BRADFORD VIVIAN

Public Forgetting

The Rhetoric and Politics of Beginning Again

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FOR ANNE — *unforgettable*

made it seem so imperative for us to think and speak of forgetting in such stridently negative ways—always as oblivion, liquidation, or amnesia, as the tragic loss, absence, or lack of memory? How might we learn to think and speak of it anew as a substantive resource of public judgment regarding communal lessons of the past?

PART I

FORGETTING IN PUBLIC LIFE: AN IDIOMATIC HISTORY OF THE PRESENT

One

THE TWO RIVERS, PAST AND PRESENT

I contend that one cannot understand in full the nature of prevailing rhetorical resources for assigning significance to forgetting in public culture without studying their patent family resemblance to traditional tropes and figures of forgetting. The textual sources of these tropes and figures—all manner of intellectual, spiritual, and artistic reflections on memory and its fortunes in the Western tradition—are legion. The present chapter provides merely a synoptic overview of such tropes and figures in order to establish argumentative grounds for reconsidering equations of forgetting with oblivion that motivate seemingly unarguable present-day investments in public memory. Doing so will also establish a clear basis for comparison with succeeding chapters of this book, which seek to identify and apply alternate heuristics for evaluating the nature and effects of forgetting in particular cultures of memory.

Long-standing affinities among rhetoric, memory, and forgetfulness date to the classical origins of Western thought and culture. Foundational Latin treatises on rhetoric credit the poet Simonides of Ceos with inventing the so-called art of memory (*ars memoriae*)—a mnemonic method that enabled poets and orators to develop extraordinary powers of memory and remained an essential component of Western education for centuries.[1] Legend has it that Simonides, while dining at the house of a wealthy nobleman after a chariot race, was called outside by two young men seeking an audience with him; after he exited, the roof of the banquet hall caved in and killed the other celebrants still inside. Shortly thereafter, Simonides alone was able to name those who perished by remembering where he had seen them in the banquet hall, thereby identifying the dead so their families could commit their unrecognizable remains to a proper burial. "Prompted by this experience," Cicero recounts in *De oratore,* Simonides "made the discovery that order is what most brings light to our memory. And he concluded that those

who would like to employ this part of their abilities should choose localities, then form mental images of the things they wanted to store in their memory, and place these in the localities" (2001, 2.354; see also 1.18, 1.157, 2.299–300, and 3.230). Thus began the formal tradition of mnemonics, which Frances Yates (2001) has so masterfully documented, wherein orators assigned particular *topoi* (or lines of argument) to different places within an imagined building. Orators exhibited astounding capacities for recall by mentally walking through such imagined spaces as they spoke, discoursing on topics according to the order in which they were there arranged. "And it was as part of the art of rhetoric," Yates writes, "that the art of memory traveled down through the European tradition in which it was never forgotten, or not forgotten until comparatively modern times" (2).

The dramatic episode that allegedly inspired the art of memory implicitly associates forgetting with death and memory with life (or at least a kind of life). The Greeks' fear of being forgotten and deprived of lasting fame after death operates subtly in the story of Simonides' mnemonic display. The poet's feats of memory afforded those killed in the unforeseen tragedy a measure of life after death, ensuring that their names and reputations would survive in communal recollection. If Simonides had not remembered the victims' names, then they would have been consigned to oblivion rather than communal memory. To forget, in this instance, is to amplify the power of death. Or better: forgetting as such betokens a kind of death.

The intellectual and performative tradition of mnemonics therefore originates in a manifestly negative depiction of forgetting as the opposite of, or even a threat to, communal memory—and, to this extent, as a struggle of life over death, of metaphysical redemption over physical oblivion. The cultural and intellectual movements that profoundly influenced dominant Western perceptions of memory developed by appealing persistently to this incipient symbolism, wherein memory connoted life, action, productivity, and presence and forgetting signified death, passivity, barrenness, and absence. These tropes of life and death, or activity and passivity, survive in modern ideals of memory and preserve the negative value of forgetting even at this late date.

