negative goes together with memory. Let us approach the lively force of forgetting. The most powerful parable of forgetting comes from the peaks of Greek mythology (Hesiod, Pindar). Lethe is a feminine divinity often opposed to Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory and of the muses. Lethe is above all the name of a river from Hades that offers forgetting to the souls of the dead. Metaphorically, forgetting is simply merged with the liquid and fluid element that is water. It is the harsh reality that is liquified and is lost through liquefaction in the smoothness of the perpetual flow. The classical authors do not agree regarding the topography of the Lethe River in the underworld, but Lethe is often situated close to Champs Elysées. Remember Aeneas’ descent into the Inferno, from Chapter VI of the Aeneid: Aeneas meets his father Anchises who explains to him the topography of Lethe and the meaning of the mysterious events that take place there; and Anchises says: “The souls […] drink at the water of Lethe’s stream, they drink the soothing draught and long forgetfulness (animae […] securos latices et longa oblivia potant)”. The Virgilian context suggests that the souls, after having left behind them their earthly bodies, get ready to occupy other bodies. They will live another life with a completely new memory. Virgil sketches a rather euphoric parable of Lethe and Dante, just like Petrarch, also exploit this phoria.

But there is also the insistence of the dysphoric side: it is often said that one should not drink from the Lethe but from the fountain of Memory. Memory is the antidote of Forgetting. It is true that in general our philosophies do not favour forgetting. Augustine, more than anyone, laments the forces of forgetting. Forgetfulness that does not cease to haunt the memory and its power, forgetfulness, this predator of time that buries our memories. And to the author of the Confessions, it is memory, at the moment of recognizing the forgotten object, which testifies of forgetting. The forgetfulness that memory resists, is there to remind one that there is no absolutely happy memory. Forgetting oscillates between the complete effacement and the consciousness of available but inaccessible recollections.

Indeed, there is always the threat of the radical effacement of traces, the thread of ultimate forgetting. But there are surely forms of forgetting that do not disclose the effacement of traces but bad consciousness and simulacrum. Nevertheless, there remains the menace of an irreversible forgetting that gives memory its dramatic character. Forgetfulness is the enemy of memory and memory is often a hopeless effort to escape the destruction of forgetting. And then there is Freud – the purpose of psychoanalysis is to fill in the memory gaps and it is thus a therapy that conquers forgetting. And Heidegger: the
andenken or “commemorative thought” is an effort to transcend the forgetfulness of Being. Nietzsche, on the contrary, is exceptionally positive towards forgetting. According to Nietzsche, one has to cultivate forgetfulness so that the wounds of life are eradicated. The rigid memory imposed by the law is often disquieting and Nietzsche teaches us to free ourselves from this culture of memory in order to live: “Blessed are the forgetful”, he observes. But against Nietzsche, one can raise the objection that, if there is necessity of memory so that there is community, there is certainly a necessity of forgetting as well. Memory and forgetting are interdependent and in order not to lose either memory or curiosity, one must not forget to forget. It is imprecise to state that forgetting is the loss of memory, and to affirm that memory is the norm and forgetting the repression, the denial. One implies then that forgetting, even in its forms of indifference, forgiveness and neglect, is on the side of death while memory would be on the side of life. But it happens that life and death, just like memory and forgetting, define only one in relation to the other. Death, without doubt, is the horizon of any individual life, and it is felt as far as into the quotidian as constituting the feeling of life. Such is the reciprocal relation of life and death, of memory and forgetting.

Therefore forgetting is not the loss of memory but an essential component of memory itself. Forgetting shapes memory like the sea shapes the shores. Forgetting is as necessary to the individual as it is to society. If we here speak highly of forgetfulness, it is not in order to ignore memory but to locate the work of forgetting inside memory. This work of forgetting is one of selection: in order for memory to blossom, some reminiscences have to be eliminated. This is nothing bad in itself. Forgetting a reminiscence is not yet forgetting a fact, an account, a sensible quality, all in their absolute and independent exteriority, but rather a certain treatment, a certain interpretation of the fact, the account and the sensible quality. In many cases, forgetting does not mean just selecting but also rectifying according to a larger coherence, to a more authentic familiarity.

