

**Forgetting to Remember:
From Benjamin to Blanchot**

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Forgetting is the primordial divinity, the venerable ancestor and the first presence of what, in a later generation, will give rise to Mnemosyne, mother of the Muses. The essence of memory is therefore forgetting: the forgetfulness of which one must drink in order to die.

Blanchot ("Forgetful Memory", IC 315)

Let us begin with Lethe, a river in Hades whose waters caused forgetfulness to dead souls who drank from it. The daughter of Eris, Lethe was the sister of Thanatos (death), and with Zeus she bore the Graces/Charites. According to some myths, she was the mother of Dionysus. She was the goddess of oblivion and the river with the same name. When someone died and went to Hades, they had to drink from her water so they would forget their previous existence on earth. Once they had drunk from the waters of Lethe, they were left with nothing to reminisce about for eternity. If ever anybody was allowed back to life, again they had to drink from the river so they would not remember the afterlife. One of memory's earliest myths proclaims that at the dawn of philosophy, at the oracle of Lebadeia, a descent into Hades required that the questor be first taken to Lethe, the spring of forgetfulness, and then to Mnemosyne, the mother of the Muses, the second spring, the spring of remembrance.¹ Jean

Pierre Vernant recounts the legend thus:

Before venturing into the mouth of hell, the questor, who had already undergone rites of purification, was taken to two springs named respectively Lethe and Mnemosoune. He drank from the first and immediately forgot everything to do with his human life and, like a dead man, he entered the realm of Night. The water of the second spring was to enable him to remember all that he had seen and heard in the other world. When he returned he was no longer restricted to knowledge of the present moment: contact with the beyond had revealed both past and future to him.²

Two questions that immediately come to mind are concerned with the anteriority of forgetting in relation to memory. Why was the initiate taken first to Lethe? What was the motivation behind this unusual ritual in the cavern of Trophonius in Boetia that demands forgetfulness as the first step? Secondly, why is the power of memory, which enables him to remember what “he had seen and heard in the other world,” constituted as the second step – though unmistakably a step, an unmistakable step – toward knowledge? The dip in the Lethe cleanses the initiate from the distracting and unmitigated sorrows of the past like a clean slate. It is well known that for the ancient Greeks, knowledge, a source of immortality, derived from memory. One could ask, is the knowledge that memory brings to us the knowledge that memory is the *first presence* of what was before it, namely forgetting?

In a world that is perpetually mourning for the loss of memory, it is, then, not easy to write a few words in praise of the power of forgetting. And especially to inscribe in writing what itself is seen as one of the fundamental reasons for the historical decline, or, if you will, neglect of the mother of Muses’s, Mnemosyne’s greatest gift – memory. Legends about memory, from King Theuth in the *Phaedrus* of Plato to Caesar’s *Gallic Wars* concerning the Druids have always been uncomfortable with – if not downright opposed to – writing. According to Caesar, the Druids did not allow their students to write down the verses they were supposed to memorize. “They believe that religion forbids these courses to be written down.... They seem to ... have established this custom for two reasons: because they do not wish to divulge their doctrines, or to see their pupils *neglect* their memory by re-lying on memory, for it almost always happens that making use of texts has as its result decreased zeal for learning by heart and a diminution of memory.”³

In the *Phaedrus*, writing is associated with the decline of memory. These “marks which are outside the mind” – the writing, mark as the erasure – “allows forgetfulness to infiltrate into the soul through *amêlêtêsia mnêmes*, that is

through a lack of exercising the memory."⁴ Historically speaking, it is not too late to speculate at this stage that with the introduction to writing, the function of memory was perhaps already starting to decline. Derrida has observed that writing as such (in Plato) is opposed to itself in the forms of internal memory, *mnêmê*, and external memory, *hypomnêsis*. Why is the writing bad? Is it because it "appears" to be good for memory only "externally" and not internally? What is true in writing helps memory from within *only* externally, whereas the truth is always produced dialectically from within, that is to say, from logic. "Plato thinks of writing, and tries to comprehend it, to dominate it, on the basis of *opposition* as such. In order for these contrary values (good/evil, true/false, essence/appearance, inside/outside, etc.) to be in opposition, each of the terms must be simply *external* to the other."⁵ Maurice Blanchot, too, comments on the question of writing and memorization in relation to the Judaic form of prescriptive writing, as in the stone inscription of the Torah "written with the finger of God," with that of Plato's recipe for writing as an antidote, a *pharmakon*, to memory. He writes: "let us note in passing the huge divide that opens up here between Plato and Moses: for one, writing, which is external and alien, is bad because it makes up for the loss of memory and thus encourages the failings of living memory (why bother remembering something since it can be written down?). For Moses, writing assuredly guarantees memorization, but it is also (or primarily) the 'doing,' the 'acting,' the exteriority which precedes interiority or will institute it [in the form of a commandment] – in the same way that Deuteronomy, in which Moses begins the whole story over again in the first person, redoubles and prolongs the difficult Exodus."⁶

"Let us not pretend to know what it is, this forgetting," writes Derrida in *Spurs*.⁷ Let us also not be in haste in consigning forgetting to an "undifferentiated" status of forgetful nonremembering and elevate remembering to the realization of "redifferentiation," as in Merleau-Ponty's work. For the status of forgetting is, however, not contained within the articulation of a differentiation that sets itself apart from the other *only* in relation to it; rather, it constitutes itself in relation to itself, or, in other words, to borrow a turn of phrase from Blanchot, "what is forgotten points at once toward the thing forgotten [not remembered] and toward forgetting" (*IC* 315). Forgetting is the movement from the inside to the outside, "the most profound effacement," according to Blanchot, of the thing forgotten toward forgetting, toward forgetting's sovereign status (*IC* 315). He writes: "To forget what holds itself apart from absence and apart from presence, and nonetheless causes both presence and absence to come forth through the necessity of forgetting: this is the movement of interruption we would be asked to accomplish" ("Forgetting, Unreason", *IC* 195). Thus for Blanchot, forgetting is

not only a possibility of slipping outside (of possibility), but also the movement of “interruption” that forgets its own forgetting. Paul de Man will come dangerously close to this sense of forgetting in his writings on the rhetoric of temporality, where temporality also has the tendency to slip away in self-concealment in relation to its own origin.