This antithesis between memory and forgetting, between life and death, descends from the ancient mythological *topoi* of Lethe and Mnemosyne.[2] *Lēthe* meant "forgetfulness" or "concealment" (conversely, the Greek word for truth—*alḗthia*—meant "*un*forgetfulness" or "*un*concealment").[3] Lethe was also the name of a river in Hades; drinking from it causes forgetfulness, and in some tales souls imbibed its waters prior to reincarnation in

order to forget their past lives. Mnemosyne, in contrast, not only personified memory in Greek poetry but was mother of the nine Muses by Zeus.[4] Memory, in this figuration, is impressively fertile—biologically, culturally, and artistically. Souls in Hades could likewise drink from a river named Mnemosyne, but its waters, unlike those of the river Lethe, enhanced their recollections. Whereas the currents of memory ensure continuity between body and soul, mortal and immortal life, those of forgetfulness erase abiding connection between flesh and spirit, between earthly life and afterlife. From antiquity to modernity, Western intellectual, literary, and religious authorities drew from the mythological symbolism of Lethe and Mnemosyne in order to preserve forgetting as a synonym of absence, erosion, loss, or death. The symbolism of life and death, of cultivation and destruction, operates at the heart of major intellectual, religious, and artistic movements without which both our historical and contemporary attitudes toward memory and forgetting would not exist.

Forgetting, from Antiquity to Modernity and Beyond

Plato's reflections on memory, wisdom, and morality are unsurpassed in their influence on long-standing suspicions against forgetting. Plato adheres strictly to the etymological meaning of the word "philosopher": philosophers are dignified by their love of wisdom (*philosophía*).[5] According to Plato, one owes one's love of wisdom, and the preeminent title of philosopher, to the inborn providence of memory. Some individuals fortunately possess souls that remember visions of ideal truth they acquired while traversing the heavenly sphere in disembodied form prior to their incarnation in human flesh. In the *Meno,* Plato has Socrates instruct the title character that his pedagogy consists in training oneself to activate intuitive wisdom latent in one's soul. "Thus, the soul," Socrates expounds, "since it is immortal and has been born many times, and has seen all things both here and in the other world, has learned everything that is. So we need not be surprised if it can recall the knowledge of virtue or anything else which, as we see, it once possessed" (81c–d). Learning, by the Socratic model, is recollection (*anamnesis*). In the Myth of Er (at the end of Plato's *Republic*) a warrior dies on the battlefield, then wanders in the afterlife among fellow souls as they receive judgment and learn their impending human fates. These other souls "journeyed to the Plain of Oblivion," where they were made to drink from "the River of Forgetfulness" (X.621a), but the warrior is resurrected so he

may tell the living what he has witnessed. And in Plato's *Phaedrus,* Socrates relates a myth in which Theuth, a god, boasts to the Egyptian king Thamus of having invented the art of writing, proclaiming it "a branch of learning that will make the people of Egypt wiser and improve their memories," "a recipe for memory and wisdom" (274e). Thamus, however, objects that "if men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls" (275a). Writing, he retorts, is "a recipe not for memory, but for reminder"; it does not furnish wisdom from anamnesis "but only its semblance," the effect of which will be to fill pupils "with the conceit of wisdom" (275a–b). Plato riddles these and other dialogues with literary motifs all dramatizing this central theme: philosophers love wisdom the most, and become wisest above all others, because their souls remember the luster of its divine forms so well.