In this respect, psychoanalysis tends to think that we forget less than we fear that we do and that, at the price of a certain labour, we can recover and reappropriate entire pieces of recollections. The Freudian doctrine is to a large extent a reflection on the relation between memory and forgetting. And forgetfulness accompanies each phase of the reflection on memory. In general forgetting is considered as the effacement of traces, and under this form it is irrecoverable. Psychoanalysis confronts us with an entirely different situation: the idea of seemingly forgetting, forgetfulness at the unconscious level that appears to be the work of repression. This active forgetting, which makes of recollection a “labour” is thus at the core of the theory of the unconscious. At the level of consciousness, however, these psychoanalytical views on forgetting could be received with concern – is thus the conscious subject not master in his own house? – but also with confidence – finally, we will forget less than we might fear.

THE DAUGHTERS OF FORGETTING

Forgetfulness, like memory, embodies also its temporality. If memory requires forgetting, it is also in order to restructure time: to focus intentionality on the savour of the instant present or on the joy of expectation one has to “forget” other temporal dimensions. And conversely, our relation to time passes fundamentally through forgetting. We know since Augustine that the three devices
that freeze time – the memory of the past, the attention in the present, the
expectation of the future – intertwine. No dimension of time can be concep-
tualised in abstraction of the others. It is in this way that the tension between
memory and expectation characterizes the present insofar as it organizes
the passage from a before to an after. In his admirable essay The Forms of
Forgetfulness, Marc Augé distinguishes from this observation three “figures” of
forgetting, the “three daughters of forgetting”. The return is the first daugh-
ter of forgetting. The initial ambition of the return is to regain the past time,
which requires the forgetting of the present and the existential temporality
that merges with it. And it is by forgetting the present that the return is capa-
ble to reestablish a continuity with the most distant past. The abeyance is the
second daughter of forgetting. Its ambition is to live the time of the present
by at least provisionally cutting it off from the past and the future. The abey-
ance consists in an aesthetisation of the instant present, rather artificial, where
the dimensions of past and future are bracketed (“forgotten”) according to
an existential hypostasis of the now. The (re)commencement, third daughter of
forgetting, aspires to create the conditions of a birth or a rebirth, an opening
to all possible futures. In this case, forgetting consists in the reduction of the
dimensions of past and present. Mythically, it is the time of departure, of the
journey and of its oblivions.

THE DISEASES OF MEMORY

The three daughters of memory spread procedures of forgetting that are
common in daily life. In order to better understand them, let us make a
detour to the memory’s diseases, or, less dramatic, to the memory’s distortions,
to the emplacement of false memories, to the amnesias and the hypermnesias.
Descriptive psychology’s interests in the diseases of memory were built up at
the end of the 19th century within the framework of a conception of memory as
biological fact. Combining Schopenhauerian intuitions with biologizing positiv-
ism, Théodule Ribot can be considered to be the key figure of the psychol-
ogy of the individual that deals with will, attention, creative imagination,
emotions and passions, and with memory. In 1881, he published a mono-
graph entitled The Diseases of Memory where he formulates quite adequate
conclusions. I quote Ribot:

Thus we reach the paradoxical result that forgetfulness is a condition of
memory. Were it not for our totally forgetting a vast number of states of
consciousness and momentarily forgetting a great many, we could not
recollect anything. Forgetfulness therefore is not, except in certain cases,
a disease of memory, but rather one condition of its healthful action and
of its life. In this we find a striking analogy with the two great vital proc-
esses. To live is to gain and to lose; life consists as much in the work that
eliminates as in that which assimilates. Forgetfulness is elimination.7