The intimate relationship of remembering and forgetting deepens once we take into consideration that the past that emerges from the vertiginous folds in our memory is not quite identical to the past that was actually experienced at that time. De Man comments on the temporal structure of the past and its reversal through the remembered past in the texts of Marcel Proust, in *Blindness and Insight*, in the following terms: “The power of memory does not reside in its capacity to resurrect a situation or feeling that actually existed, but it is a constitutive act of the mind bound to its own present and oriented toward the future of its own elaboration.”⁸ De Man’s reading of the structure of temporality of the past as it is mediated in the presence of memory indicates a departure from the original temporality, in the sense that this moment in the presence of memory, in “memory’s immobile presence,” as Blanchot would have said, is structurally different, for it is bereft of the “original anxiety and weakness” that characterizes a past experience without precedence – for it has nothing before it – and has become the “creative moment par excellence.”⁹ In Proust’s world, the “creative moment par excellence” is the division of a past and a present from its future obligation that is the retrospective domain of writing. De Man suggests that the transcendence of time (from a past and a present to its futurity) reenters the temporal process and, thus, marks the “arrival of the past” in the decisive event: “the event to write.”¹⁰ Remembrance, thus, for de Man signals the disruption of the temporal flux, is the “forgetting” of the temporal continuity, and “enables a consciousness ‘to find access to the intemporal’.”¹¹

Not only is time in memory a figure or metaphor, its authentic function as a continuous temporality has also been disrupted by the encounter of the futuristic act of writing into a reverse field of spatiality. This space of writing has a life that “steals away,” “escapes” the presence of temporality and affirms itself through the absence and the lack and the effacement of the forgotten words. Such a life of forgetting is inaccessible “to the space of *memoire*,” “where ... memory holds sway” (*IC* 195, 194). And the only spatial configuration of time possible in our experience is the manifestation of a transitional element, namely, what Walter Benjamin calls, the instant. Memory is the instant of an experience, lived synchronically, which is devoid of any temporality whatsoever, though it depends on the lapse of time. What one experiences in memory is hardly time, but the timelessness, or

the lack of it – the death of time. Neither past nor future is remembered in memory, but the self in its absence is now re-presented as a forgetting through images. Memory sees itself fleetingly as eternally present in the instant of forgetting.

To “forget forgetting,” to get away from forgetting, forgetting “gets away,” “escapes,” as Blanchot puts it, is the slippage into the outside, not as the antithesis of inside, or, as it should never be construed, an “escape” from inside to the outside. To forget forgetting for Blanchot implies, on the other hand, an “outside” of “possibility” itself. In other words, to forget forgetting, therefore, remains a possibility outside the realm of possibility itself, that is, forever an interruption. To forget forgetting, in Blanchot, is not a condition of possibility that depends upon the journey, the movement from the inside to outside, from the internal *memoire* to the external amnesia, that is, the absorption of memory into the outside of history. No such movement between the inside and outside, but a perpetual outside that stays outside of itself. Thus to a large extent, following Levinas’s trace of thought, Blanchot’s “outside” itself is “situated beyond all critique and all exegesis.”¹²

Levinas puts Blanchot’s work outside the realm of both literature and philosophy, as non-presence, non-absence; a condition that Blanchot has attributed to forgetting in the very first sentence of his essay “Forgetting, Unreason,” in his book *The Infinite Conversation*. Blanchot writes: “Forgetting: non-presence, non-absence” (*IC* 194). The “I can,” for Blanchot, according to Levinas, represents “the limit of the human.”¹³ This “non-presence, non-absence” is not to be judged by the limit of the human, that is, the possibility of the ultimate possibility that resides in philosophy, as in the thought of Hegel and of Heidegger. It is the humanist contradiction of atheism, which holds on to a thought of secularism, of atheistic negation of gods in the emergence of Being, that makes Blanchot’s work so significant, because the secular thought has not really forgotten the withdrawal of gods – the retreat of gods with which the humanist tradition began, perhaps as early as the beginning of the early Lyric poem in archaic Greece in the seventh century – in the forgetting of gods. As far as forgetting in Heidegger is concerned, it is most obviously the forgetting of the truth of Being in Western metaphysics, which one can, perhaps, suggest began as early as Aristotle. Instead of heeding the “call of being,” humanity began to think in images. It began to place trust in science and technology, and, thus, utterly lost its true nature by the dominance of science and rationality.

Gerald Bruns provides another context through which we can analyze the concept of possibility as mediated through poetry, that is, through work. Bruns quotes Blanchot saying that, since the poem exists, thus arises the

very possibility of future: "It is ... because the poem exists that future is possible" (WF 103). Each work is a negation of that which already exists, thus it is possible to write a book, a book that is not yet written. Each book, then, is a negation, in terms of possibility, of all other books, but the moment the book is written, it is no longer mediated by possibility, but by its own impossibility, for it will never be written again. And, therefore, the future is no longer a part of it. "The work in this respect might be thought of as 'a refusal to take part in the world.' As a work of mediation, it always remains outside the world that it makes possible, as if it were itself impossible."¹⁴

Bruns interprets Blanchot's notion of the "possibility as negation" in the Hegelian sense. Therefore, the impossibility of possibility, which Blanchot is perpetually examining in his textual limits, is precisely this movement that turns away from the negativity of the Hegelian dialectics, the *Aufhebung* of *Aufhebung*, and it is, thus, simply a negation of negation. The movement of the Hegelian self-consciousness as a project of interiorizing consciousness that gathers itself in the memory of its own spirit at the end of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is precisely what is interrupted in Blanchot's thinking of the forgetting, which contends that forgetting is an essential aspect of memory that disrupts the movement of internalization.¹⁵ Blanchot takes forgetting as a way to escape the teleological grasp of history, in order to make way for an "unreachable limit."

