

INTRODUCTION

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In his celebrated essay, "Imaginary Homelands", Salman Rushdie writes about a visit to Bombay, after an absence of twenty years or so, and the unsettling realization that his family's old home is not black and white as it is in the old picture hanging in his study. Standing outside the riotously colourful house, the writer makes a crucial, if painful, discovery: "[t]he colours of my history had seeped out of my mind's eye" (Rushdie 9). Motioned from the grays of memory to the colours of reality, Rushdie inevitably derives a sense of loss from this unfortunate seepage. The past is of course irretrievable. The writer who looks back can only "create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind" (Rushdie 10), and whoever writes about the past "is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost" (Rushdie 11).

If the past is past, if memory is unreliable and forgetting inescapable, the interplay of memory and forgetting as Rushdie sees it may also be the crucible of literary creation:

[t]he broken mirror may actually be as valuable as the one which is supposedly unflawed. ... [I]t was precisely the partial nature of these memories, their fragmentation, that made them so evocative for me. The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were *remains*; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities. (Rushdie 11)

Thus the "broken mirror" of oblivion releases new perspectives, new angles, new narrative configurations. It is with the potentially productive uses of forgetting, with its creative interplay with memory, that this volume will be dealing. This in turn calls for a reappraisal of the commonly accepted opposition between memory and oblivion. After Paul Ricœur and Marc Augé among others, remembering and forgetting will be seen as a collaborative pair, with forgetting as the condition of memory (Ricœur) or as the lifeblood of memory ("la force vive de la mémoire", Augé). The articles

* CAS EA 801

included here are contributions to the delineation of an *ars oblivionis*, a poetics of forgetting in which oblivion's ghostly remains make for emancipatory swerves from the past, for the advent of the new.

We are looking indeed for a shift of perspective in line with Rushdie's "new angles". We wish to explore forgetting as something different from memory's unreliability, from loss, traumatic obfuscation or distortion. We will thus not deal with the type of forgetting that Derrida, reading Freud, links to the death drive, a type of oblivion which "threatens the archival desire" (Derrida 1996, 12), "destroys in advance its own archive" (Derrida 1996, 10) and "incites forgetfulness, amnesia, the annihilation of memory" (Derrida 1996, 11). Forgetting produces variations, rewritings, the writer's "imaginative truth" (Derrida 1996, 10), a transfigured pronouncement about the past.

Freud talks of oblivion as "motivated" (Freud 149. Translation mine), as a "spontaneous selection process" (Freud 128) derived from repression. Expert in the mechanisms of memory lapses, he analyses people's "wish for forgetting" (Freud 10), their secret wish not to remember that is counterbalanced by "false reminiscences", true "deceptions" or "illusions of memory" (Freud 150) like those described by Rushdie. In turn, Marc Augé sees oblivion as the main editor of the narrative configurations of our individual or collective lives. Forgetfulness can thus be read as a paradoxical *dynamis*, a driving force produced by the interplay of oblivion and memory. As Derrida puts it: "forgetting corresponds to the moment of living appropriation. ... One must forget the specter ... so that history can continue" (Derrida 1994, 137). In this contradictory drive, this remembering-while-forgetting-enough, meaning and narratives come to be engendered. As Rushdie underlines, the "broken mirror" of oblivion may also be "a useful tool with which to work in the present" (Rushdie 12), not just in one's quest for the past.

Forgetting has been an object of inquiry in the field of social science; perhaps not so much in the field of literary studies. Yet, as Rushdie's essay highlights, narratives, as fictional constructs, investigate and challenge oblivion. We may thus wonder in what ways, both in their formal and thematic explorations, they weave forgetting, writing and storytelling together, how they represent what Derrida calls "the life of forgetting".

To clarify what this life actually is, we wish to make a short detour to analyse the image we chose for the volume's cover. *Untitled (Two Women)* by Daisy Patton belongs to a series the artist started four years ago, entitled *Forgetting Is So Long*. It is an apt illustration of the active process of forgetfulness, of the living appropriation it entails. Between the erasure or disappearance of memory and the legacy of the "spirit of the past" (Derrida

1994, 136), the life of forgetting points to the need to acknowledge and accept loss—"to keep loss as loss" (Derrida 1996, 19)—and to preserve its traces. As Derrida makes clear concerning photography, "[o]ne keeps the archive of 'some thing' (of someone as some thing) which took place once and is lost, that one keeps as such, as the unkept, in short, a sort of cenotaph: an empty tomb" (Derrida 2010, 19). This echoes Patton's own words when describing her creative process: "[n]ot alive but not quite dead, each person's newly imagined and altered portrait straddles the lines between memory, identity, and death. They are monuments to the forgotten" (Artist statement).

Patton works with discarded family photographs she collects from thrift shops, flea markets or on the Internet. She scans them, enlarges them and paints over them. Her collection of anonymous faces composes an archive of disappearance and erasure:

[Family photographs] show a mother, a child, a past self, full of in-jokes and the mundane meaningful only to a select few. But divorced from their origins, these emotion-ridden images become unknowable and lost in translation. (Artist statement)

The artist talks about a double death, the second one being inflicted by oblivion. She does not wish to recollect or reconstruct memories: her images are freed from any recognisable context; they stand as nameless orphans—all of them remain untitled—free-floating in anachronic times. Daisy Patton's painterly gesture thus updates forgotten presences, their absence suddenly brought closer to us. "With *Forgetting Is So Long*, my aim is to actually de-historicize the individuals from the past to make them present" (Patton 2018). Defacing her subjects to re-figure them as portraits, she secures a future for images emerging from an unknown past. Patton brings forgetting to life as she does not even try to search for things past and lost but exploits oblivion and confronts us with a renewed presence rather than with the absence of those who have irretrievably vanished. "I paint to disrupt, to reimagine, to re-enliven these individuals until I can either no longer recognize them or their presence is too piercing to continue" (Artist statement).