Foundational sources of Judeo-Christian teaching also identify forgetting as a neglectful, unrighteous condition. Old Testament prophets time and again adjure the Israelites to remember God's covenant with them, for the distractions of earthly pleasures repeatedly breed spiritual indolence among his chosen people.[6] Forgetting constitutes a breach of the divine covenant—the ultimate offense against God. Moses' exhortations to the Israelites not to forget this holy pact comprise a rhetorical leitmotif throughout the book of Exodus. "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt," he proclaims in Deuteronomy, "and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; and therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day" (Deut. 5:15). God's faith in the chosen people is one with his steadfast oath to remember the original terms of the covenant: "He will neither abandon you nor destroy you; he will not forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them" (Deut. 4:31). The Israelites honor God, and follow his divine example, in remembering the covenant; forgetting the covenant is tantamount to renouncing God. The biblical history of the Jewish people demonstrates the pragmatic urgency of such impassioned prophetic reminders: in exile, the survival of Jewish history depended upon its preservation in communal memory. The Jewish people are thus, as Jacques Le Goff would have it, "the people of remembrance par excellence" (1996, 132). In this sense, the Hebrew Bible and the ethos of the people it continually calls into being is a monumental work of memory.

Holy injunctions against forgetting are also central to Christian theology. Jesus' life, suffering, and sacrificial death introduce a new covenant between God and humankind: as Jesus' death redeems humanity of its sins, so humanity must honor that sacrifice by remaining faithful to the Holy Word, of

which he was the singular human embodiment. The Eucharist establishes this new covenant—the definitive article of Christian theology—as one of remembrance, of demonstrating one's faith by not forgetting. Jesus breaks bread and distributes it among his disciples at the Last Supper, instructing them: "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19).

Augustine, greatest of the early church fathers, synthesizes Platonic and Judeo-Christian *doxa* concerning memory and the woeful prospect of forgetting in his enduringly influential testament of faith, the *Confessions.* "Great is the power of memory," he famously proclaims (X.xvii.26).[7] The seminal moment in Augustine's story of conversion is his realization that he had forgotten God's word in living a sinfully pagan life. He nonetheless rediscovers divine grace in the salvific fact that his creator has not forgotten him: "I call upon you, my God, my Mercy. You made me and, when I forgot you, you did not forget me" (XIII.i.1). For Augustine, Christian faith is defined by the belief that God does not forget us even when we forget God's call. This polarity between the steadfastness of God's memory and the heedlessness of human recollection is the sine qua non of Augustine's teaching.

Even in our forgetfulness of God's divine presence, according to Augustine, God sends signs that may help us reestablish our connection with divinity. Plato's influence looms large in this dimension of Augustine's thought, as articulated in the simultaneously theological and psychological treatment of memory in book 10 of the *Confessions.* Such signs—heavenly stimuli to remembrance—resemble Plato's ideal forms insofar as they incite us to rediscover our knowledge of God, our capacity for beholding God's radiance, dwelling within us since birth. Our souls, as in Plato, retain latent memories of the divine, before their incarnation in human form, if only we may train ourselves to remember God by reawakening those traces. Memory is the lodestar by which we recover our abiding relations with God: "Where shall I find you?" Augustine muses. "If I find you outside my memory, I am not mindful of you. And how shall I find you if I am not mindful of you?" (X.xvi.24). For Augustine, there is more at stake in such divine reminding than personal salvation. His charge to remember God as God remembers us provides a formula for gaining entrance to, and furthering the enlargement of, that kingdom of memory known as Christendom.

Even comparatively approving literary explorations of forgetfulness, evident throughout the history of Western letters, depict it as a hopelessly passive condition. Virgil, Dante, Milton, Goethe, Schiller, and many others employ the symbolism of Lethe in describing those liminal currents that

run between life and death, remembering and forgetting, experience and oblivion. Dante's *Purgatory* infuses Lethe with patently Christian significance when Matilda informs the poet's narrative double that the river Lethe "removes as it flows down all memory of sin" (XXVIII.127–28).[8] Milton similarly recasts Lethe according to Christian motifs in *Paradise Lost,* but in his rendering the waters of forgetfulness stupefy rather than redeem:

> Far off from these a slow and silent stream,
> Lethè the river of oblivion rolls
> Her watery labyrinth, whereof who drinks,
> Forthwith his former state and being forgets,
> Forgets both joy and grief, pleasure and pain.
> (2007, II.582–86)