Forgetting as an endless detour of memory that refuses to identify itself with the limits or the extremes of the possibility of the past. The wandering forgetting, not unlike Benjamin's *flâneur*, is neutral to the sense of arrival and departure; instead, it is a perpetual movement outside the motion of a destiny or place. There is no sense of time in Benjamin's *flâneur*, similarly, neither for forgetting in Blanchot. With the abundance of paronomasia (the stringing together of words derived from the same root which nevertheless function grammatically as different parts of speech) and oxymorons in Blanchot's critical as well as literary texts (although his works make the so-called distinction between fiction and criticism an impossible limit), the aspect to the mastery ("to use language as if it were solely an instrument of power") of language is forever reduced to a *mise-en-abyme*.¹⁶ The "fascination" with words overtakes the orientation of sense and meaning with which language conducts its teleological mission and renders it oblivious to the acts of literature, whereby meaning is already constituted prior to the autonomy of language, that is, words.

"The power of forgetting ... the capacity of feeling 'unhistorically'" that Nietzsche finds so essential for the state of happiness is in some sense reciprocated by Benjamin in "The Image of Proust," where he speaks of the

Proustian desire for “the elegiac idea of happiness.”¹⁷ What makes happiness, as it were, tick, is none other than this power of forgetting, a power that is reminiscent, for both Nietzsche and Benjamin, of the great reliever, sleep. Neither Zarathustra nor Proust can prophesy or write without the aid of forgetting, without the assistance of darkness, without the power of slumber. At the bottom of the feeling of happiness, forgetting always provides succor. This happiness in forgetting is echoed in Blanchot’s *Awaiting Oblivion*: “Why this happiness in forgetting?” – ‘Happiness itself forgotten’” (AwO 43). In contradistinction to the phenomenological perception of the continual state of becoming that occurs in the broad daylight of *remembering*, the Blanchotian *forgetting* is even more luminously etched in the darkness of the night. As Nietzsche reminds us: “Forgetfulness is a property of all action, just as not only light but darkness is bound up with the life of every organism.”¹⁸ The striking image of day and night sends us back to Benjamin who comments on how Proust turned his days into nights to facilitate the “Penelope work of forgetting.” Historians, Nietzsche says, “refrain from sleep,” thus deny themselves the dreams that *express* the “deeper resemblance” of things. In remembrance (for Benjamin, *das Eingedenken*), life glances back and stays there in mute silence at the horrific state of things, in suffering and pain; but without forgetfulness it will become unhealthy, sterile, and stagnant. Only through learning to forget can mankind hope to attain happiness. Pain causes happiness to be forgotten. Yet one cannot speak of happiness, suggests Nietzsche, without realizing suffering and pain. Echoed in Blanchot, the relationship between memory and pain is articulated in the following sentence: “What is this pain, this fear, what is this light? The forgetting of light in light” (AwO 44).

To come back to the forgetting that itself turns away from us: this is no ordinary forgetting, where one loses things because of “absent mindedness,” through distractions. On the contrary, this forgetting that we still do not pretend to know, which is neither non-presence nor non-absence, keeps an unflinching vigil on an all-encompassing reach of memory and keeps it from inundating the hiddenness of things. The step beyond has always reminded us to preserve things *in* memory. *The Step Not Beyond* warns us, is an injunction, to preserve and hide things *from* memory.

It is as if, in Blanchot’s words, forgetting were “the very vigilance of memory,” which is irreducible to the difference between absence and presence (IC 315). Paul de Man will evoke this with reference to Hegel on memory, that is, the thinking memory (*Gedächtnis*), which is different from recollection (*Erinnerung*), in which “memory effaces remembrance”: “In order to have memory one has to be able to forget remembrance.”¹⁹ And Benjamin certainly affirms the intertwining of memory and forgetting, when he compares the weaving of memory in Proust’s text to “the Penelope work

of recollection, or should I say, the Penelope work of forgetting.” Benjamin writes:

For the important thing for the remembering author is not what he experienced, but the weaving of his memory, the Penelope work of recollection. Or should one call it, rather, a Penelope work of forgetting? Is not the involuntary recollection, Proust’s *mémoire involontaire*, much closer to forgetting than what is usually called memory? And is not this work of spontaneous recollection, in which remembrance is the woof and forgetting the warf, a counterpart to Penelope’s work rather than its likeness? For here the day unravels what the night was woven. When we awake each morning, we hold in our hands, usually weakly and loosely, but a few fringes of the tapestry of lived life, as loomed for us by forgetting. However with our purposeful activity and, even more, our purposive remembering each day unravels the web and the ornaments of forgetting. (III 202)

Benjamin’s reading of *mémoire involontaire* in “The Image of Proust” is closer to forgetting than remembering. It is my task here to establish the centrality of *forgetting* in both Benjamin’s and Blanchot’s work. It is to provide an uncanny glimpse of the “ascendancy” of forgetting – in its intertwining with remembering and its constitution of the “space of writing” – as the difference between life and literature to which both Benjamin’s above mentioned essay and Blanchot’s essay, “The Experience of Proust” in *The Book to Come*, can be traced.