Preserving the mark of loss means working on what survives, a secret and ineffable tenuous presence. It means making the afterlife appear, "a being from the past that keeps surviving" (Didi-Huberman 33) through a painterly defacing/refacing process. Such is the Warburgian survival analysed by art historian Georges Didi-Huberman: that which abolishes chronology to reveal constant becoming and sketch a new temporality, the

out of joint, private time of intimacy and hauntedness. Patton reckons on disappearance, on what remains in what we have forgotten and which might bring renewal:

I like the idea that photography is a representation of death (death of a moment, from Barthes), while painting is an elongation of time, or at least allows for a dynamic understanding of what time can be. My challenge with this series is to strike that tightrope walk of transforming the photograph into something new and alive through paint, permitting neither medium to overpower the other and totally destroy each other. (Patton 2016)

Shunning nostalgia, Daisy Patton confesses to being touched by mysterious details she then hides under colourful ornaments, by poignant remains that prick her and trigger emotions which allow for the "regenerating reviviscence of the past" (Derrida 1994, 136).

As the title of her series—a quote from Neruda's "Tonight I Can Write"—suggests, forgetting lingers and endures. It holds on. Because they preserve their first photographic face underneath the paint, Patton's transfigured portraits make the persisting presence of unidentified people very vivid. In the folds of the photo-pictorial palimpsest, what-has-been survives retouched. Daisy Patton's work is thus shaped "between a mechanical reproduction of the specter and an appropriation that is so alive, so interiorising, so assimilating of the inheritance and of the 'spirit of the past' that it is none other than the life of forgetting, life as forgetting itself" (Derrida 1994, 136).

Forgetting also lingers and endures in the field of 20th- and 21st-century British literature as the essays collected in this issue will show. "The life of forgetting" ripples on, producing narratives where oblivion is spun into memory, where elusive absences are captured and new presences are summoned.

The ambivalent and fruitful relation between remembering and forgetting is at the centre of T.S. Eliot's poetry. Analysing the poet's evolution through Nietzsche's construction of history and modernity, Philippe Birgy understands forgetfulness as a crucial aspect of modernity, one that cannot be separated from the desperate urge to memorialise and the backward glance it occasions. Reappraising Eliot's conservative, even reactionary, attitude towards modernity and its crisis of memory at the turn of the 20th century, Philippe Birgy shows in what ways oblivion works with

poetic liberation and how creativity needs to be released from human time to shape the new.

In turn, Anne-Marie Smith-Di Biasio explores the memory of forgetting in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and *Jacob's Room*. Focusing on reading scenes which rework inter-intra-textual references to Tennyson and Grimm, she analyses how "forgotten fragments of past texts are inscribed in the narrative present in a form of working through". Her analyses of the afterlife of forgetting takes on the writings of Benjamin, Freud and Fédida in order to reveal the ghosts of a future past, timeless dream images prefiguring the loss and destruction of World War 1.

In Adam Thorpe's *Still*, oblivion is not presented either as a negative foil to memory or as absolute nothingness, but as a compound of presence and absence. Delving into linguistic and stylistic inventiveness, Alexandre Privat explores the subject's mediated relationship to negativity, which oblivion is part of, to shed light on the creative potential of the gap between remembering and forgetting.

In Armelle Parey's article, Alzheimer's disease and its gradual loss of memory and of cognitive function are shown to be the breeding ground of new possibilities for contemporary British fiction. In Emma Healey's *Elizabeth is Missing*, forgetting paradoxically starts a heuristic process which leads to the solving of an old mystery, and contributes something to the renewal of the conventions of detective fiction: through the unusual association of forgetting and sleuthing, the conventional closure which the genre postulates is revised into a less comforting stagnation, as well as a "post-postmodern" imperative to listen to the voice of those afflicted with dementia.

Although more tangentially, Alzheimer's disease is also present in Lisa Appignanesi's *The Memory Man*, the novel discussed in Silvia Pellicer-Ortín's essay. The author explores the links between memory, forgetting and trauma, arguing that forgetting is a new direction in memory studies and that forgetting and remembering are "two sides of the same memory coin". Retracing the protagonist's journey from forgetting to remembering, the paper offers insightful analyses of the interaction of the two at individual and collective levels, but also of the tension between the totalising discourse of neurobiology and the multiperspectival approach of the memory novel.

With Katia Marcellin's study of two novels by Ali Smith, we step into ethical ground. We see how the figure of metalepsis produces both an ethical and healing kind of oblivion that presides over the emergence of a dispossessed self. Laying the ghosts of the past, taking the self out of a neoliberal logic of accumulation of goods or memories, metalepsis performs

emancipation and transformation, and makes way for an encounter with the vulnerable other within and without.

Finally, Jean-Michel Ganteau's essay presents Jon McGregor's novel, *Reservoir 13*, as a narrative which captures forgetting in the making through the recording of insignificant details of the everyday which blur into forgetting as soon as they are perceived. The impossible task of this *ars oblivionis* consists in gesturing towards forgetting and its lacunae which the saturated textual matter, the blunting of perception, repetition and metalepsis are symptoms of. Thus, to go back to Ricœur, forgetting is not only the condition of memory; it is also the condition "of the capacity to create and to tell stories".

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