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The Power of Forgetting: *Ressentiment*, Guilt, and Transformative Politics

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Though long regarded as an injustice in its own right, willed forgetting is currently enjoying something of a revival in politics. Concerned by the threat memory poses to both the peace and vitality of the state, critics have championed forgetting for its power to release us from *ressentiment* and begin anew. In this article, I take a closer look at Nietzsche's conception of willed forgetfulness, specifically as it is set out in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, to bring out what contemporary critics of the "surfeit of memory" seem happy to ignore: Namely, that a certain kind of cruelty, either against others or towards oneself, is the sine qua non of forgetting. Drawing on Freud as a supplement, I argue that many of the symptoms critics ascribe to the surfeit of memory—the culture of victimhood, the tyranny of guilt, the displacement of action, and the eclipse of visionary modes of imagining the future—may in actual fact be the product of forgetting.

Keywords: conflict, memory, *ressentiment*, guilt, forgetting, Nietzsche, Freud

"Politikos is the name of one who knows how to agree to oblivion." (Louraux, 2006, p. 43)

The dim view now commonly taken of forgetting in politics owes a great deal (perhaps everything) to the Shoah. In the wake of the Nazi attempt to annihilate a people and then erase all traces of the crime, the *ars oblivionis* came to be regarded, not just as an obstacle to the pursuit of justice, but as an extension of the original offence. Where forgetting was not violently denounced on the grounds that it cheats victims out of "the one thing," as Theodore Adorno put it, "that our powerlessness can grant them," it was deemed more or less of a piece with the original crime itself (Adorno, 1986, p. 117). To fail to remember, claimed Paul Ricoeur (1995), was to "kill the victims twice" (p. 290)—the implication being that advocates of forgetting were guilty, not just of being accessories to the original crime (which their forgetfulness completes), but of symbolically repeating it. Through the act of forgetting, the body of the victim was, as it were, incinerated again, only this time without leaving even that trace of the crime upon which a form of public instruction and a practice of public mourning might be built. In short, then, to forget was to conspire and to injure. Whether done consciously or unconsciously, it left the dead in the very "holes of oblivion" (this being the name Arendt gave the concentration camps) to which the perpetrators consigned them and from which there could now be no rescue other than the rescue of memory (Arendt, 1976, p. 459).

The more the Shoah has receded in historical memory, however, the more willing critics have been to question the "duty of memory." Before the twentieth century ended, Charles Maier (1993) had already issued his diagnosis of a "surfeit of memory," locating its symptoms in a culture of victimhood and a retreat from transformative politics. Though by no means hostile to remembrance in all its forms, Maier alluded to the natural tendency for collective memory to become sacralized and the deleterious effects this could have on civic life. Since collective memories are almost invariably founded upon "painful incidents of victimisation," he claimed, they give rise to a politics of *ressentiment* that pivots around cultural, not civic, identity. Thus, where citizens might once have devoted their political energies to the betterment of the collective, they were now inclined either to pursue public recognition for the sufferings of *their* group or gaze guiltily upon the misdeeds of *their* group (p. 144). Remarkably prescient in his critique of "identity politics," Maier has now been joined by a chorus of critics concerned that contemporary political life is preoccupied with the traumas of the past and ought be reoriented back to the future (Bruckner, 2010; Elshtain, 2003; Rieff, 2011, 2016; Torpey, 2001; Vivian, 2010). Perhaps the clearest indication of the changing mood is to found in the fact that it is no longer quite so unacceptable to pose the question that sits at the center of David Reiff's (2011) provocatively titled polemic *Against Remembrance*: "what if, instead of being the herald of meaninglessness, it is a decent measure of communal forgetting that is the sine qua non of a peaceful and decent society?" (p. 46).

In fairness, none of these critics deny that there is something ethically impoverished in simply forgetting. The argument, surprisingly Nietzschean in flavor, is rather that at some point remembrance becomes "hostile to life" in the double sense of both keeping the wounds of the past perpetually open and of closing us off from the fecundity of the future. "There comes a time," writes Pascal Bruckner (2010), appropriating and reshaping Marx's memorable phrase from the *Communist Manifesto*,

> when we have to let the dead bury the dead, taking with them their dissensions and their woes. Focusing on what separates us rather than on what unites us is always dangerous. Oblivion is what makes room for the living, for newcomers who want to wipe away the obligations of the past and not bear the burden of

> ancient resentments. It is a power of beginning again for future generations. (pp. 162–163).

Exactly when that time comes and how the dead are supposed to bury themselves are matters of some equivocation, if not matters of some evasion. Bruckner and Rieff both agree that the "biological duration" must be respected: so long as there are still victims of the crime living among us we are obliged to honor their suffering as best we can. Yet neither believes we can "go on forever using suffering to make demands on the future" (Bruckner, 2010, p. 162). Indeed, as a witness to the civil wars that memory can spark, Rieff (2011) insists that forgetting might be just as much a moral duty as remembrance: "I do not see why Nietzsche's notion of active forgetting is any less viable or, once the survivors of a great crime and their immediate descendants are dead, less moral than the stubborn adherence to memory as a categorical imperative" (p. 127).[1]

Though it is hard not to be taken aback when liberal democrats begin to cite Nietzsche approvingly, such allusions are neither without sense nor merit. While Nietzsche does not figure prominently in the literature on postconflict or transitional societies, his insights into the psychological residues of pain and loss (namely, hatred and guilt) help sharpen our sense of what our attempts to bury the past are up against. Indeed, as one of the first to frame memory as a problem of pathology, bound up with issues of health and sickness, Nietzsche directs our attention squarely to the problem of psychic processing, famously figuring it through the alimentary metaphor of digestion (see Ansell-Pearson, 2005, p. 53). For Nietzsche, the crucial question in this respect is always that of limits: At what point, he invites us to consider, does our consumption of the past cease to be a source of nourishment and become instead a source of indigestion? Long before Freud, in other words, Nietzsche (1997) was acutely conscious of the fact that there are limits to our "plastic powers"—that is, to our capacity to incorporate or digest our experiences—and that the health and vitality of peoples as much as individuals depends upon them knowing what *not* to consume (p. 62). Always future-oriented, Nietzsche (1887/1969) attempts to secure us against the indigestible (that is, against trauma) by championing forgetfulness as a "positive faculty of repression" that allows us to "make room for new things" (*GM* 2:1).[2] In more ways than one, therefore, he is a natural ally of all those concerned about the surfeit of memory and the need to begin anew.