What has Marcel Proust in common with a shy, self-effacing, yet “primordial” forgetting? We are already quite familiar with Benjamin’s famous analogy of the asymmetrical relation of the Penelope work of remembering to a Penelope work of forgetting in Proust’s texts. The consequence of such asymmetrical exchange, according to Blanchot, reverses the ordering of remembering and forgetting and advances a speculation that memory, “*me-moire*,” the space of memory, is far more disposed towards forgetting, “*Moira*,” the “portion of obscurity,” than to remembering (IC 314). The exegesis of the Benjaminian text “The Image of Proust” is the endeavor of one of my earlier essays, to which I will periodically pay attention.²⁰

In the meanwhile, let me draw your attention to a curious passage in *À la Recherche du temps perdu* – right after the famous “*petites madeleines*” affair of the “all-powerful joy” of the unexpected “*mémoire involontaire*” – in which Proust contemplates a journey through the “dark region” that he must undertake, a descent into Hades in order to stand “face to face with something that does not yet exist,” his future as a writer.²¹ Proust had already drank a second mouthful, in mythological terms it is equivalent to drinking

twice from the sacred springs of Lethe and Mnemosyne, which makes him realize that the power of memory is already declining, waning, before the future engagement of writing begins to take a firm foothold in his desires. We have all witnessed in ourselves the effects of declining memory, some of us as we grow old often talk of dim memories, but scarcely one sees or hears someone dispensing a few words in praise of an all-powerful joy of forgetting, except, perhaps, Nietzsche. As the memory recedes from us and the forgetting takes over, we start inventing things for what we thought was real. Some forgettings are even so dense and so deep that we would probably require the anchorage of memory as a rope – a Proustian trope – to climb out of it. The possibility of writing is revealed in the impossibility of forgetting memory as “fragments of existence withdrawn from time.”²²

It is also Blanchot who tells us that before Proust had become the accomplished author of *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, he, as the author of *Jean Santeuil* – what Blanchot calls a “complete-incomplete work” – is more of a pure writer who writes for the sheer joy of writing, where memory is an agency for living the instant that no longer belongs to either the past or the present. In “The Experience of Proust,” Blanchot writes:

He [Proust] does not see in it the simplest pleasure of a spontaneous memory, since it is not a question of memory, but of “transmutation of the memory into a directly felt reality.” He concludes that he is faced with something very important, a communication that is not of the present, or of the past, but the outpouring of the imagination in which a field is established between the two, and he resolves henceforth to write only in order to make such moments to come to life again, or to respond to the inspiration this transport of joy gives him. (BC 18)

The lack of interiority in the phenomena of reminiscence in Proust is further attested to by Blanchot as the joyous “encounter with the song of the Sirens”:

We see that what is given to him at that instant is not only the assurance of his calling, the affirmation of his gifts, but also the very essence of his literature – he has touched it, experienced it in its pure state, by experiencing the transformation of time into an imaginary space (the space unique to images), in that moving absence, without events to hide it, without presence to obstruct it, in this emptiness always in the process of becoming [the Nietzschean element of Proust’s involuntary memory]: the remoteness and distance that make up the milieu and the principle of metamorphoses and of what Proust calls metaphors. But it is no longer a matter of applying psy-

chology; on the contrary, there is no more interiority, for everything that is interior is deployed outwardly, takes the form of an image. Yes, at this time, everything becomes image, and the essence of image is to be entirely outside, without intimacy, and yet more inaccessible and more mysterious than the innermost thought; without signification, but summoning the profundity of every possible meaning; unrevealed and yet manifest, having that presence-absence that constitutes the attraction and the fascination of the Sirens. (BC 14)

Proust's writing is the work of time, for it restores in the narrative the experience of life in a manner in which the narrative transforms itself into a narrative of time that fulfills itself in the time of the narrative. In Proust, Blanchot writes that the encounter between life and literature is not only superimposed, but "this encounter ... seems to provide him with the only space where the movement of his existence can be not only understood, but also restored, actually experienced, actually accomplished" (BC 11). "Thus he ends up," Blanchot tells us, "living in the mode of the time of the narrative" (BC 12). "The exteriorized time" – a time outside of itself – is that which annihilates, erases, time. But what Proust destroys in time through his writing, as an act of defiance against time, is precisely this destructive element of time against which his writing inveighs as a metaphor for restoring what has been ravaged by time and age. Therefore, in essence, in Proust, life itself is understood outside in the experience of writing, or in the writing of the experience, whichever way it may be, but it is always already accomplished in the form of the writing of memory, the inaccessible song. Proust's *madeleine*, "a wandering image" drifting between the shores of past and present experience, is like the Sirens' "enigmatic song" that Ulysses hears as he comes into the sight of their enchanted island (BC 17, 5).

Benjamin, too, is not distant from Blanchot when he recalls the image of Proust as neither the image of life nor the image of literature or poetry. The creative in-difference (*schöpferische Indifferenz*) at the center of Proust's "lifework," Benjamin insists, is not found in the description of life as Proust saw it, "but [in] a life as it was remembered by the one who had lived it" (III 202). For Benjamin, the image of the author comes into being through the encounter of life and literature at the threshold of fiction and reality. The amalgamation, that is, the interaction of literature and life has a profound significance for Benjamin in his conception of memory that determines a large number of his critical projects. What else besides memory can possibly trace the movement between life and literature? Not only is the image, as we have encountered it in Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, a product of the fruitful interaction of life and literature, mediated by memory, but, at the same time, it also functions as the site of forgetting. "The Pene-

lope work of forgetting,” as Benjamin characterizes *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, depends on the relationship of life and literature that culminates in a most intense “homesickness,” precipitated by a terminally ill author on his sick bed, who in a “deliberate and fastidious way” weaves the text of forgetting, which will be only unraveled in the daylight of remembering. In Proust, one might boldly suggest, a time to remember is also a place of forgetting. This element of forgetting, which is implied in the process of aging, is the “place” for the “rejuvenation” of the past, of memory, and, above all, of *mémoire involontaire*.²³