In Milton's epic, "Lethè the river of oblivion" leaves numbness, not regeneration, in its wake; it obliterates all experience, whether pleasant or painful—"both joy and grief, pleasure and pain." Goethe's *Faust,* moreover, includes an appreciation of such waters as thawing, replenishing currents. The wager Faust makes with Mephistopheles commences various scenes of forgetting in which the disavowal of one's past symbolizes spiritual liberation: "Let all past time for us be done and ended," he says. "For happiness Arcadian-free!" (1965, II.9563, 9573). These literary figurations *appear* to endow Lethe with estimable value—removing the memory of sin or pain, at however comprehensive a cost—yet forgetfulness in such depictions remains an ominously ambiguous proposition, signifying at best a form of amnesia. These canonical epics affirm the putative virtues of Lethe, of forgetting so defined, but only in the context of purgatory (Dante), amid humanity's fall from grace (Milton), and at the behest of Mephistopheles (Goethe). Forgetting, in this lineage, not only retains supernatural connotations but acquires a diabolical parentage as well, thus representing a doubtful salve to human woes.

This tendency, however, is not confined to the formulaic tropes of forgetting in Christian epics. Secular allusions to the waters of forgetting, of which there are many, similarly associate it with some form of oblivion, whether it be sleep, death, or both. "Tho will we little Love awake," Edmund Spenser wrote in *The Shephard's Calendar,* "That now sleepeth in Lethe lake" (1962, "AEgloga tertia," l. 23). Shakespeare's dramas include an array of such usages. In *Twelfth Night,* Sebastian prays, "Let fancy still my sense in Lethe steep; / If it be thus to dream, still let me sleep!" (1969, IV.i.58–59). Here, Lethe numbs one's "sense," possibly quieting dreams in "sleep." In *Julius*

Caesar, Lethe symbolizes the aftermath of violent death—the ultimate form of passivity—when Antony, upon seeing the hands of Caesar's murderers red with blood, laments: "Here didst thou fall; and here thy hunters stand, / Signed in thy spoil, and crimsoned in thy lethe"(III.i.205–6). Shakespeare makes the point explicit: "thy lethe" is synonymous with murder.

Similar references abound in myriad instances of early moden and modern literature. John Keats's "Ode on Melancholy" commences with the plea, "No, no, go not to Lethe" (I.1), one of several methods by which to "drown the wakeful anguish of the soul" (I.10), whereas his "Ode to a Nightingale" makes the connection with death more explicit: "As though of hemlock I had drunk" (I.2), the speaker swoons, "One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk" (I.4) (1907, 247, 230). In either case, Lethe lulls the speaker into some form of slumber, whether temporary or permanent. Samuel Beckett's association of Lethe with passivity and death in his radio play *Embers* is even blunter. Henry, the play's principal character, invokes the mythological river when describing conversations with his dead wife: "That's what hell will be like, small chat to the babbling of Lethe about the good old days when we wished we were dead" (1970, 102). The figure of Lethe connotes an erasure of personality and self-possession in Sylvia Plath's "Getting There," the characteristically biting conclusion of which, following a stream of deathly imagery, renovates Lethe into a hearse-like automobile: "And I, stepping from this skin / Of old bandages, boredoms, old faces // Step to you from the black car of Lethe, / Pure as a baby" (1966, 38). Such long-standing poetic or dramatic allusions to Lethe's soporific powers reappear even in modern scientific nomenclature. William T. G. Morton, who first publicly demonstrated the use of ether as an effective inhalation anesthetic (which made modern surgery viable), exercised literary flair in calling his ether "Letheon" (Fenster 2003, 210–11). By Morton's day, however, the symbolism was entrenched, thanks in large part to centuries' worth of canonical literary works that depicted forgetting according to the mysterious imagery of Lethe—as a figure of passivity, sleep, or even death.