For the most part, however, contemporary advocates of democracy, whether of a more civil or a more vital kind, have been happy to borrow the slogans—"forgetting is essential to life"—without paying too much attention either to the context in which Nietzsche developed them or to the psychological and political demands they place upon us. While forgetting is understood as an ethical breach, it is generally regarded as one that saves us from being (rather than causing us to become) "wounded monsters" (Rieff, 2011, p. 133). In this article, I turn to Nietzsche's (1887/1969) *On the Genealogy of Morals* to expose what critics of memory seem happy to ignore: That a certain kind of cruelty, either against others or against oneself, is the sine qua non of forgetting. To forget the debts of the past, Nietzsche helps us to see, one must either be so rich as to not feel them or so fearful as to not recall them. In the first case, forgetting emerges as the unique privilege of the all-powerful sovereign that is

[1] In a similar vein, W. James Booth (2001) has noted that "[r]emembrance draws us to what is dead and to the irreversible. It is nostalgia, bitterness, or the thirst for revenge. All these dwell in what is beyond human agency to modify; all it seems, irrationally resist the becoming of time. Worse, all (therefore) sacrifice the present for the sake of the past. Perhaps forgetting, the letting go of the past, as Nietzsche argued, is essential to life" (p. 783).

[2] Throughout, I will use the abbreviation "*GM*" to reference *On the Genealogy of Morals* in parenthetical citations.

insensitive to loss. And this, I suggest, inadvertently helps to explain why the victims of state violence commonly find it so difficult to get the perpetrator to remember the misdeeds of the past. In the second case, forgetting emerges as a form of repression imposed by citizens upon themselves out of fear of the return of internecine violence. And this, I suggest, taking instruction from the Athenian Amnesty of 403 BCE, is calculated, less to put the past behind us, than to ensure its reappearance in the form of neuroses. Drawing on Freud as a supplement, I conclude by suggesting that many of the symptoms critics ascribe to the surfeit of memory—the culture of victimhood, the tyranny of guilt, the displacement of action, and the eclipse of visionary modes of imagining the future—may in actual fact be the product of forgetting.

Memory, Ressentiment, and Grand Politics

Critics of the surfeit of memory characteristically take inspiration from the second of Nietzsche's (1997) so-called "untimely meditations," *On the Uses and Abuses of History for Life* (1874), citing his famous slogan that "forgetting is essential to life" (p. 62). Arguably, however, it is *On the Genealogy of Morals* that provides us with the most valuable tools for thinking through the problem of memory and forgetting in politics. In that work, Nietzsche abandons his earlier belief in the natural distinction between animals and humans, exchanging it for a genealogical account in which man acquires his historical form through brutal self-fashioning. Once upon a time, he claims, we too were animals without memory, a creature as naturally inconstant and forgetful as the cattle in the field and with just as little by way of culture. To become what we are, we have had to change our nature entirely. Since even the most rudimentary form of society depends upon us being able to remember rules, according to Nietzsche, man cannot emerge from his animal state until his natural inclination towards forgetfulness has been overcome—civilization begins with the recollection of "five or six 'I shall not's'" (*GM* 2:3). Despite (or perhaps because) of its importance, however, this faculty of memory is far from easily acquired. If the inconstant "human animal," once attuned only to the passing moment, was finally turned into a reliable "man," capable of conforming to rules, according to Nietzsche, it was only because the most fearful "mnemotechnics" had been applied to him:

> Man could never do without blood, torture, and sacrifices when he felt the need to create a memory for himself; the most dreadful sacrifices and pledges (sacrifices of the first-born among them), the most repulsive mutilations (castration, for example), the cruelest rites of all the religious cults (and all religions are at the deepest level systems of cruelties)—all this has its origin in the instinct that realized that pain is the most powerful aid to mnemonics. (*GM* 2:3)

Nietzsche's first and last word on "mnemotechnics" is easily summarized: "'If something is to stay in the memory it must be burned in: only that which never ceases to *hurt* stays in the memory'—this is the main clause of the oldest (unhappily also the most enduring) psychology on earth" (*GM* 2:3). Unhappily indeed! One would be hard pressed to deny that this psychology (and the conclusions Nietzsche develops from it) are tough to stomach, even, it seems, for Nietzsche scholars. As Deinstag (1997) has noted, "[i]t would be difficult to overemphasise the degree to which the secondary literature on Nietzsche…has fled the bloody *Genealogy* for the calmer climate of the second of the *Untimely Meditations*" (p. 113). To say that his thoughts on mnemotechnics are unpalatable is not, however, to say that they are wrong. If the connection between victimization and memory is as strong as critics like Maier suggest, that which Nietzsche says at the beginning of the *Genealogy* could be especially applicable here: "plain, harsh, ugly, repellent…truths do exist" (*GM* 1:2). No doubt Nietzsche goes too far in saying that it is *only* that which never ceases to hurt which stays in the memory. As Ansell-Pearson (2005) notes, pleasurable experiences stay there too, opening up the possibility that the "return of memory" can be an occasion for "great joy" as well as

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"tremendous anguish" (p. 55). Yet, that concession does not do too much damage to Nietzsche's psychological realism. When it comes to leaving an impression (and what else is memory?), pain may not be the *only thing*, but it is a *sure thing*—however unhappy we humans may be about it.