In “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (III 155-200), Benjamin seeks to reconcile what is normally associated with the two distinct and divergent aspects of memory, that is, the involuntary and the voluntary memory to which Proust devoted almost his entire work. This reconciliation offers Benjamin an opportunity to extend the range and scope of memory to photography in a manner that stresses its aesthetic function in difference to the aesthetic standard, which, for instance, Paul Valéry sets for it.²⁴ The auratic experience of art tends to emphasize the image of the beautiful as the fulfillment of its real function. Such images of the beautiful are far from the mere sensation of what actually exists. The object in the painting looks back in a way that exceeds the gaze of the looker. This is a look that the mechanical reproduction is unable to return.

Although, in the Baudelaire essay, Benjamin is content with assigning the role of *mémoire volontaire* to photography and has not yet moved in the direction of labeling it as a political weapon, that purpose is achieved in his “Artwork” essay (III 217-51). In the Baudelaire essay, Benjamin is satisfied with distinguishing photography from painting as a non-auratic art form, whose perception of the world is no longer governed by the traditional aesthetic principles of beauty, imagination, and creativity. The aura of traditional painting consists in the painting’s ability to return our look that exceeds the appropriating glance. Benjamin writes: “The painting we look at reflects back at us that of which our eyes will never have their fill” (III 187). The “cult” of the beautiful creates a desire for the beautiful that can never be satisfied, because, as Benjamin says, it perpetually “feeds” on its original desire. “What prevents our delight in the beautiful from ever being satisfied,” according to Benjamin, “is the image of the past” (III 187). The irrevocable distance between the past from which we are irremediably cut off is the distance, that is, “the image of the past,” that the aura of the beautiful “reproduces” as it “conjures it up ... from the womb of time,” for instance, in a figure like Helen in *Faust* (III 187). Photography neither aims towards reproducing the beautiful image of the past nor participates in the perpetuation of a desire, which is “veiled by the nostalgia of tears,” as in the case of Baudelaire, as Benjamin points out (III 187).

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Baudelaire's visceral opposition to photography is not due to some sort of blindness to modernity or a lack of historical sense. What seemed to have unnerved and terrified him about the function of the daguerreotype was its "natural alliance to the mob."²⁵ He expressed rather too clearly what he considered the "mistaken developments" of photography at the prompting of the "stupidity of the broad masses," which "demanded an ideal that would conform to their aspirations and nature of their temperament ... Their prayers were granted by a vengeful God, and Daguerre became his prophet" (III 186). Baudelaire is alluding to the "asinine belief" of the masses that "art was nothing other than the accurate reflection of nature" and that photography, indeed, is the most suitable medium for it. Benjamin expresses his solidarity with Baudelaire on this point, and we shall see how his argument about photography and film proceed to differentiate them from the traditional view of the artistic form.

The decisive bracketing of the aura with *mémoire involontaire* sets the stage for theorizing the advent of photography as very much "the phenomenon of the 'decline of the aura'" (III 187). The limitation of photography or of *mémoire volontaire* is duly noted by Benjamin. What photography cannot achieve is built in its structure, for it cannot "faithfully" reproduce the image of the past, which is only possible through the involuntary illumination of a memory that remains repressed at the unconscious level. Benjamin compares the Proustian *mémoire involontaire*, the most exemplary and enigmatic experience of auratic writings, with *the mémoire volontaire*, that "perpetual readiness of volitional, discursive memory," the "one that is in the service of the intellect" (III 186, 158). Simply put, the difference between these two types of memory is that the former has an accidental but full relationship to the past, whereas the latter, though clearly present in its "attentiveness" to the past, happens to retain no trace of it. In historical terms, both these memories imply the "atrophy of experience" (III 159). "The object of the story," according to Benjamin, is not "to convey a happening *per se*, which is the purpose of information; rather it embeds in it the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening. It thus bears the marks of the potter's hand" (III 159). In the same essay on Baudelaire, Benjamin would once more evoke the traces of experience of "the practiced hands" on the "utilitarian objects" in association with the auratic object of perception, which is, subsequently, "at home in the *mémoire involontaire*" (III 186).

Involuntary memory finds its trace in a moment in history in which the personal and individual past can no longer be reconstituted by the recourse to the experience of the traditional past. Such memory already crystallizes

outside the conscious experience of the individual who has no control over it. Involuntary memory, thus, can no longer be associated with the inventory of an individualized objective memory, because it reflects upon the contingency of the chance encounter with the objective world that lies “beyond the reach of the intellect.” And thus to restore the experience of the individual past with the material of collective past, at a time when it is increasingly difficult to reconcile these two antagonistic tendencies, voluntary memory comes to our aid, but not in order to reconstitute the order of the past that no longer has its home in the individual consciousness. Instead, it is present, as Proust would say, in “some material object (or in the sensation which such an object arouses in us)” (III 158).