But accepting that the essential forgetting is not a disease of memory, one still
learns a great deal about the nature of memory by studying its pathologies,
the amnesias and the hypermnesias. Certain disturbances of memory are limited
to one single set of recollections and leave the rest untouched: these are the
partial amnesias. Others, to the contrary, affect the entire memory in all forms
and they injure severely our mental life by destroying it: these are the global
amnesias. The partial amnesias are doubtlessly more interesting from a heuristic
point of view if one wants to understand the nature of memory. Everyone
knows these wonderful and, at the first sight, inexplicable phenomena. That
one loses just the memory of words, that one forgets just one language but
keeps the other ones or that a language that one has forgotten for a long
time is suddenly remembered, that one loses only his or her musical memory
seems strange and inexplicable. This phenomena of “partial memory loss”
corresponds to other wonders, like “partial memory”, the one of Mozart who
transcribes the *Miserere* in the Sistine Chapel after having twice listened to it,
or of the great virtuous pianists that play the five piano concertos of Prokofiev
in a row and by heart, or of the chess players that play, in their mind, two or
three games at the same time ... And this “exceptional memory” can be very
specialized: one has a good “visual memory” either of pictorial colours or of
forms, an excellent memory for one or for another sensorial field: a memory of
hearing, or of tasting, or of smelling, or of touching, a special memory equally
for the psychic states of a superior order: abstract ideas, complex feelings that
cannot be linked to any organ or sense. The inequality of memories in the
same person is the rule and not the exception. Consequently, it seems that
most of the analyses in descriptive psychology are about local memories, in a
dispersed localization and without any apparent structuring.

Let us approach now the pathology. In a normal state, as we saw, the
diverse domains of memory have a relative independence, but the same can be
true in the pathological states where one domain can disappear while others
remain intact. We just have to look at cases of partial amnesia, for instance the
forgetting of signs, figures, names, numbers through an irreversible destruc-
tion or through temporary suspension. Or otherwise, loss of the memory of
abstraction or of motor memory separately, or, more often, an amnesia of the
joint idea, sign and motor capability, which of course is a consequently more
radical amnesia. Are there general laws in this domain? For example, that the
memory of emotions disappears later than the memory of ideas? And accord-
ingly, that the language of emotions disappears after the language of ideas? The
explanatory hypothesis of this phenomenon would simply be that the affective
language of emotions is formed before the language of ideas, and so that the
former disappears after the latter. If one accepts that *aphasia* is an *amnesia*, one
can argue within the perspective of the historical development of languages,
that the dissolution of language in aphasics happened, as one can expect, in
an order that is opposite to the one of the historical evolution of languages.
The primitive form of the sign is the affirmation of quality (verbs, nouns and
adjectives), followed by the indication of positional relations (pronouns and
adverbs) and finally by the transformation of common names into proper
names. The stages of the dissolution in the aphasic unfold in the reverse order
of the historical evolution of languages: first there is the loss of the memory of
proper names, then of the memory of pronouns and adverbs, and finally of the
memory of categories of quality (verbs, adjectives and nouns).

There is a pathology of memory that is not destructive but, on the contrary,
resuscitating, intensifying. The exaltation of memory or *hypermnesia* is at least
an unusual but often creative anomaly. The degree of excitation of memory
is entirely relative from one person to the other, and there is no common
measure in this domain: one’s amnesia can be the other’s hypermnesia. Clearly
pathological cases like maniac excitation in ecstasy or in hypnotism or due to
intoxication are possibly not the most interesting cases of the overexcitement
of memory. More enigmatic are the permanent but partial hypermniesias, the
hypermnesia of the artist who develops an extraordinary, creative and localized
memory of reminiscences from childhood and adolescence, for instance, as with Proust’s Marcel. Hypermnesiacs develop often an extraordinary creativity. Should one conclude from these intensified memorial experiences that in fact memory in these privileged cases of hypermnesia loses nothing, absolutely nothing? That even the most fleeting impression can always be revived at a given time? That what once entered remains indestructible? In 1942 Jorge Luis Borges created a remarkable character who serves as the prototype of the hypermnesiac. The hero of Funes the Memorious is an uneducated peasant whose memory excessively increases due to a fall from his horse. In a short amount of time the paralytic peasant learns Latin, English, French and Portuguese, he memorizes without any effort endless lists of words and numbers and he remembers not only every tree that he has seen in his life but even each leaf of every tree. Nevertheless, Funes suffers gravely from this overabundance of particular details that his flawless memory has recorded. It became impossible for him to sleep since, the author comments, “to sleep is to turn one’s mind from the world” (dormir es distraerse del mundo). Indeed, sleeping requires the art of forgetting. However, there are a few strategies of forgetting available to Funes, like “he would [… ] imagine himself at the bottom of the river, rocked and annihilated by the current,” surely an allusion to the mythical river of Lethe. This is a perfect illustration of an extreme hypermnesia pathology.

