

A Primer for Forgetting by Lewis Hyde review – in praise of oblivion

An absorbing exploration of memory, creative freedom and the significance of letting go

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The arts of forgetting, as Lewis Hyde reminds us in this wonderfully inventive book, have at least as venerable a history as the more familiar arts of memory. Mythology is abundant in illustrations of the spiritual and therapeutic values of forgetting, as are the histories of art, religion, philosophy and nationhood.

Among modern thinkers, this ancient and primordial power was recognised above all by Nietzsche, who in the first of his *Untimely Meditations* insisted that “any action requires oblivion”, and that all human unhappiness derived from a deficiency of forgetting. He would later enjoy an “active forgetting” as a means of preserving a space in consciousness “for something new”.

In the century that followed, the idea of forgetting as an active force would be a recurring motif in thinkers as diverse as Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud and Martin Heidegger, as well as in imaginative writers from Marcel Proust to Georges Perec, each of whom encourages us to see memory and forgetting in a relationship of intimacy rather than of opposition, to notice the many ways in which each assumes and depends on the other.

Hyde’s reflections on the different forms and possibilities of oblivion turn insistently on those instances in which language and culture reveal this intimacy. Kierkegaard, for example, notices that we “consign something to oblivion”, the word signifying the act of marking with a seal, such that the thing marked out is the very thing to be forgotten.

Hyde’s “associative collage” of fragmentary stories, meditations and recollections turns on this paradoxical relation between memory and forgetting. Perhaps the most intriguing and original argument of the book is that forgetting is an essential condition for imaginative as well as political freedom. Imaginative freedom has been Hyde’s abiding theme since the publication of his now classic 1983 study *The Gift*, which made the case for the infinite generosity of a “gift economy” of art against the pinched rivalries of a market economy.

A Primer for Forgetting states the case for creative freedom less in the traditional mode of rigorous argument and carefully marshalled evidence, of which Hyde endearingly declares himself at the outset to have grown weary, than in its very form.

But while his project owes much to this literary-philosophical lineage, it is also markedly and importantly different. His style and tone have little resonance with the enigmatic, melancholy and allusive signatures of those European masters. For the likes of Adorno and Blanchot, the exercise of imaginative freedom entails a liberation from the strictures of established forms and received meanings; difficulty is a matter of political and philosophical resistance.

For the author of *The Gift*, in contrast, creative freedom is above all a matter of cultural democracy, meaning the gifts of art should be disseminated without social, economic, racial or gendered restrictions or exclusions. In this as in many things, Hyde is very much a stylistic and political descendant of one of that earlier book's heroes, the visionary poet Walt Whitman, whose delirious lyric epics sought to affirm the full range of humanity from within the expansive confines of his selfhood, and whose essays forged an intricate link between democracy and imagination.

Clarity and accessibility are in this sense more than creditable qualities of Hyde's prose; they express a distinctly American vision of a cultural commons whose riches are available to all who wish to enjoy them.

And nowhere is this Americanness more evident than in Hyde's qualified defence of forgetting. For the Transcendentalists, the new nation's pre-eminent thinkers, America's promise (as well as its subsequent betrayal) was bound up with the chance to break with the European past. Hyde cites HD Thoreau here: "The Atlantic is a Lethean stream, in our passage over which we have had an opportunity to forget the Old World and its institutions."

Forgetting the old world means shaking off the burden of its worn-out traditions and moribund cultural hierarchies. But it's here that Hyde is especially wary of misunderstanding. To forget is not to erase, unless we understand erasure in the sense of the Hebrew Bible's command to "blot out the memory of Amalek", or more profanely, of Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning*, a work consisting of the marks left by the artist's rubbing out of his friend's pencil drawing. In both cases, an act of forgetting is indistinguishable from an act of remembering.

For Hyde, the value of this paradox is as much political as creative, a point nicely illustrated by a section, *The Pact of Forgetting*, on the practice of amnesty in traumatised nations. In Spain, the transition to democracy after Franco's death in 1975 was felt to demand the collective forgetting of "any discriminatory legacy of the past" in the form of a blanket amnesty on all historical crimes. This, Hyde suggests, is an "amnesic amnesty" to be distinguished from "accountable amnesty", in which the establishment of truth and the offer of reparation are necessary conditions for reconciliation and forgiveness.

Only when it operates in concert with memory can forgetting clear new ground without foreclosing the past. When forgetting is instead invoked as the binary of memory, as in Spain after Franco, it ends up perpetuating the very violence it seeks to end.

With such a free-flowing stream of association comes the obvious and necessary risk of unevenness. *A Primer* isn't without its lapses; some of the childhood stories tend a little towards mawkishness, and while the sequence of entries recounting Charles Moore's journey towards the forgiveness of the Klansmen who murdered his brother tells a remarkable and moving story, its relatively long form sits uneasily inside the book's aphoristic structure. But when a consignment of gifts is as bountiful and various as this, even the lesser ones add texture and colour.

Not Working: Why We Have to Stop by Josh Cohen is published by Granta. *A Primer for Forgetting* by Lewis Hyde is published by Canongate (£17.99).