

Lewis Hyde's new book reconsiders the role of forgetting

By Anthony Domestico
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A Primer for Forgetting: Getting Past the Past, by Lewis Hyde. FSG, 384 pp. \$28

Early on in “A Primer for Forgetting,” Lewis Hyde’s idiosyncratic and brilliant new book, we read about “programmed cell death” — the biological process by which certain cells die and, through their dying, turn “undifferentiated flesh” into “useful organs and tissues.” In one example Hyde offers, “Two flipper-like appendages turn into hands as the cells between the fingers die off, separating the digits.” The destruction of cells leads to the creation of fingers; death and life, dissolution and formation, engage in a generative dance.

After giving us this condensed description of a complex phenomenon, Hyde pivots to his book’s subject: “Normal forgetting is the programmed cell death of mental life. It winnows the day. It shapes experience into a useful story.” Without programmed cell death, we wouldn’t have organs; without forgetting, Hyde suggests, we wouldn’t have stories or selves.

To live in time is to live in a realm of forgetfulness — and that, Hyde argues, is a good thing. If we remembered all of the thoughts we think and the experiences we have, we’d live in chaos. Yet if we couldn’t forget our habitual ways of being, we’d never be able to see the world freshly, in all its particular details. Forgetfulness, at least some of the time and in some forms, is something to be celebrated, certainly something to be investigated.

Hyde, whose earlier work “The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property” blended anthropology and aesthetics to scintillating effect, describes “A Primer for Forgetting” as “an experiment in both thought and form.” It’s an experiment in thought because it subverts our tendency to associate memory with discipline and intelligence, forgetfulness with distraction and infirmity. Looking at forgetfulness through multiple lenses — myth, psychology, politics, and aesthetics — Hyde instead sets out to “test the proposition that forgetfulness can be more useful than memory or, at the very least, that memory functions best in tandem with forgetting” .

Everywhere Hyde looks, he finds forgetfulness. Considering religion, he quotes the Zen master Dogen: “To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self”; Christianity likewise preaches an emptying out — which is to say, a forgetting — of the self. Great art makes us forget old ways of perceiving so that, as Hyde writes, “the stone may again be stony, the grass grassy, the divan divany, the life lively.” In politics, forgetting, if it arises after honest remembering, can lead to a new national life “steeped in history but not in the past.”

Over the years, Hyde has collected samples — from poems and philosophical treatises and psychological studies and art exhibits — that speak to forgetting, and he shapes his intentionally scattershot book around these selections and his brief responses to them. He’ll give us a quotation from John Cage followed by his own thoughts on the “practice of self-forgetfulness”; then, following the “native jumpiness of [Hyde’s] mind,” we’re on to Nietzsche, then Freud, then Frederick Douglass. Most of the entries are around a page, many only a few sentences.

Though Hyde asserts that his book “does not so much argue its point ... as simply sketch the territory [he has] been exploring,” it does have a rough thesis: forgetting serves an oftentimes good, and in any event necessary, role in the creation of poems and selves and nations. It’s just that this argument is made through apposition: the tension existing between his different sources and his own musings, between how forgetting plays out in different realms and in different times. Does he contradict himself? Very well then he contradicts himself. After all, contradicting oneself comes from forgetting oneself, and forgetting oneself can lead to new life.

Hyde doesn’t shrink from the hard cases, especially when thinking about historical trauma. Of course, forgetting the past can serve bad ends. Consider how the intentional amnesia of the Lost Cause — roughly summarized, “Henceforth any story claiming abolition as the cause of [the Civil War] shall be forgotten” — helped lead to the Ku Klux Klan. Yet an unwillingness to forget can turn old wounds gangrenous, too — hence the occasional necessity of amnesty, which Hyde defines as “judicial forgetting” .

Etymologically, forgetting relates to “the covering up or hiding of something.” This association leads Hyde to think about bad and good burials: “in one, something is hidden because we can’t stand to look at it; in the other, it is buried because we are done with it. It has been revealed and examined, and now it may be covered up or dropped for good.”

There’s bad forgetting; we all know this. But there’s also good forgetting, a laying to rest that enables growth. In his new book, Hyde makes us forget what we thought we knew about forgetfulness — and, in doing so, he makes us know forgetfulness for the first time.

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