However, the way Benjamin approaches this topic, which manifests itself as “the crisis of reproduction,” and which he sees as “an integral part of a crisis of perception,” is not without a trace of ambiguity. Prompted by the destruction of traditional experience of a community, for instance, of storytelling – a specific mode of communication that passed on the experience of the storyteller to the listener – the new experiences that *mémoire volontaire* encompasses are certainly not geared towards retaining that element or trace of the past. In its experience, *mémoire volontaire* has ceded its ineffectual and intellectual domain from personal to impersonal information, which is “encouraged by the technique of mechanical reproduction” (III 186). If it is purely a matter of contingency whether an individual would ever come to form an image of herself, that is to say, whether an experience akin to the *madeleine* would ever occur in her life, then the safest bet for her would be to make use of the data available to her that she cannot assimilate. Especially in relation to a world where both individual and collective experiences are progressively witnessing their own decline, a new set of standards is emerging that values information over experience.

Nonetheless, in Proust’s *mémoire involontaire*, Benjamin finds a redemption and reconciliation of the two elements of memory. Here, according to Benjamin, “the voluntary and involuntary memory lose their mutual exclusiveness” (III 160). The same two elements of memory, whose synthesis and assimilation to *mémoire involontaire* he so profoundly admires in Proust’s *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, will later in Benjamin’s own text assume the form of *Gedächtnis*, the conservative function of remembrance that protects impressions in the Freudian sense, and *Erinnerung*, a memory that has been allocated a disintegrative or destructive function.²⁶ Benjamin assigns primarily two functions to *mémoire involontaire*. First, he notes that Proust’s work is an effort to “restore the figure of the storyteller to the present generation,” and second, it is also a magnificent task of resurrecting his own childhood. For the concept of *mémoire involontaire* entails within it

the idea that “where there is experience in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine with the material of the collective past. The rituals with their ceremonies, their festivals (quite probably nowhere recalled in Proust’s work) kept producing the amalgamation of these two elements of memory over and over again” (III 159).

The contingency of involuntary memory evades the “promptings” of the voluntary memory and gives access to a past that is beyond the reach of the intellect. Voluntary memory is fraudulent as far as the real memory is concerned, for it is merely an “echo of a past sensation.” And not only that but it is also “conditioned by the prejudices of intelligence,” which makes the matter only worse. Whereas *mémoire involontaire* is constitutive of that experience which is not a “part of the inventory of the individual who is isolated in many ways,” but rather a mode of collective experience that has already ceded its presence to material objects outside.²⁷ Since the memory has already transpired into something else, most probably it is present in some material object or it is lying submerged in the recess of the senses that can only be aroused by a chance encounter. Proust demonstrates the nature of *mémoire involontaire* in his treatment of the famous *madeleine* affair, and its access to the past that he remembered very “poorly” before then, despite the “promptings of a memory that obeyed the call of attentiveness” (III 158). Benjamin says of *mémoire volontaire*: “it is its characteristic that the information which it gives about that past retains no trace of it” (III 158).

The access to one’s own past in *mémoire volontaire* is limited to the “promptings of a memory which obey(s) the call of attentiveness.” Voluntary memory fails to conjure the image of the past, because instead of the past, what we get from it is only the image. That is why one encounters in the photograph a memory that retains no trace of the past. This to some extent explains why it is always so difficult to remember the experience of what was going on in one’s mind when a photograph was taken. Benjamin’s insight into the nature of *mémoire volontaire* explains that, despite its attentiveness, that is, its *presence*, it fails to conjure up the past. The simultaneity of remembering and forgetting gradually destroys what has survived in us from the past, since it is in perpetual contradiction with reality. To appreciate the real worth of the Proustian memory, we must in deference to the parable of the twin fountains of remembrance and forgetting drink simultaneously from the twin sources.

In Benjamin’s Proust essay, the twin sources – Mnemosyne and Lethe – are intertwined; his literary project to invoke the “highest physiognomic expression” of the image of Proust, as a writer, is elusively bound to the “counter-play” of remembering and forgetting. We would be better served if

I sketch it in advance that the function of remembering and forgetting, despite their similarity, despite their intertwining, should not for a moment be approximated as a relation of identity. The difference is preserved in the memory of what Derrida calls elsewhere “*alêtheia*.” And, yet, to perceive a difference between remembering and forgetting as purely antithetical or oppositional categories of memory indicates a misreading, a misrepresentation. What we arrive at after a close reading of Benjamin’s essay on Proust propels us to realize the difference between the presence and the absence of the self. As Carol Jacobs reminds us through her brilliant essay on the same Benjamin text: “Thus all remembrance of things past indicates the inevitable absence of the self from itself.”²⁸

In Proust, Benjamin tells us, remembering and forgetting are forever a “place” of intertwining, a crossroad, a junction – for instance, the intertwining of the roads in Combray that Proust discovers in one of his walks, and also the intertwining of the uneven cobblestones of the Guermites on the uneven flagstones of the Baptistery of San Marco in Proust’s memory. To put it another way, remembering and forgetting forge together where they intersect with each other, in that instant – “a place in time where time itself finds a place – a space that reflects time through images.”²⁹ In a wonderful passage, Blanchot writes: “forgetting is the sun: memory gleams through reflection, reflecting forgetting and drawing from this reflection the light-amazement and clarity – of forgetting” (*JC* 315). And here I am well aware that to quote Blanchot now is rather “out of place,” but is not that the place of Blanchot?

