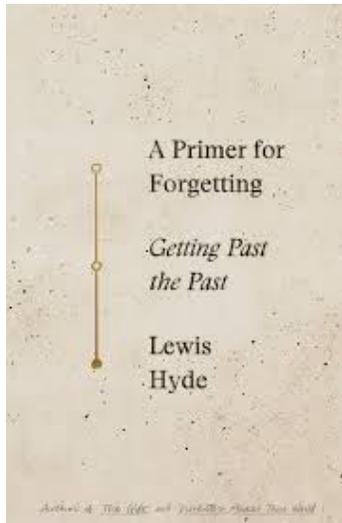


To study the Buddha Way is to study the self; to study the self is to forget the self; to forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things. --Dogen

A Primer for Forgetting

--by [Lewis Hyde](#), Jun 27, 2019



From *A Primer for Forgetting*, out this month from Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

ANTI-MNEMONICS

Umberto Eco writes that "once, as a joke, some friends and I invented advertisements for university positions in nonexistent disciplines," one of these being an *ars oblivionalis*, as opposed to the ancient arts of memory. Eco tells the story in an essay meant to prove that, from a semiotician's point of view, no such art could possibly exist.

Others would disagree. At one point in the *Biographia Literaria*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge complains about the habit of reading periodicals, suggesting that it should rightly be added to the "catalogue of Anti-Mnemonics," a list of practices that weaken the memory, which he had found in the work of a Muslim scholar. These include:

throwing to the ground lice picked from the hair, without crushing them; eating of unripe fruit; gazing on the clouds, and (in genere) on movable things suspended in the air; riding among a multitude of camels; frequent laughter; . . . the habit of reading tomb-stones in church-yards, etc.

"CROTHF DELETOK"

In fact, the *ars oblivionalis* (or *oblivionis*, as most would have it) not only exists; it's more easily mastered than any of the old arts of memory, now happily forgotten. Take, for example, Robert Richardson's description of the nineteenth-century method for remembering historical dates as offered by a certain Richard Grey:

Grey used a table of numbers with letter equivalents. To remember a given date, one made up a new word, beginning with letters designed to recall the desired event, and ending with a date coded in letters To remember that the creation of the world came in 4004, one remembered the word "crothf," "cr" being a tag for Creation, "othf" standing for 4004 [*Th* = 1,000; *o* being four times that, and *f* being the simple 4.] To remember the dates for Creation, the Deluge, the call of Abraham, the Exodus, and the foundation of Solomon's temple, one memorized the line "Crothf Deletok Abaneb Exasna Tembybe."

MOVING PICTURES

In 1917, a group of Dadaists living in New York—Marcel Duchamp and Henri-Pierre Roché, from France, and the American studio artist Beatrice Wood (the "Mama of Dada")—published a short-lived journal, *The Blind Man*, whose second issue comments on Duchamp's having submitted a

urinal, credited to R. Mutt and titled *Fountain*, for an exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists:

They say any artist paying six dollars may exhibit.

Mr. Richard Mutt sent in a fountain. Without discussion this article disappeared and never was exhibited.

What were the grounds for refusing Mr. Mutt's fountain:—

1. Some contended it was immoral, vulgar.
2. Others, it was plagiarism, a plain piece of plumbing.

Now Mr. Mutt's fountain is not immoral, that is absurd, no more than a bath tub is immoral. It is a fixture that you see every day in plumbers' show windows.

Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object.

Question: How does one create "a new thought" for any object? Answer: move it around. And therein lies a problem with the "place system," that old technique of artificial memory in which an image is committed to memory (committed!—as if to prison) by fixing it in a specific location. The whole apparatus freezes meaning, solidifies it, produces durable, fixed ideas, useful in the short term, to be sure, but what happens to those ideas when they are in need of change? Just to take the Virtues and Vices images that Giotto painted in the Arena Chapel in Padua: What if, as the centuries unfold, it turns out that the sword by which *Fortitude* is figured has outlived its usefulness? What if questions arise as to why Giotto painted *Inconstancy* as a woman?

Move it around: Duchamp's life coincided with the birth of motion pictures, a technology that he imported into the plastic arts as a key element of a new *ars oblivionis* for old ideas.

DISTANCE

The painter Brice Marden sometimes draws with a long stick or branch dipped in ink, distancing himself from the work and deliberately interfering with his control of the stroke. Says Marden, "[The works] start out with observation and then automatic reaction, and then back off, so there's layering of different ways of drawing. . . . It's the opposite of knowing yourself through analysis. It's more like knowing yourself by forgetting yourself, learning not to be so involved with yourself."

How to forget yourself: use a long stick.

"THORNY"

Jeffrey Eugenides, interviewed by Terry Gross on *Fresh Air*, explains that Mitchell Grammaticus, a character in his novel *The Marriage Plot*, spends time in India, as Eugenides himself had done. Gross says that it seems to her "it would probably be very helpful to have authentic memories to draw from."

"It's not that helpful," says Eugenides. "I'm not really an autobiographical writer. . . . When I actually write about myself, I get very confused. And with Mitchell, I wrote that chapter many times. It was the slowest and the hardest to write. The problem was that I remembered too much, and I put in every person that I remembered in Calcutta and everything I saw and every amazing sight in Calcutta."

“And suddenly I had a hundred pages of this thorny fiction, and I had to pare away so much of the autobiography to finally find the proper shape for Mitchell’s story, and it just took forever, and I never knew where the spine of the story was.”

REVISION BY FORGETTING

“The supreme achievement of memory. . . is the masterly use it makes of innate harmonies when gathering to its fold the suspended and wandering tonalities of the past,” says Vladimir Nabokov.