If we can take him at his word, Nietzsche too is "unhappy" about the oldest and most enduring psychology on earth. Yet clearly not so much so that he can't find consolation in what our brutal mnemotechnics has yielded: "the sovereign individual" who can remember what he has said he will do and has thus acquired "the right to make promises" (*GM* 2:2). With equable, or perhaps ominous, irony (it is hard to tell which), he suggests that this is just another example of "how much blood and cruelty lie at the bottom of all 'good things'!" (*GM* 2:3). For all his apparent *sang-froid* in face of our painful transformation into an historical animal, however, the genealogist of morals is hardly blind to the pathologies to which man becomes exposed once he has acquired the faculty of memory. Drawn, as ever, to what is higher and noble (at least in his view), Nietzsche locates the distinction of the "sovereign individual" in the fact that he *chooses* to remember. His is an "active *desire*" not to rid himself of his pledge and so a "real *memory of the will*" (*GM* 2:1). To be consistent with his views about the oldest psychology on earth, however, Nietzsche must also concede that "memory has an existence independent of our will" (see Ansell-Pearson, 2005, p. 55). If the calculated application of pain is what brings the human animal to the remembrance of every "thou shalt not," it can only be because the experience of suffering clings to him regardless of his desire to cast it off. And if this is true of the human animal, that inconstant creature lying at the very beginning of our so-called "moral development," how much more is it likely to be true of the late human being who has already been broken in to memory?[3]

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In the *Genealogy*, then, the acquisition of the faculty of memory is presented as a paradoxical achievement. On the one hand, it is the precondition of one of Nietzsche's most celebrated human types: the sovereign individual who has the right to make promises. Without the capacity to remember his undertakings, man would have stayed a prisoner of happenstance, forever unable, as Nietzsche puts it, "to stand security for *his own future*" (*GM* 2:1). On the other hand, the faculty of memory exposes him to what Shakespeare instructively called "the whips and scorns of time": "The oppressors wrong, the proud man's contumely/The pangs of disprized love, the law's delay"[4] Once his natural inclination towards forgetfulness has been overcome, man is condemned to remember a great many things that he might be better off forgetting (if only he could). At the same time that he cherishes the hard won right of the sovereign individual to be taken at his word, therefore, Nietzsche is acutely conscious of the maladies to which man becomes vulnerable once his (brutal) transformation into an historical animal is complete. To live a life "in time" is to carry the burden of memory and therein lays the source of what is for Nietzsche perhaps our most debilitating sickness: *ressentiment*. Born of undigested experiences of suffering, *ressentiment* is, for Nietzsche, the temporal disorder par excellence. For in contrast to the righteous rage that devours itself fully in acts of revenge, *ressentiment* is like a stone that sits

[3] "Perhaps in those days," writes Nietzsche (1887/1969), in what is an ugly, but revealing comment form the second essay of the *Genealogy*, "pain did not hurt as much as it does now; at least that is the conclusion a doctor may arrive at who has treated Negroes (taken as representatives of pre-historic man –) for sever internal inflammations that would drive even the best constituted European to distraction—in the case of the Negroes they do *not* do so" (p. 68).

[4] *Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 1.

in the stomach, poisoning every now with what has been. To it we owe not only hatred but also guilt.

Nietzsche's conception of *ressentiment* is, as Kaufmann (1969) notes, "one of his major contributions to psychology" (p. 7). Yet since it is also the place where his psychological and political concerns intersect, it provides an ideal vehicle for exploring the nature of grievance, the seductions of revenge, and the power of forgetting as an instrument of transformation. In his portrait of the "man of *ressentiment*," Nietzsche gives us a striking insight into both the psychological *and* political implications of our failure to rid ourselves of an (unwanted) impression. In his diagnosis, *ressentiment* always has a double aetiology: a sense of grievance and an inability to do anything about it. For Nietzsche, it is characteristic of the man of *ressentiment* that he refuses to accept suffering as something inherent to life. Someone is always to blame for it and so hatred finds its targets. However, unlike the aggrieved noble man who, should he feel a sense of *ressentiment* at all, exhausts it in an immediate reaction, the man of *ressentiment* is marked by his incapacity to respond or retaliate—that is, to "act out his reactions" (Ansell-Pearson, 2005, p. 57). In him, the desire for revenge is expressed inwardly in feeling rather than outwardly in action, and in this dark, underground shelter, it becomes increasingly poisonous. Obsessed with getting even, but unable to vent his anger, the man of *ressentiment* does not so much consume the past as become consumed by it, his hatred growing in its impotence to "monstrous and uncanny proportions" (*GM* 1:7). And yet, as Nietzsche points out, this incapacity for action by no means nullifies him as an historical force. On the contrary, it is precisely from the frustration of his desire that his "*grand* politics of revenge" is born (*GM* 1:8).

Nietzsche's shorthand for this grand politics of revenge is the "slave revolt in morality"—a revolt that predates Christianity, is realized through it and is then carried on in secular form through the democratic era. Having long suffered at the hands of the masters, according to Nietzsche, the slave exacts his "farseeing, subterranean, slowly advancing, and premeditated revenge" by inverting the entire table of values that had hitherto governed society (*GM* 1:8). Where previously "the good" had been equated with the noble, powerful, beautiful, and happy, it is now the wretched alone who are deemed good. The suffering, the deprived, the sick, the ugly—these alone are now the pious ones, these alone blessed by God (*GM* 1:7). That Nietzsche finds little to like in this "morality of *ressentiment*" almost goes without saying, for on his reckoning it is, at base, a negation, rather than an affirmation, of life. That which the man of *ressentiment* lacks the strength to do he labels evil, and only as an afterthought does he describe himself as good (*GM* 1:10). Yet his grudging admiration for this grand politics of revenge, two thousand years in the making, is undeniable. Though, in his view, the weak can no more choose to be weak than the strong can choose to be strong, the former have succeeded in transforming impotence into goodness of heart, anxious lowliness into humility, and subjection to those one hates into obedience (*GM* 1:13). "Out of the cauldron of unsatisfied hatred," in other words, a whole new morality has been created, which, for all its dishonesty, has nevertheless become ascendant and infected the vital instincts (*GM* 1:11). In the wake of the save revolt in morality, what was once considered a wholly natural expression of the will to power—namely, the desire to dominate—is figured as immoral and gives rise to feelings of guilt.