The positivist psychology which accounts for memory in terms of cellular modifications, in fact as a biological phenomenon, offers a naturalistic answer that doubtlessly does not exhaust the richness and the variety of phenomena. How does one explain, for instance, within this naturalistic paradigm the phenomenon of “illusion of memory” or “false memory”? The latter consists in believing that a new state was actually previously felt so that, while it takes place for the first time, it seems like a repetition, for instance, when one has the feeling of formerly having witnessed and having contemplated the same spectacle. This illusion is explained by the fact that the received impression evokes in our mind analogue, vague, confused emotions that are sufficient to give the impression that the new state is its repetition. There is a common background that urges one to identify two states of consciousness. How to explain the mechanism of “false recognition”? Explaining the intensity of memory as a hallucinatory state is not enough: “false recognition” is less dramatic, even though frequent and hardly abnormal, and one does not come to believe that hypermnesia, in all its positivity (in everyday life as in artistic production), could be completely legitimated by a biological or neurophysiological explanation. We catch our breath with the firm will to escape any cognitivist reductionism. There is an alternative approach: no longer the cognitivist and naturalistic explanation of memory and forgetting but the pragmatic approach; no longer memory as imprint (Platonic труд) but as exercise; no longer forgetting as effacement of the trace but as a motivated and sanctioned labour. Exercise of memory, labour of forgetting, these are the two sides of the pragmatic model of remembering and forgetting.

THE EXERCISE OF MEMORY

Remembering does not just mean acquiring again an image of the past, it rather means searching for it. Memory is “exercised”. The idea of exercise competes with the notion of representation, in the double form of “searching” (zëtësis in the definition that Aristotle gives to anæmnesis) and “affection” (pathos, in its definition of simple mnèmè). There is accordingly an unfolding into a cognitive
dimension (representation, affection) on one side and a pragmatic dimension (exercise, search) on the other. Memory as exercise and search means “the making of memory”. Exercising memory means its use, but if there is use, there is also a troubling vulnerability, namely the fact that memory can be the victim of abuse. I want to say a word about forgetting as the consequence of the abused memory.

In his fundamental work Memory, History, Forgetting Paul Ricoeur distinguishes between three types of memory abuse: blocked memory, manipulated memory and commanded memory (mémoire empêchée, manipulée, obligée). The first one, blocked memory, is a notion introduced from the psychoanalytical and therapeutic clinic of some memory pathologies. The second, manipulated or instrumentalized memory derives from the critique of ideologies. The third, commanded memory, is a phenomenon of ethical-political nature. Here is an overview of these three pragmatic types of abuse imposed upon the exercise of memory.