Myself, when writing poems, I practice revision by forgetting. I write a draft of the poem, and then another and another, allowing the versions to pile up in a jumble—lines I am attached to, although they don’t belong, lines that fit but go flat in the middle, words replaced and then reinserted, promising developments that never delivered—it all sits there, a shapeless pile, clammy with fatigue.

Then I set the mess aside and ignore it for at least one day. Then I write the poem from memory. Great chunks will have fallen into oblivion, while others will have returned clarified from the pool. The double goddess Mnemosyne attends erasing as she records, drawing shape from shapelessness, dropping the discord to reveal the harmony.

FROM THE MUSEUM OF FORGETTING

Louise Bourgeois—ninety years after her father abandoned the family to enlist in World War I, eighty years after he abandoned them again, taking young Louise’s English tutor as his mistress (“the trauma of abandonment. . . has remained active ever since”), thirty years after the death of her

husband, and about a decade after the death of one of her three sons—made a large, unique fabric book *Ode à l'oubli* using for pages the linen hand towels embroidered with the initials L.B.G. for Louise Bourgeois Goldwater, her married name, each page collaged with designs cut from fragments of clothing and household items, some as old as the memories of trauma themselves.

Bourgeois has said that every day you must accept the past and abandon it, and “if you can’t accept it, then you have to do sculpture. . . . If your need is to refuse to abandon the past, then you have to re-create it. Which is what I have been doing.” Except, in the case of *Ode à l'oubli*, as the title implies, for here the process of making designs out of old cloth is intended to put the past to rest.

Abstraction was, for Bourgeois, an *ars oblivionis*. To calm and relieve her insomnia (the too-much-memory disease!), she used to draw repeated, simple lines across sheets of paper. With *Ode à l'oubli* she takes a near century of memories (“You can . . . remember your life by the shape, weight, color, and smell of those clothes in your closet”) and converts them into grids and circles, pyramids, starbursts, and waves (“strong emotional motivation . . . held in a kind of formal restraint”). True, there is one oddly soiled page. In red letters it reads, “The / return / of / the / repressed,” and a long brown stain runs across the page between the last two words. And yet, if we take the book as a whole, that unyielding stain is ten square inches of the Unforgettable, in over four thousand square inches of oblivion-by-design.

“LOOK AT A COCA-COLA BOTTLE”

At one point in *Notes and Projects for the Large Glass*, Marcel Duchamp reflects on inventing new languages as a way of getting to some sort of

primary experience. In this context, he addresses the way in which memory abstracts and so impedes perception. Note 31 reads,

To lose the *possibility of recognizing 2 similar objects*—2 colors, 2 laces, 2 hats, 2 forms whatsoever—to reach the Impossibility of sufficient *visual* memory, to transfer from one like object to another the Memory imprint. Same possibility with sounds; with brain facts.

John Cage was struck by Duchamp's notion. In a 1984 interview, Cage remarked that, for him, to repeat a phrase in music moves him "toward my taste and memory," exactly what he wanted "to become free of." He then repeated Duchamp's "beautiful statement" about the memory imprint, explaining that from Duchamp's "visual point of view" it meant "to look at a Coca-Cola bottle without the feeling that you've ever seen one before, as though you're looking at it for the very first time. That's what I'd like to find with sounds—to play them and hear them as if you've never heard them before."

TRANSFER, TRANSFERENCE

When Duchamp writes of how we "transfer from one like object to another the memory imprint," we might note the verb "transfer" and bring to it the memory imprint of Freud's idea of transference. The patient unconsciously projects the memory of other people onto the analyst, whereupon, to rewrite Duchamp, the goal becomes: to lose the possibility of recognizing 2 similar persons (2 lovers, 2 parents, 2 enemies, 2 people whomsoever). To reach the impossibility of sufficient emotional memory, to transfer from one like person to another the memory imprint. Psychotherapeutic work includes becoming conscious of memory's transfer habit and dropping it so as to experience more directly not just the therapist but any other person.

FROM THE MUSEUM OF FORGETTING

How did Agnes Martin begin a painting? She would sit and wait for something to come to mind. Once, early in her career, she was thinking of “the innocence of trees” and “this grid came into [her] mind and [she] thought it represented innocence.” From then on, her paintings were all variations on the grid.

She imagined the mind as operating either by intellect or by inspiration. Intellect is problematic. It’s “the servant of ego,” she said, (and “everybody’s born 100 percent ego; after that it’s just adjustment”). Intellect “does all the conquering.” It struggles with facts, discovering first one and then another until finally making a deduction. “But in my opinion that is just guesswork, so completely inaccurate.” It’s “never going to find the truth about life.” She added:

I gave up facts entirely in order to have an empty mind for inspiration to come into. . . . You have to practice quiet, empty mind. I gave up the intellect entirely. I had a hard time giving up evolution and the atomic theory but I managed it. . . . And I never have any ideas myself. I’m very careful not to have ideas.

THE PAINTER

Of the artist who figures largely in Marcel Proust’s novel, *In Search of Lost Time*, the narrator says,

The effort made by Elstir, when seeing reality, to rid himself of all the ideas the mind contains, to make himself ignorant in order to paint, to forget everything for the sake of his own integrity . . . was especially admirable in a man whose own mind was exceptionally cultivated.

FROM THE MUSEUM OF FORGETTING, GALLERY OF ERASURES

“Frank [O’Hara] was standing there,” says Elaine de Kooning. “First I painted the whole structure of his face; then I wiped out the face, and when the face was gone, it was more Frank than when the face was there.”

Excerpted from A Primer for Forgetting, Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Syndicated with permission from the publishers.