Major facets of late Renaissance and Enlightenment thought, one could argue, offered resolute alternatives to the classical and medieval tradition of *ars memoriae* and, by implication, countered the foregoing negative depictions of forgetting.[9] Montaigne, for instance, railed against long-standing European pedagogical methods, which in his view equated knowledge with rote memorization: "To know by heart is not to know," he declared. "What a poor kind of knowledge it is that comes solely from books!" (1957, I.26). "Let him [the student]," Montaigne advised, "be asked for an account not

merely of the words of his lesson, but of its sense and substance, and let him judge the profit he has made by the testimony not of his memory, but of his life" (I.26). Harald Weinrich interprets Montaigne's polemics as a watershed development in which the formerly unquestioned authority of memory in intellectual pursuits gives way to the seemingly enhanced status of forgetting, primarily of medieval prejudices, as a requirement for enlightened knowledge (2004, 43–44). Cervantes' *Don Quixote,* published soon after, is generally regarded as the first modern novel precisely for its depiction of a man so bedazzled by romantic tales of chivalry that he no longer recognizes his own identity; indeed, his illusory recollections of a fabled past make him a pathetic object of ridicule (2005). By these measures, late Renaissance intellectual criticism and literature showed signs of a growing unease with the ancient art of memory and its influence on human knowledge.

Montaigne's polemics and Cervantes' novel presaged the more developed denunciation of scholasticism, dogma, and superstition that characterized Enlightenment philosophy and political theory. The ambitious Enlightenment project of "education" amounted to a pedagogical battle waged against memory in its musty scholastic garb (Gay 1969, 501–11). Descartes' methodological skepticism further legitimated such rejections of scholastic memory. One attains a secure foundation for rational thought, he maintained, by eliminating ideas subject to doubt in favor of maintaining clear and distinct chains of reasoning. Descartes' (2006) reflections on the proper techniques for forgetting as an instrument of sound and independent rational inquiry were ingredient to the very foundations of modern Western philosophy and mathematics.

But this putative early modern reversal in the respective value of memory and forgetting is deceiving. Forgetting remained a hindrance to intellectual refinement and the retention of knowledge in both the late Renaissance and the Enlightenment. The crucial development was not that forgetting attained a dramatically increased value but that leading thinkers of the day substituted the classical ideal of memory for modern, scientific ideals. Pioneering thinkers such as Descartes indeed contributed to the demise of the *ars memoriae* as well as the scholastic pedagogy to which it conformed; yet, as Weinrich admits, the Cartesian method produced "not only a new memory but also to some extent a new mnemonotechnics" (2004, 59), which severely circumscribed any validation of forgetting. The same may be said of numerous Enlightenment tracts that embraced similar methodologies: mature inquiry, as defined by leading philosophies of the day, depended upon trading one pedagogical ideal of memory for a competing ideal—one

based on the clear retention of rationally discovered truths, which classical relics such *ars memoriae* and scholasticism occluded.

The characteristic tendency of late Renaissance and Enlightenment inquiry was to reinterpret the operations of memory according to emergent faculty psychology. Philosophical innovators of the period broadly agreed that sensations, ideas, and universal human experiences were best explained according to the mind's hierarchy of cognitive processes, including memory. John Locke's enormously influential account of human understanding provides an indispensable illustration of how such philosophies produced new and decisive models of memory. In Locke's analysis, the mind functioned best when ideas remained clearest, most reflective of the natural sensations or perceptions that inspired them. Language was a chief agent of forgetting because it naturally muddied one's comprehension of complex ideas. "When a word stands for a very complex idea that is compounded and decompounded, it is not easy for men to form and retain that idea so exactly, as to make the name in common use stand for the same precise idea, without the least variation" (1959, III.9.6). In Locke's interpretation, we use "moral words" (III.9.6) to refer to such complex ideas, a fact which indicates the gravity of this inevitable deviance from our originally clear understandings of particular concepts. The language of ordinary discussion incessantly obfuscates our apprehension of basic moral concepts upon which our judgments concerning such crucial subjects as law depend. "And hence we see," Locke writes, "that, in the interpretation of laws, whether divine or human, there is no end; comments beget comments, and explications make new matter for explications; and of limiting, distinguishing, varying the signification of these moral words there is no end" (III.9.9). The more we explicate the meaning of complex ideas, the further our original understanding of topics vital to human well-being passes into oblivion.