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The significance of all this should not be lost on us. In the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche takes the critique of the surfeit of memory further than even the most polemical of contemporary scholars would dare or, one must presume, desire. While he shares with them a certain disdain for the culture of victimhood, the tyranny of guilt, the displacement of action, and the eclipse of visionary modes of imagining the future, his genealogical analysis finds a much earlier origin for them and implicates precisely the democratic order in whose name their war upon the excess of memory is waged. For Nietzsche, our preoccupation with the past is not a

product of the late twentieth century. It began two thousand years ago with the slave revolt in morality, was fully realized in the Christian era, and subsequently carried through in secular form in modern democracy. Seen from his perspective, the great democratic movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, now so mournfully recollected by contemporary critics of the politics of memory, was already a culture of victimhood, hell bent on curbing the vital instinct of the will to power and leveling all. To Nietzsche, disturbingly enough, the chant of the French Revolution, "supreme rights of the majority," is itself a "slogan of *ressentiment*," reflective of a will "to the lowering, the abasement, the levelling and the decline and twilight of mankind" (*GM* 1:16). In it reverberates the central principle of the slave revolt: that the powerful ought to feel guilty simply for being powerful. Without even knowing it, therefore, we moderns have long been the prisoners of the past. Our entire democratic way of life owes its origins to those who were incapable of letting things go.

Nietzsche's concern with the future or, to be more precise, with the future of humanity, ultimately leads him to fashion a grand politics of his own. In order to regain his health, man must, according to Nietzsche, close the door on the past and make a new beginning as a species by overcoming the culture of *ressentiment* in favor of a tragi-heroic culture in which life is affirmed in all its suffering and unpredictability (Thiele, 1995, p. 15). Where hitherto he has resisted the world, seeking metaphysical comforts for his suffering, pain, and agony, he must now embrace life as it is: *amor fati* (Kaufmann, 1976, p. 324). Their hostility to the politics of *ressentiment* and willingness to call up Nietzsche's concept of *amor fati* notwithstanding, contemporary advocates of forgetting and a more future-oriented politics clearly have more modest ambitions (see Rieff, 2016, p. 111). In their case, the objective is not the revitalization of a decadent Western culture, but the revitalization of an overly memorious democracy. That Nietzsche would have found this an inherently contradictory endeavor (democracy being for him an inherently antivital, life-sapping form) is perhaps our first hint that his particular brand of "active forgetfulness" may not be especially helpful as an antidote to the hatred and guilt that serves as the mark of the "divided society." But such prejudgments stand, as always, in need of demonstration.

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In the space that remains, I turn directly to Nietzsche's comments about forgetting in the *Genealogy*, reading them in light of his claim that "pain is the most powerful aide to mnemonics." In order to be consistent with his psychological assumptions, I argue, Nietzsche can conceive of forgetting in only two forms, neither of which is particularly attractive *from a democratic perspective*. Either he must understand it as an insensitivity to pain, in which case it emerges as the unique privilege of the sovereign, of him "beyond the law," who is already, as it were, predisposed to forgetting. Or he must understand it as an effect of pain, in which case it leads to a willingness to use punishment, or the threat thereof, to impress upon citizens the need to remember *not* to remember. As I go on to suggest, the second of these may, in situations of emergency, have a certain kind of utility as a means of stemming cycles of violence and restoring civic peace. (Though, contra Bruckner and Rieff, this would mean disrespecting the "biological duration" and not waiting until the victims are dead before institutionalizing a policy of forgetting.) Even in this case, however, forgetting seems in danger of reproducing precisely those symptoms that it is meant to overcome. Drawing upon the famous case of the Athenian Amnesty of 403 BCE, I suggest that the ban on memory is, like any form of repression, calculated to produce neurosis. Rather than revivify politics, I argue, the Amnesty heightened fears of political division, engendered feelings of guilt and precipitated an on-going identity crisis.

The Power of Forgetting

In the first essay of the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche provides his readers with an arresting solution to the problem of trauma and *ressentiment*: Don't let yourself become a victim! In what turns out to be highly instructive example, he presents Mirabeau as an exemplar of

robust health on the grounds that he had "no memory for insults and vile actions done to him" (*GM* 1:10). Such a man, he tells us, is able to "shake off with a *single* shrug many vermin that eat deeply into others" (*GM* 1:10). Though consistent with the second untimely meditation in terms of the association it draws between strength and forgetting, this reference to Mirabeau contains a striking inversion of the alimentary metaphor that runs through the earlier work (*UM* 63).[5] Having there persistently couched our relationship to the past in terms of a process of digestion, he now alludes to the frightening possibility of certain experiences eating into us as we eat into them. Some things, it seems, are acid to our insides, and it is the ability to keep these from staying within the digestive system (or entering it at all) that both differentiates the strong and allows them to maintain their strength. Mirabeau serves as an exemplar of health because he knows vermin when he sees them and denies them the opportunity to gnaw their way through his entrails. He forgets the vile actions done to him and in doing so spares his innards the slow feast of the parasite that is the singular disease of "the man of *ressentiment*."

But how does Mirabeau pull it off? How does an animal that has been trained to remember have no memory of precisely those painful events that, according to Nietzsche, are the most likely to stay with us? One answer is that he doesn't pull it off at all. As Ure (2007) notes, Nietzsche is in this case "oddly and uncharacteristically" blind to the possibility that Mirabeau's lack of *ressentiment* in the face of the vile actions done to him is a form of self-deception, reflective of a regression into primary narcissism. Viewed from this perspective, his causal dismissal of his enemies is less a sign of vitality than a means of taking flight from the struggle for recognition where wounded pride is an ever-present possibility. His insouciance is, to put it simply, a "perverse kind of therapy" (p. 63). Unable to accept his dependency upon others, his need for *their recognition*, Mirabeau retreats into the illusion of narcissistic self-sufficiency where nothing can touch him for the simple reason that there is no "other" (p. 63). Ure's analysis of the regressive infantilism of the wounded narcissist is not unconvincing, especially in light of Freud's view about the enduring power of the narcissistic drive. The fact that Mirabeau's self-sufficiency is illusory, a retreat from the reality of intersubjective relations that will ultimately reassert itself, does not make it any less likely as a response to insult—are we not always partly in flight from the "relentless assaults of reality"? (Freud, 1956, p. 57). But suppose, for the sake of argument, that Mirabeau's bravado is not false, his lack of *ressentiment* not *merely* apparent. What, then, would be the secret behind his happy forgetfulness? The only answer that is consistent with Nietzsche's views about the oldest and most enduring psychology on earth is that he feels no pain. Mirabeau can't remember for the very simple reason that he has not been hurt.