The blocked memory has a strategic position in the Freudian reflection on the failures of memory: one recalls that for Freud the exercise of memory is essentially perceived as a labour of rememoration. The abuse of memory of which our psyche is largely responsible since it is our psyche that “prevents” rememoration, reveals a wounded, traumatized, scarred memory. The text “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through” (Erinnern, Wiederholen, Durcharbeiten), from 1914, is fundamental for the understanding of the psychoanalytical conception of the exercise of memory. The point of departure of Freud’s reflection resides in the identification of the main obstacle encountered by the work of interpretation (Deutungsarbeit) while remembering traumatic reminiscences. This obstacle is attributed to “resistances of the repressed” (Verdrängungswiderstände) and is designated with the term “compulsion to repeat” (Wiederholungszwang). This “compulsion to repeat” is characterized by a tendency to give way to acting out (Agieren) that for Freud “substitutes memory”. The analysant “reproduces [the forgotten fact] not as a memory but as an action, he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it.” The resistance of the patient turns into acting out rather than remembering. And yet, it is this “work of recollection” (Erinnerungsarbeit) against the compulsion of active repetition that re-establishes the veridical relation of the analysant with his past that is the goal of the psychoanalytical procedure.

The second abuse of memory, following the “blocked” memory, is the manipulated memory. The manipulation of memory is the deed of those in power, instrumentalizing the memory of subjects and imposing their “rationality in conformity to their own purpose” (Zweckrationalität). The memory thus manipulated is as feeble as the identity of the subject himself. Ideologies, and more generally the others felt as a threat, constantly attack the identity of the subject and his memory. Living together brings up confrontations, rejections and exclusions that traumatize the identitarian memory of the subject. The fragile memory of the subject, effectively and symbolically, suffers intensely, and it is dismembered in this environment of founding violence. Ideology opposes the claim of the identity of the subject and proposes public expressions of memory emanating from a system of order and power. Indeed, ideology actually aims at legitimating the authority of order and power by a rhetorical imposition of beliefs. One can easily notice how memory connected with the identity of the subject is manipulable by the violent discourses of ideologies. The subject is almost powerless: memory, from an institutional perspective, is an inculcated memory, it is found inscribed to the advantage of the dominating ideologies.

A third abuse of memory, doubtlessly the most subtle, is the commanded memory. In some radical cases it can be transformed into the duty of memory.
It is certainly an abuse to compel the subjects to remember. One can “create a memory” in a gentle way, without coercion: this is the spontaneous, serene and happy memory. But the command to memory understood as an imperative invitation, seems seriously problematic: how can one say “You have to remember” as if remembering is a task to be accomplished? This duty of memory is often presented as an imperative of justice, and it is difficult to challenge this ethical-political request. It seems then that the imperative of memory is the duty to do justice to the other through remembrance, and there is no moral way to oppose this imperative of justice. There is certainly an abuse in imposing memory as a duty, particularly where forgetting is even an anthropological necessity. Through an excess of obligation of remembrance one abuses memory by separating it from its constitutive double, forgetting.

THE LABOUR OF FORGETTING

Let me now discuss the beneficial aspects of the “labour” or the “art” of forgetting (ars oblivionis). Forgetting is largely felt as an assault on the reliability of memory, as a gap and as fallibility. It means “forgetting” – that the issue of forgetting has to be treated within the dialectics of presence and absence that is at the heart of the very experience of the past. It is of prime importance to state that the experience of forgetting includes a feeling of distance, of remoteness, of presentified absence. How can the experience of forgetting be understood as a feeling of presentified absence? Again, there are two analytic models: the cognitive model where forgetting consists in the effacement of traces (parallel to memory that then consists in the inscription of traces) and the pragmatic model where forgetting is understood rather in terms of obstacle, manipulation, command (parallel to memory as recognizing and reminding). At the first sight, it seems easy to grasp the phenomenon of total and ultimate forgetting within the cognitive model (the radical effacement of traces) while the idea of reversible forgetting, or even the idea of the unforgettable, is more easily conceivable within the pragmatic model. Let us go deeper into this double analysis of forgetting.