For these reasons, Locke argues vociferously against traditional "books of rhetoric," claiming they do little but "insinuate wrong ideas" and promote "error and deceit" (III.10.34). In doing so, he naturally argues against the classical mnemonic methods central to their pedagogy. But Locke intends his invective against the traditional conjunction of rhetoric and memorized wisdom to justify its subordination to competing ideals of language and memory. He does not argue categorically against memory in favor of forgetting; he advocates, to the contrary, a more scientifically accurate, psychologically grounded model of memory in order to counteract a linguistic form of forgetting. "*Any words,*" he states, "*will serve for recording. . . . [F]or the recording our own thoughts for the help of our own memories*" (III.9.2; emphasis in original).[10]

Locke redefines memory as a system of recording, and thus prepares the way for the development of modern conceptions of memory. Chris Westbury and Daniel C. Dennett, for example, express a conception of memory indebted to Locke when they describe it as "the ability to store useful information and to retrieve it in precisely those circumstances and that form which allows it to be useful" (2000, 14). Good human understanding, by this definition, follows from ordered mental retention, from clear and rational recording and mental preservation of ideas. Endless "explications" in the style of "books of rhetoric" foment forgetting by obscuring originally clear and reasoned understanding, animating the passions and the "love to deceive and be deceived." For Locke, and the many Enlightenment figures who revered him as an intellectual giant, the proper functioning of faculty psychology held import beyond individual experience and understanding. The expanding, increasingly diversified marketplace of public discussion in their time allegedly fostered confused and counterproductive civic discourse. Those who participated in it did so with clouded ideas about moral and political issues. Civic bodies that disputed vital issues in misunderstanding, or forgetfulness, of their true nature would make accordingly deluded judgments—a notion that retains the status of conventional wisdom in liberal-democratic societies pledged to the institutional cultivation of memory.

Some have argued that the ascendance of modernist ideals in early twentieth-century science, politics, and art (which still exercise enormous influence over contemporary thought and culture) indicated not simply an increasing disillusion with the alleged goods of the past but a growing amenability to those of forgetting. The works of avant-garde movements such as Dadaism, Surrealism, and Futurism reflected, in especially provocative ways, a host of scientific, political, and artistic motivations for rejecting the authority of the traditional past. This interpretation, however, elides a crucial nuance: increasing recognition of the prevalence of forgetting, motivated by anxiety over the fragility of memory and history, does not amount to an affirmation of forgetting. Like the Enlightenment, mature twentieth-century modernism rejected classical ideals of memory and history, but precisely in order to erect new ones, not to embrace forgetting on its own terms. If anything, some of the most resounding intellectual and literary projects of the early twentieth century reveal that fuller assessments of forgetting only motivated the search for modern ideals of memory no less hostile to it than comparatively antique ones.

Freud's psychoanalytic theory, for instance, exerted vast influence in shaping modernist anxieties about forgetting and the mind's capacity for

recollection. Psychoanalysis did not merely flourish as a therapeutic or intellectual project but, in Paul Ricoeur's description, "produced a sort of vulgate that has raised it to the level of a cultural phenomenon" (2004, 447). Indeed, the premise that unconscious drives covertly mold our conscious thoughts and behaviors is central to both modern and late modern notions of the self. One may cogently describe the *raison d'être* of psychoanalysis—to uncover and explain the secrets of the unconscious—as a project against forgetting. The presumption that we repress awareness of traumatic episodes from our past is elemental to Freudian methods. Freud distinguishes between repeating and remembering in this context: we repeat thoughts and behaviors that prevent us from remembering the original trauma in order to impede conscious awareness of it. "The patient," he writes, "does not *remember* anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but *acts* it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he *repeats* it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it" (1958, 150).[11] Forgetting is psychologically unhealthy: it leads to repression, which leads in turn to debilitating neuroses or psychoses.