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A charitable explanation of this invulnerability to suffering might attribute it to the cultivation of a certain Stoic indifference towards the things of the world. Mirabeau, one might surmise, has trained himself not to place any store in his reputation and so does not feel its loss when he is dishonored. Such things don't matter to him because he has effectively withdrawn from the world of need and desire where our happiness is always at the mercy of others (see Nussbaum, 2001, p. 362). However, Nietzsche explicitly points his readers to a different explanation. In the passage which prefaces his reference to Mirabeau, he writes as follows: "To be incapable of taking one's enemies, one's accidents, even one's misdeeds seriously for very long—that is the sign of strong, full natures in whom there is an excess of the power to form, to mould, to recuperate and to forget" (*GM* 1:10). In this passage, which clearly harkens back to the concept of plastic power from the second untimely meditation, Mirabeau's invulnerability to suffering emerges as a function, less of a Stoic *apathia* that

[5] "*UM*" represents Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations.*

treats losses as unimportant, than of a noble superabundance that makes losses unnoticeable. Arguably, the best analogy Nietzsche gives us for Mirabeau is that of "the creditor" he speaks of later in the *Genealogy* who has grown so rich that he barely even notices when his debtors default on their repayments. Like Mirabeau, such a creditor can "endure injury without suffering from it" because he enjoys a noble luxury (*GM* 2:10). Put simply, Mirabeau forgets the insults to his honor (which is another way of saying he doesn't bother to call in his debts), because they cause him no pain. His abundance makes retaliation as superfluous as mourning.

It is easy to see what Nietzsche sees in Mirabeau. His "wealth" means he can "afford" to be forgetful of "debts"—by no means an unattractive trait, especially in politics (as the case of Mandela attests). And yet, his insensitivity to loss also makes him a problematic figure from a democratic perspective. Mirabeau's capacity to endure injury without suffering from it effectively releases him from the restraint exercised by the negative judgment of others. Since nothing they say or do touches him, he does not *need* to take them into consideration. Conceivably that would not be such a problem were it only the vile actions of others *towards him* that was under discussion. Though Mirabeau's lack of anger in the face of villainy would seem to compromise his capacity to act as an agent of justice (does it not simply allow his enemies to act with impunity?), it could also spare the political world some of the rancor that drives cycles of violence. However, as Nietzsche makes clear, it is not just the injustices they suffer, but the misdeeds they commit which those like Mirabeau are incapable of taking seriously for very long. Since the opinion of others leaves no impression upon such noble types, they are just as impervious to censure as they are to insult—both will be shaken off "with a *single* shrug." Mirabeau's forgetfulness thus speaks more of contempt than of benevolence. At the root of his failure to remember either what he is owed *or what he owes* is a sense of the insignificance of the debtor and the creditor *to him*. Both travail in such trifling amounts that he can scarcely be bothered with them.

Forgetting, then, comes easy to those who feel no pain or suffer no loss. But who among us is really so rich that they can endure injury without suffering from it and happily renounce the pursuit of recompense (that is, justice)? For whom, in other words, would this insensitivity to loss not amount to a retreat into the illusion of narcissistic self-sufficiency? Nietzsche's answer is instructive: "[T]his self-overcoming of justice: one knows the beautiful name it has given itself—*mercy*; it goes without saying that mercy remains the privilege of the most powerful man, or better, his—beyond the law" (*GM* 2:10). Arguably one should never read Nietzsche so literally, but it is hard not to interpret the phrase "beyond the law" as a reference, not to the sovereign individual, but to the sovereign state, precisely as we find it represented in Hobbes and Schmitt. Configured by both as a gigantic juristic person, a "mortal God" who must be beyond the law in order to secure the law, the sovereign is the only one, in the strictly legal sense, who can make exceptions. Only he can decide *not* to enforce the law, *not* to call in the debts, "[proving] by pardons and amnesties his supremacy over his own laws" (Schmitt, 2005, p. 38). However, as the famous image from the frontispiece of Hobbes' *Leviathan* suggests, it is not just the *right* to forget that distinguishes the sovereign from his subjects, it is also the *capacity* to forget. Since he incorporates the power of all his subjects, consolidating it in one body, the sovereign really is capable of enduring injury without suffering from it (Hobbes, 1985, p. 227). To take a line out of the Book of Job from which Hobbes draws his image of the leviathan: "the sword that reaches it has no effect…it laughs at the rattling of the lance." He truly is the "most powerful man" who, by virtue of his sheer excess, has no memory for the insults and vile actions done to him. In short, then, and to steal a phrase from Schmitt, sovereign is he who is able to forget.