How can one conceive of the effacement of psychic traces? One says “psychic trace” in order to distinguish it from the “material” of cortical trace. We are interested not so much in the neuronal architecture of memory and forgetting but in its modes of reappropriation by the subjective consciousness. The absence of the material trace does not bring about any experience of the past. However, it is the experience and the representation of absence and of distance that should interest the theoretician of forgetting. What is then a “psychic” trace? Is it an entirely “metaphorical” trace? It is true that some primary impressions remain in the mind: an event stroke, touched, affected us and the affective trace remains in our spirit. It is in the nature of affections to survive, to persist, to abide, to last while keeping the mark of absence and distance, of anteriority, of temporal profundity. Something must have been maintained from the first impression so that I remember it now. If a reminiscence returns, it is because I have lost it; but if, despite everything, I find it again and I recognize it, it is because its image has survived. This is in fact Bergson’s argument in Matter and Memory: recognition and survival are the two poles of the mnemonic dialectics. But since the traces, in our view, are not “material” but psychic, the issue is no longer the “effacement of traces” but rather a global subjective attitude provoking forgetting. Thus, forgetting represents the unnoticed character of the reminiscence’s perseverance, its withdrawal from the
vigilance of consciousness. Consciously or unconsciously, through experience or inexperience, it is so that a “psychic” trace is actually an “existential” feeling. All of us have the experience of memory’s erosion and we link frequently this experience to aging, even to nearing death. Moreover, this erosion contributes to the sadness that goes with the loss of memory. And to the contrary, we know the small joy when remembering things that we thought that they were lost forever. With memory and forgetting one inhabits a permanent existential structure where the imprint of images-affections is existentially lived in the flux of experiences and the temporalities of consciousness.

A last word on the pragmatic model that explains forgetting more directly as the effect of a strategy, that is blocking, manipulating or commanding. It is true that by the pragmatic analysis one exits the subjective layers of the experience of the erosion of mnemonic traces towards a surface level, there where social life shows its tricks. The individual manifestation of forgetting is related at this surface level to its collective forms: the experience of forgetting determined by the pragmatic context of social life, generally shows its effects at the level of collective memories. Here again is a short overview. As I already demonstrated, certain pragmatic situations involve an obstruction in reaching the concealed treasures of memory. The issue of blocked memory has often been the theme of psychoanalysis. We remember that forgetting for Freud, is a labour by the fact that it can be seen as the compulsion of repeating: the subject repeats instead of remembers. It is precisely what distinguishes Freud’s from Bergson’s unconscious: powerlessness and passivity define the Bergsonian unconscious while the Freudian unconscious is marked by drives and it turns forgetting into an exercise, a labour of substituting; resisting implies repeating. This conception implies that for Freud the experienced past is indestructible: the past is unforgetable and, in fact, no obstacle can forever do away with memory. Forgetting means substituting. A transposition from the subjective to the public sphere is easy to make. In the open life of everyday, there are forces of power and authority, real, symbolic or imagined that obstruct memory to unfold itself and that force the subject to turn its memories into actions. If these forces of power and authority are purely ideological, one speaks of manipulation rather than of obstruction, and here the sociology of ideologies rather than the psychopathology of the subject can be explanatory. Ideological forces manipulate, partially or generally, the domain of reminiscences and attack the memory linked to the very identity of the subject. The ideological brainwashing is nothing but a manipulation of memory, a pragmatic of conspiring conscious or unconscious beliefs and reminiscences. If obstruction belongs rather to the order of the psychopathology of the subject and manipulation to the order of the ideologies of everyday life, we will have to add a third pragmatic of forgetting: commanded forgetting. It is the urge to forget that is found in forgiveness and, for instance, in the presidential pardon or in amnesty. The latter is “commanded” and the duty of forgetting is established according to a so-called raison d’état, for pardon or amnesty, or according to a moral value, as in forgiveness. As a result, one can see that the pragmatic of the “labour of forgetting” is large and diverse, in depth and on surface, rather active than passive, inexhaustible in tricks.

ABOUT LIBRARIES
How does one illustrate the balance of memory and forgetting? It is with the figure of the library. Not any library but La Biblioteca de Babel, a hallucinating story of Borges. This library of a disturbing size that exists ab aeterno and that...
contains not just all the existing but all the conceivable books, makes no one happy. A sect appears whose members are the fanatics of forgetting. They start eliminating millions of so-called “useless works” but the library resists forgetting: the impact of this elimination of the library’s reserves is microscopic.