Let’s take another detour, a final detour, to Levinas, who proclaims that in Blanchot “forgetting restores diachrony to time. A diachrony with neither pretension nor retention. To await nothing and forget everything – the opposite of subjectivity – ‘absence of any center’.”³⁰ Thus for Levinas, forgetting that is opposed to remembering, and “waiting that is not waiting for something,” are “juxtaposed” as “Waiting, Forgetting” “without any conjunction having linked them in a structure.”³¹ “Waiting, Forgetting,” not for something or anything, for that will cheapen the discourse of the radical alterity of the Other that Levinas has attributed to Proust’s *œuvre*. In Proust, observes Levinas, there exists “an insatiable curiosity about the alterity of the other.”³² “But Proust’s most profound teaching,” Levinas tells us (although he wonders whether poetry is capable of teaching anything at all), “consists in situating the real in a relation with what forever remains other – with the other as absence and mystery.”³³ Yet even Levinas cannot help, albeit unknowingly, but provide an analogy to Benjamin’s explication of Penelope’s work of forgetting, the unraveling of the threads in the night of forgetting, just like Blanchot, whose work is, as Levinas claims, “Waiting,

forgetting, loosen that ontological field [that is, the ‘inextricable weave of being’], release a thread, untie, erode, relax, obliterate.”³⁴ “And forgetting turns away from the past instant but keeps a relationship with what it turns away from ‘when it remains in words.’ Here diachrony is restored to time. A nocturnal time: ‘the night in which nothing is awaited represents this movement of waiting.’ But the primordial forgetting is the forgetting of oneself.”³⁵

Memory brings us face-to-face with what has been forgotten, the primordial forgetting of the self as the other in the discourse of history. But the former depends for its own existence on the latter (Hegelian dialectics of Master and Slave would corroborate such apprehension), and if not so, then what will be the joy of remembering anything more than the day already ordained to the rituals of remembering. The “unprecedented feeling of happiness”³⁶ that Proust felt at the advent of the involuntary memory is rather produced by, what Blanchot calls, “the transmutation of the memory,” “where the past opens up onto the future that it repeats, so that what comes always comes again, and again, and again” (*BC* 18, 17). In Proust time is made to work, work against the constant threat of destructive time, against the threat of “losing the ‘time’ to write” (*BC* 15). Proust must accomplish the task of writing before the impending disaster of his life, but in a manner that suspends, or neutralizes, the onslaught of the disastrous time, the destructive time that is racing ahead to put a claim on his life, a race against time, that is, death. Henceforth, he must accomplish in his writing the entire experience of his life as he begins to encounter it through his involuntary memory.

In Proust, one does not remember, or better, is loath to remember, what can be recalled. The happiness of remembering resides in a memory that comes from forgetting as a gift, as a Derridean gift without return.³⁷ This memory is not collected or evoked by a mechanism, through the institution of the archive, that knows how to recall and remember, but it is given to us from the depth of an immemorial past that is inaccessible to the mechanism of intelligence, because it lacks the “intentionality” of phenomenological consciousness, the “egological” reverberation of the I in the being-in-the world.³⁸ What comes to us in its own volition, what is never asked for, we can only wait for in utter happiness and full of “supplication” without anticipation. It comes to us defying Proust’s own title of his book *À la Recherche*, “In Search,” for it is precisely this search that one must abandon if one truly wants the taste of the *madeleine*. It requires enormous patience and waiting. The ontological dimension no longer separates forgetting from waiting, but, instead, it forms an antistrophic bond: “Forgetting, waiting. Waiting that assembles, disperses; forgetting that disperses, assembles. Waiting, forgetting.”³⁹ It is, then, Michel Foucault who renders

sembles. Waiting, forgetting.”³⁹ It is, then, Michel Foucault who renders the meaning of this “forgetting, waiting” in Blanchot’s narrative to appear in a broader relief in the simultaneity of approaching and distancing: “the approach of forgetting, the distance of the wait – draw near to one another and unendingly move apart.”⁴⁰

We started at the dawn of philosophy and crossed over to the nocturnal hour, from the synchrony of time to the diachrony of time – “the time of the other” – to the night of oblivion in Proust. For Blanchot: “*In* the night one can die; we reach oblivion. But this *other* night is the death no one dies, the forgetfulness which gets forgotten. In the heart of oblivion it is memory without rest” (SL 164). What took the nocturnal journey of death that began with a dip in Lethe but came back through the power of forgetting is none other than the memory as an erasure of time. “Here, then, time is erased by time itself: here death, the death that is the work of time, is suspended, neutralized, made vain and inoffensive. What an instant! A moment that is ‘freed from the order of time’ and that recreates in me, ‘a man freed from the order of time’” (BC 13). “A man freed from the order of time” is, undoubtedly, Proust. To Benjamin, it is the “convoluted time” of Proust that makes him the prophet of forgetting. Similarly, Blanchot on the “mnemopoeitics” of Proust remarks, “there is in his work perhaps a deceptive but wonderful intertwining of all the forms of time” (BC 11). Proust is truly a man of forgetting, or we could insist that he wrote the most monumental treatise to memory – to *mémoire involontaire*, which precedes the workings of *mémoire volontaire* – because he was himself being forgotten by the literary trends of his time.⁴¹ Yet it was Proust who, Benjamin reminds us, made “the nineteenth century ripe for memories” (III 205). It is to him that we should devote this line from Blanchot to end this homage to the “inspiration,” to the Siren’s song, to forgetting: “It was necessary that he, too, enter into forgetting” (AwO 4). That is, in the end the hiddenness, the meaning of hiddenness, of “the final hiddenness of death, is the root meaning of Lethe,” and therefore, of forgetting.⁴²

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NOTES

¹ The location of Lethe in the underworld, in classical and Gnostic imagery, originates from the oracle cave of Earth-deities (*Chthonioi*) at Lebadeia, where an individual made elaborate preparations to enter down into the dark pit to learn his fate

through “things seen” or “things heard.” Among the preparations, “he has to drink of the water of Lethe, in order to achieve forgetfulness of all that he has hitherto thought of; and on top of it another water Mnemosyne, which gives him remembrance of what he sees when he has gone down.” Classical writers made Lethe one of the principle rivers of the underworld, along with Acheron, Cocytus, Phegethon, and Styx, “Lethe”, *The Mystica*, Date of access 15.3.05 <<http://www.themystica.com/mystica/articles//lethe.html>>