Transposed into this political register—a register where the subterranean links between Nietzsche and Schmitt appear ever more clearly—the forgetfulness of the "sovereign man" appears simultaneously more plausible and more disturbing. Endowed with an excess

of power, the sovereign towers over his subjects, impervious to their slings and arrows, surely the only genuine exception to the oldest and most enduring psychology on earth. To him, for whom "nothing on earth is his equal," forgetting comes easily—arguably much too easily. Incapable of being wounded, the sovereign is at liberty to be merciful to those who transgress the law—what does it matter to him? Yet, as Pompidou's presidential pardon of Paul Tovier (a Vichy militia officer who ordered the execution of Jewish hostages in 1944) demonstrated, sovereign "pardons and amnesties" often show scant regard for ordinary people who *have* been wounded by their fellow citizens but are thereby denied the chance to recoup *their* losses (see Koven, 1995, p. 55). Worse off still, perhaps, are those who suffer at the hands of the sovereign himself. Since nothing his subjects do, no pain they are capable of inflicting upon him, will be sufficient to *make* him remember the misdeeds he commits, the recollection and resolution of past injustice becomes entirely contingent upon sovereign will. If the sovereign recalls what he has done to his subjects, it will not be because they have succeeded in burning the offence into his memory but because he *chooses* to remember it. The inherently precarious nature of this position has been demonstrated many times over by those minority groups around the world whose political struggle consists precisely in trying to make the sovereign recall his past misdeeds and take them seriously. Try as they might, such groups, to borrow the title of a recent publication concerning the Aboriginal peoples of Australia, are always at risk of becoming "the forgotten people" (Freeman & Morris, 2016). Their criticisms and accusations are all too easily "shaken off with a single shrug"—and that too is a breeding ground for *ressentiment* if ever there was one.

The other pathway to forgetfulness consistent with Nietzsche's psychology does not pose anything like the same problems for the relations of mutual recognition that underpin democracy. Yet, it may not, in the end, be a great deal more attractive. Although Nietzsche does not develop this line of thought himself, his claim that pain is the most powerful aide to mnemonics points to the possibility of a forgetting secured through punishment or the threat thereof—a forgetting, in other words, which only takes effect because it has been *burned in the memory*. The key to understanding this apparent paradox is to be found in the practice of promising. As the *Genealogy* makes clear, the real payoff (and "great justification") of our brutal initiation into the habits of memory is not to be found in the fact that we can recall things from the past, but in the fact that we can make promises for the future (*GM* 2:2). As Nietzsche underlines, society becomes possible, not just because we are capable of remembering rules (those five or six "I shall not's"), but because a degree of trust can be placed in our promise to adhere to them. Ultimately it is the commitment to remember and the remembering of the commitment that matters. There is thus no inherent contradiction in the idea of remembering to forget. Should a state wish to make a rule about forgetting (that is, to place a ban upon remembering something), there is no reason why its citizens might not pledge to remember that rule. And if some were to find that especially challenging, the government can always call in that great *aide memoire*—the threat of punishment—to help them remember what it is they ought not remember.

Recourse to this kind of "commanded forgetting," as Ricoeur puts it, has been recurring feature of post-civil war reconstructions, not least of all within France (Ricoeur, 2006, pp. 452–456). However, the first, and arguably still the most instructive, instance of a ban on memory was the Athenian Amnesty of 403 BCE that brought the civil war to an end and sealed the democratic reconciliation. Having ended the bloody oligarchy of the Thirty Tyrants, the returning democrats waived their rights of revenge for all but the Thirty themselves, opting instead for a policy of a public forgetting whose form fully anticipates Nietzsche's thoughts on mnemotechnics. As Louraux (1998) notes, the Amnesty of 403 was a "memorable forgetting" built upon a double proscription: the first a *decree*—it is forbidden to recall the misfortunes/evils—the second—an *oath*, I shall not recall the misfortunes/evils (p.

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87). In adopting this double form, the Athenians were effectively conceding that the ban (even with the threat of punishment) might not be enough to prevent citizens from brandishing their memories in the manner of a weapon. The only way to ensure that the events of the past were not used to sew dissension was to have each citizen commit to the ban; that is, to make them promise *not to remember*. Despite the etymological association between amnesty and amnesia, therefore, the institutionalized forgetting of the Athenians was, in fact, entirely reliant upon the memory of a pledge underwritten by the threat of pain. Indeed, as can be inferred from the story of the "unknown democrat," put to death without judgment for having dredged up the past, the ultimate guarantor that no citizen would forget to forget was, as always, punishment. "[O]nce this promoter of memory was put to death," writes Louraux, here citing Aristotle, "'no one afterwards recalled the misfortunes'" (p. 90).

Classical sources provide grounds for thinking that this institutionalized forgetting achieved precisely what contemporary critics of the surfeit of memory might hope: a release from the resentments of the past and an openness to the future. Thus Isocrates could write: "[S]ince we mutually gave each other pledges…we govern ourselves in a manner as beautiful as collective as if no misfortune had happened to us" (cited in Louraux, 1998, p. 91). Worked over by Louraux, Isocrates' remarks help to illuminate the twin benefits of this self-chosen (and thus, one must presume, fully conscious) pact of forgetting. In the first place, it secures the transformation of "enemies" into "friends" that simultaneously institutes the civil peace and bolsters the position of Athens relative to other city-states. Thus, where only a few months previously the Athenians had confronted each other "army against army," they were now reconciled as "citizen to citizen"—the division of the city all but forgotten (Louraux, 1998, pp. 90–91). Secondly, and just as importantly, institutionalized forgetting clears the collective of citizens to once again act in an uninhibited way, as if they had lost nothing, *as if no misfortune had ever befallen them*: "[E]verything is clear: politics is to act as if everything were fine. As if nothing had happened. Neither conflict nor murder nor ill-feelings (nor resentment)" (p. 91). Not unlike the whitewash used to recoat the official stone tablets of the ancient Greek world, then, institutionalized forgetting works in the manner of a solvent. With its help, Athens too could erase the past and begin anew or, as Barbara Cassin (2002) has instructively put it, "devastate the devastation" (p. 23). But with what efficacy and at what cost?

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If it were possible to consider things from a purely political perspective, one in which everything hinges on the integrity and vitality of the state, the answer to that question might well be: no cost at all. Following Schmitt (2007, p. 32) in his emphasis upon the friend-enemy distinction as the essence of "the political," the Athenian amnesty of 403 BCE could be regarded as an admirable *political* response to what is a distinctly political problem; namely, the weakening of the common identity that occurs when internal antagonisms erupt into civil war. By taking the exceptional step of imposing a ban upon memory, institutionalized forgetting brings an end to that most disastrous of all "states of exception"—civil war—and in doing so restores life to political life. At the bare minimum, in other words, amnesty reinvigorates the body politic by reinstating the friend-enemy distinction in its proper signification—namely in relations *between* states—and returns the phenomenon of war (for Schmitt, the greatest existential threat to which an individual can be exposed) to its rightful place *beyond* the city walls. Moreover, by drawing a line under the past, forgetting avoids the risk of further "self-laceration" inherent to both the ethical (apology) and the economic (reparations) modes of repairing loss. Since grievances cannot be aired, the manifold problems associated with allocating responsibility for loss and repairing the irreparable cannot arise. The body politic goes on as if nothing had happened and is thus spared both a life-destroying cycle of revenge and a life-sapping absorption in the past.