Borges – one reads this especially in the poems from his old days – reflects on the limits of memory and on the “stubbornness of forgetting”: if memory is omnipresent, “common forgetting” belongs also to human nature. Forgetting is directly linked to memory – Borges writes somewhere: “Forgetting is a form of memory, its broad basement (su vago sótano), the secret flipside of the coin.” 18 For him, disturbingly, forgetting materializes the passing of time. A well-present emblem in Borges’ writings is the sandglass whose flow evokes the fluidity of the magic Lethe (el magico Leteo) and whose sand resembles the “ash from which forgetting is made”. Having become blind, Borges goes so far as to praise the “white gifts of forgetting” (los blancos dones del olvido).

The faculty of detachment and forgetting reveals in Borges the generosity of a human being who leaves life in all serenity.

From the Library of Babel, let us rapidly skip to this other gigantic library that contemporary science has become. Is it true, like Tzvetan Todorov announces it, that “Science is a […] sphere where memory lost many of its prerogatives”? 19 On the one hand, one has to admit that no one can complain about the contemporary possibilities of recording human knowledge. But the coin has its flipside. There is an endeavor of exhaustive documentation in science today but the effort is hopeless. A subtle art of rejecting information is equally required. Science is no longer feasible today without a component of forgetting. At first sight, it seems difficult to accept this proposition and even more difficult to define the rules of the “conduct of forgetting” for scientists.

Without doubt, in science one has to sacrifice on the altar of two divinities that inspired us during this paper: Mnemosyne and Lemnosyne, Memory and Forgetting.

NIETZSCHE ON FORGETTING

I would like to conclude this paper by commenting on a great poem about forgetting. Indeed, one of the most inspired poems on forgetting is due to Nietzsche. Obviously forgetting means for him happiness, solitude, serenity. Here is a fragment from Die Sonne Sinkt (“The Sun Sinks”) 20:

Gilded cheerfulness, come!
Sweetest, secretest
Foretaste of death!
-Did I run my course too quickly?
Only now, when my foot has grown weary,
Does your glance overtake me,
Does your happiness overtake me.

Only playing of waves all around.
Whatever was hard
Has sunk into blue oblivion –
my boat now lies idle.
Storm and voyaging – all forgotten now!
Desire and hope have drowned,
smooth lie soul and sea.
Seventh solitude!
Never such sweet
security, never such
sunlight warmth.
-Does the ice of my summit still glow?
Silver, light, a fish
My little craft now swims out ... 

This poem is about the *blaue Vergessenheit* (*blue oblivion*) – for Nietzsche, forgetting is first of all happiness and serenity. However, death is the dark bottom of this happiness and serenity. The second stanza is Lethean: the river of forgetting extends into a sea, and the boat now stays still on the blue of the waters on the depth of which desires are drowned and forgotten, the hopes that still stand in the way of this serenity and happiness. In this perfect solitude where forgetting abolishes all trouble – it is the third stanza – new spaces are opened to the sight where the boat that has turned into a silver fish glides ... 

Nietzsche has always been interested in the issue of memory and forgetting, and already his course in Rhetorics in Basel included an *ars memoriae*. And very early, Nietzsche recommends forgetting as “the art and science of history”: historical culture destroys the elementary capacity to live and act (“Any action requires forgetting”), his apology of Mephistopheles and his art of forgetting is constant in Nietzsche, just like the diatribes against memory. “Blessed are the forgetful!”, he warns us. However, the question of memory and forgetting unavoidably leads to the question of the moral: the issue concerns the right to forget.

**SUGGESTED CITATION**


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**NOTES**

1. Michel Serres, *L’incandescent*, Paris: Le Pommier, 2003, is an exceptionally captivating essay that makes us sensitive to the genotopic memory that we evoke in these pages.