- ² Jean Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Thought among the Greeks* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 81.
- ³ Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*, trans. Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 57.
- ⁴ Vernant, *Myth*, p. 111.
- ⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 103.
- ⁶ Maurice Blanchot, “Thanks (Be Given) to Jacques Derrida”, *The Blanchot Reader*, ed. Michael Holland (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 321.
- ⁷ Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 141.
- ⁸ Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight. Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), p. 92.
- ⁹ De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, p. 93.
- ¹⁰ De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, p. 99.
- ¹¹ De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, p. 92.
- ¹² Emmanuel Levinas, “On Maurice Blanchot”, *Proper Names*, trans Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 127.
- ¹³ Levinas, “On Maurice Blanchot”, p. 127.
- ¹⁴ Gerald L. Bruns, *Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1997), p. 40.
- ¹⁵ Hegel writes in the last paragraph on “Absolute Knowing” that Spirit’s “fulfillment consists in perfectly knowing what it is, in knowing its substance, this knowing is its withdrawal into itself in which it abandons its outer existence and gives its existential shape over to recollection.” G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 492.
- ¹⁶ John Gregg, “Translator’s Introduction”, in *AwO*, p. xvii.
- ¹⁷ Benjamin, “The Image of Proust”, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 201-15, here p. 204. Hereafter all references to *Illuminations* will be abbreviated as *Ill* followed by page number.
- ¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, trans. Adrain Collins (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc. 1857), pp. 6-7.
- ¹⁹ Paul de Man, “Sign and Symbol in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*”, *Critical Inquiry*, 8.4 (1982), p. 773. This stage of involuntary recalling or *Erinnerung* in Hegel is, according to de Man, “rather like” Proust’s *mémoire involontaire*. And since de Man equates *Er-*

innerung with *mémoire involontaire* in Proust, it is but natural that *Gedächtnis* is similarly identified with *mémoire volontaire*. For Proust, we must point out, the significance of *mémoire involontaire* is definitely of a higher order than *mémoire volontaire* in aesthetic representations. This, of course, is an oversimplification of Proust's understanding of the same term. No proper justification can be possibly made which would situate the experience of *mémoire involontaire* within the content of what "is already ours." In Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, Benjamin has discerned a movement toward repetition in which a similar experience is produced with a difference.

- ²⁰ Amresh Sinha, "The Intertwining of Remembering and Forgetting in Walter Benjamin", *Connecticut Review*, 20.2 (1998), pp.99-110.
- ²¹ Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Random House, 1981), 1: 49.
- ²² Proust, *Remembrance*, 3: 568.
- ²³ See Sinha, "The Intertwining of Remembering and Forgetting", p. 102.
- ²⁴ See Benjamin's epigram in the beginning of his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (*III* 217).
- ²⁵ Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography", *One Way Street, and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: New Left, 1979), p. 256.
- ²⁶ See Irving Wohlfarth's fine analysis of *Gedächtnis* and *Erinnerung* in "On the Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin's Last Reflections", *Glyph*, 3 (1978), pp. 148-212.
- ²⁷ According to Benjamin, for Proust the *mémoire involontaire* is not only not present in the individual's past; but is "unmistakably present in some material object (or in the sensation which such an object arouse in us), though we have no idea which one it is" (*III* 158).
- ²⁸ Carol Jacobs, "Walter Benjamin: Image of Proust", *The Dissimulating Harmony* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 101.
- ²⁹ Sinha, "The Intertwining of Remembering and Forgetting", p. 99.
- ³⁰ Levinas, "On Maurice Blanchot", p. 146.
- ³¹ Levinas, "On Maurice Blanchot", p. 145.
- ³² Levinas, "The Other in Proust", p. 103.
- ³³ Levinas, "The Other in Proust", pp. 104-5.
- ³⁴ Levinas, "On Maurice Blanchot", p. 145.
- ³⁵ Levinas, "On Maurice Blanchot", p. 145. The forgetting of oneself is imperative to the understanding of Levinas's dia-chrony of time formulated in opposition to "the egology of synthesis, the gathering of all alterity into presence, and the synchrony of representation" ("Diachrony and Representation" [1982], *Time and the Other*, trans Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, Penn.: Duquesne University Press, 2002), p. 100). It is also important to note that dia-chrony, in that sense, is not a "reduction of time to the essence of being." (p. 103). Instead of being a language of representation and information that waits on the meaning of the being, in diachronic time, Levinas lays down the tenets of ethics as first philosophy, as a "facing up" to

an unlimited responsibility “for-the-other” (p. 107). It is prior to the discourse of memory (“has never come into memory”). In its an-archic responsibility, diachronic time functions “outside of all reminiscence, re-tention, re-presentation, or reference to a remembered present. The significance of an immemorial past, starting from responsibility for the other person comes into the heteronomy of an order. Such is my nonintentional participation in the history of humanity, in the past of the others, who ‘regard me.’ The dia-chrony of a past that does not gather into re-presentation is at the bottom of the concreteness of the time that is the time of my responsibility of the other” (pp. 111-2).

³⁶ Herald Weinrich, *Lethe: The Art and Critique of Forgetting*, trans. Steven Rendall (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 148.

³⁷ See Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); and *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

³⁸ Levinas, “Diachrony and Representation”, p. 98.

³⁹ Gregg, “Translator’s Introduction”, in *AwO*, p. xiii.

⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, “Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside”, *Foucault/ Blanchot*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and Brian Masumi (New York: Zone Books, 1987), p. 24.

⁴¹ Levinas, “The Other in Proust”, *Proper Names*, p. 99.

⁴² Michael Perlman, *Imaginal Memory and the Place of Hiroshima* (Albany: SUNY, 1988), p. 35.