And one could go further still—moving, if ever so slightly, from the political to the aesthetic (or the aesthetico-political). Isocrates' remarks (cited above), put one in mind of Nietzsche's sovereign individual, whose nobility resides in the fact that he *chooses* to remember his pledge even when, especially when, circumstances make it difficult to do so. In contrast to the case of Mirabeau, who has no difficulty forgetting because he feels no loss, the citizens of Athens make a conscious decision to forget *despite* the enormity of their loss. Their pledge is an act of repression, but since it is a self-chosen repression, directed against their own anger and grief out of an enlightened sense of the threat such affects pose to the unity of the people, it becomes as "beautiful" as it is "collective." To read the Amnesty of 403 BCE in this way is not to depart from the Schmittian view that institutionalized forgetting belongs to the logic of the exception, that it is an extraordinary measure for extraordinary situations. It is simply to loosen its connection with sovereign prerogative and assume, in the words of Tracy Strong (2007), "[that] the decision about the exception is a decision that *each* person can make" (p. xix). Since, in this case, every citizen must take the pledge, repression can no longer name the force exerted by the tyrant over unwilling subjects. Instead, it signifies the conscious resistance to the instinctual that each and every citizen must perform to restore (or refound) the political community as a pact of mutual obligation. To take the pledge is to unite with equals, declaring before them and with them that politics can trump trauma *if we want it to*.

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Thus forgetting: an institution that is as beautiful as it is functional. Who could ask for more? The answer, I would hazard, is no one, and if that does not make our psychoanalytic antennae tingle nothing will. Assuming, with Freud, that powerful prohibitions (in his case the incest taboo, in our case the memory taboo) imply equally powerful impulses, there are good reasons to doubt both the viability and beauty of institutionalized forgetting—at least in the longer term. Are we to assume that aggression and eros (these being the instinctual foundations of revenge and mourning respectively) will go silent just because citizens have consciously pledged not to recall the past? Or is it more likely that these instincts will continue to exert a certain psychological pressure on citizens that eventually either breaks through the damn of repression or manifests in neurotic symptoms? Doubtless whatever conclusion we ultimately arrive at with regards to institutionalized forgetting will have much to do with the perspective—political, aesthetic, psychological—from which we view it. As always, different theoretical lamps cast different light and leave different things in shadow. If nothing else, however, the need to impose a ban upon memory ought to encourage us to look beyond Nietzsche's idea of forgetting as a self-chosen activity to those psychological functions that go on, as it were, behind the backs of actors. One phenomenon that is surely of more than passing interest in this connection is that which Freud sometimes described as the psychological analogue of civil war: repression.

All of Freudian psychoanalysis is, in effect, built on the assumption that the satisfaction of the instincts is pleasurable *without exception* (Freud, 1984, p. 145). If repression comes into play, therefore, it is never because the gratification of an instinct would be unpleasant "in itself," but because the pleasure it delivers in one place is outweighed by the unpleasure it produces in another: "[It is] a condition for repression that the motive force of unpleasure shall have acquired more strength than the pleasure obtained from satisfaction" (p. 146). Repression is only to be expected, in other words, whenever the calculus of pleasure and unpleasure (for Freud an accounting procedure that takes place *beneath* the level of consciousness) stacks up against instinctual satisfaction. Even in cases were the instincts are subjected to this kind of "vicissitude," however, the repressive mechanism does little more, according to Freud, than set up a roadblock. Though it might turn the instinct (or, more accurately, its "ideational representative" and "quantum of affect") away and keep it at a distance from the conscious, it does nothing to diminish (and may, in fact, increase) the

pressure it exerts. The return of the repressed can thus be expected, first, whenever the balance of pleasure and unpleasure shifts back in favor of instinctual satisfaction and, second, whenever the repressed instinct succeeds, through a process of substitution or displacement, in transforming itself into something that eludes the censorship of the conscious—jokes and dreams being the two most celebrated instances in Freudian psychoanalysis (p. 149).

Seen from this perspective, the greatest challenge that any attempt at institutionalized forgetting faces is to ensure that the calculus of pleasure and unpleasure remains firmly in favor of instinctual repression. If aggression and eros (both of which, in this case, might incite subjects to recall the misfortunes/evils) are to be held in check, their satisfaction must become firmly associated with unpleasure. In the case of the Athenian Amnesty of 403 BCE, this association between remembrance and displeasure is created, in the first and more trivial instance, by the threat of punishment and, in the second and more serious instance, by the threat of the return of civil war itself. By punishing individuals (or, at least, *one* individual) for "recalling the misfortunes," the community of citizens makes it clear that seeking recovery for loss can only lead to more loss; namely the loss of one's own life. However, since the loss of one life is nothing compared to the loss of political life (this being the "life" upon which the "lives" of all citizens finally depend), the success of the repressive mechanism is ultimately dependent upon the perpetuation of civil war as a "real," by which I mean palpable, danger. This, in Louraux's (2006) words, is "the terror attached to the oath" (p. 41). The more civil war fades as an existential threat, the more, in other words, that it turns into a *mere* theoretical possibility, the more likely it is that the ban on recalling the misfortunes will be transgressed. From Freud's theory of repression, then, we derive the paradoxical conclusion that in order to prevent talk of civil war, civil war must be always on our minds. And so the thing to be erased becomes instead a kind of fixation.

Doubtless it would be anachronistic to suggest that the Athenian obsession with civil war began in 403 BCE. As Louraux (2006) points out, fear of the city at war with itself, "abandoned by the Gods and prey to the scourge that dries up all life within it," goes back a long way in ancient Greece and is a recurring, perhaps even *the* dominant, motif in Athenian tragedy of the fifth century—not least of all Aeschylus's *Orestia*, first performed a good 50 years before the civil war (pp. 31–33, 40). And yet one might still speculate, taking a lead from Louraux, about the intensification of fear needed to sustain the ban on memory after the events of 404–403 BCE and the neurotic symptoms to which it gave rise. To begin with, there is that obsession with unity over division, characteristic of so many postconflict states in our own time, which in fourth-century Athens elevates consensus to an unreserved good and seeks reconciliation everywhere. That the returning democrats should deny their victory and, in fact, vow never to speak of it thereafter, is but one expression of a neurosis of division that leads, at its extreme, according to Louraux, to a denial of the political itself: "[H]ow could anyone who has been absorbed in the horrible spectacle of parricide go back to the ideas of regulated operation of 'victory' in the city or of a legitimately carried-out division of the civic body?" (p. 40). In the wake of civil war, in other words, even voting terrifies because it serves as a reminder that the city is not one with itself. And one might further speculate, mindful of the analogy between civil war and the primal scene (this being Freud's "horrible spectacle of parricide"), about the desire for the return of the tyrant/father, the better to hold the rivalries between the citizen-brothers in check—an unkind, but by no means implausible, way of accounting for the turn taken by Platonic philosophy in the fourth century.

This fixation upon civil war and the desire it creates either for the all-forgiving mother or the all-powerful father (that is, for reconciliation or tyranny) is clearly troubling from a democratic perspective—wither contestation? However, it would be wrong to assume that this exhausts the "costs" associated with institutionalized forgetting. If Freud's theory of repression can be trusted, we do not give up wanting things just because they are banned; we

simply hold those wants at bay and in doing so become vulnerable to guilt and hatred. To want what is banned—this, for Freud, is the very engine of guilt and the basis upon which his whole theory of the Oedipus complex is built. Were it not for the fact that the son's hatred towards the father *ought not to be there*, he would not need to turn it back upon himself in an endless cycle of guilt and self-laceration. In Freud, the *locus-classicus* of this psychological complex of desire-prohibition-neurosis is the incest taboo, but there is no reason to assume that the memory taboo of 403 BCE would not have created similar effects, especially when one considers that what was at stake there too was the repression of an *ares emphulios*, "war within the family" (Louraux, 2006, p. 31). The story of the unknown democrat, summarily executed for dredging up this war within the family, indicates that the desire to recall the misfortunes remained alive after the Amnesty of 403 BCE—at least in *one person*. In this case, however, one might safely take the anomaly as indicative of the norm. Why otherwise the need to set such a vicious example? Who among the Athenians would have been immune to feelings of ambivalence towards the "friends" who, only a short time ago, were "enemies"? Who among them did not simultaneously hate *and* love—hate the ones they were expected to love, but who, only yesterday, had killed the ones they *really* loved? And who among them, to go one step further, did not hate themselves for still hating the others?

Despite its status as a "founding forgetting," then, everything points to the likelihood that that the Amnesty of 403 BCE left behind a remainder—phobia remains, enmity remains, and guilt remains. The suggestion that institutionalized forgetting can free us from the dead hand of the past and the tyranny of guilt would thus seem quite misleading. The more plausible argument is that it achieves precisely the opposite: irresolution rather than resolution. Perhaps if we knew more about the jokes and dreams of the ancient Athenians—for Freud two critical windows onto the unconscious—we might be less taken by the beauty and utility of their institutionalized forgetting and less prepared to believe in the unity it created. Even in the absence of such knowledge, however, we are not starved of evidence of an on-going identity crisis of precisely the kind that bedevils those postconflict states much closer to us in historical time who have tried to repress the memory of civil war: Are "we" really a "we"?[6] Thus Louraux (1998), for all the praise she lavishes upon the self-discipline that gives the political ban its durability, still has her doubts about the power of the Amnesty of 403 BCE to reunify the polis: "[O]ne could wager that no operation of memory was successful in closing the wound, so deep was the gash made in the city by the conflict" (pp. 88–89). In this instance, paradoxically, the past weighs all the more heavily for having been "forgotten" and nowhere more so than on the character of democracy itself. In the fourth century, writes Louraux (2006), the name of democracy is no longer dangerous to evoke "because the thing itself is no longer dangerous" (p. 42). Fear of division has driven the *agon* underground leaving behind a much more timid, and arguably much less vital, polis.

Conclusion

It is hard to imagine that the newfound interest in (and praise for) forgetting in politics is unrelated to the historical chasm that now stands between us and the Shoah. Indeed, what Tracy Strong (2007) has to say about the revival of interest in Carl Schmitt would, *mutatis mutandis*, seem to apply equally well to the revival of interest in forgetting: "[A]s the Nazi experience fades from consciousness…so also possibilities excluded by the spectre of Auschwitz have returned" (p. xxvii). That, in itself, is not, of course, enough to condemn forgetting as a political institution. But it is a salutary reminder about its conditions of acceptability and, with that, of the need to maintain a certain critical vigilance. The upshot of the analysis presented here is not that the kind of forgetting championed by Nietzsche has no

[6] An exemplary study in this vein is Rousso's (1991) *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France Since 1944.*

role whatsoever to play in politics. Clearly there are circumstances—civil war being the most obvious—where institutionalized forgetting can be an effective, perhaps even a necessary measure in the short term. The worry is that forgetting will have precisely the opposite effect to what is intended: not a release from the traumas of the past, but a deferral (and potentially even an intensification) of their effects. Insofar as it remains the privilege of the sovereign, forgetting is more likely to cause, rather than cure, *ressentiment*, and insofar as it exercised by the citizenry upon themselves it is more likely to enervate the political than energize it. While forgetting may succeed in putting things "on hold" for a time, in other words, the chances of it delivering a genuine release from weight of the past seem slim indeed.

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