Examining conscious thoughts and behaviors in order to discover their unconscious origins, to recover the repressed, is therefore a curative form of remembering. Freud summarizes the nature of this procedure according to a "division of labor" between patient and analyst: "The doctor uncovers the resistances which are unknown to the patient; when these have been got the better of, the patient often relates the forgotten situations and connections without any difficulty" (1958, 147). The unconscious, in Freud's theory, "is in no sense something that is merely unknown. The Unconscious is consequently an ex-known, something previously known that has been forgotten but has not thereby disappeared from the world" (Weinrich 2004, 134). Hence, psychoanalytic therapy consists in techniques designed to interrupt forgetting, to nullify the harmful effects of repressed trauma by achieving lucid, epiphanic recollection. (Freudian and Socratic methods thus resemble one another in the priority they assign to anamnesis.) In Ricoeur's estimation, "Psychoanalysis is therefore the most trustworthy ally in the thesis of the unforgettable. This was one of Freud's strongest convictions, that the past once experienced is indestructible" (2004, 445). Indeed, Freud posits that the existence of "screen memories" disproves the supposed impenetrability of "childhood amnesia": "Not only *some* but *all* of what is essential from childhood," he declares, "has been retained in these memories" (1958, 148). Psychoanalysis as Freud conceived it promised to address not only the memory blockages of individual patients but also the influence of the unconscious, and forms of forgetting intrinsic to it, on human society writ large.[12]

Marcel Proust's multivolume masterpiece *Remembrance of Things Past* (1934) likewise explored, in literary form, the possibility of using memory to recover one's past in its original texture. Implicit throughout his novel is the theory that conscious or voluntary memory, a category that necessarily includes the classical art of memory, provides one with scant hope of recovering past experience in its original richness. Such analytical recollection allows one to mentally catalogue mundane information but cannot enable one to recall sublime experiences that penetrated to the very core of one's being. Proust believed that involuntary memories were invaluable for achieving that purpose. The potency of involuntary memories in *Remembrance of Things Past* (the most famous example being the oft-quoted episode of the madeleine) lies in their wholly unexpected aspect: they wrench one out of the routine course of everyday experience with an ecstatic jolt, thereby triggering a flood of overwhelming spontaneous recollection. The *ek-stasis* of involuntary recollections, as Proust depicts them, returns one to seemingly lost, forgotten dimensions of one's past, the emotionally stirring recovery of which amounts to a reunion with previously abandoned facets of one's very self. The nature of the past that one encounters through involuntary remembrance is akin, in Proust's description, to "luminous moments" preserved in "sealed jars" waiting to be unsealed (2:994). Proust thus unequivocally rejects classical principles of memory; but he replaces them with passionately held beliefs in the power of spontaneous memory to enrich our lives. Memory, in his rendering, remains valuable for its capacity to relight pockets of personal oblivion.

Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time,* arguably the most important philosophical work of the twentieth century by its most important philosopher, also sets as its task a massive project of remembrance over forgetting. Heidegger laments that humanity at large (and not only philosophers) has forgotten to attend to the question of Being. His volume commences with this blunt assertion: "*The Necessity for Explicitly Restating the Question of Being*. This question today has been forgotten" (1996, 1). We have, in other words, forgotten how to reflect systematically on our unique existence as beings who can conduct such an investigation (as Da-sein). The disastrous consequences of this fact, in Heidegger's assessment, are not speculative in nature; one may observe them in the frightening embrace of destructive technologies deployed on an unprecedented scale as a wondrous remedy to the most formidable dilemmas of modern human existence. The quest to discover a mode of thinking and speaking by which one may remember Being in its unconcealed truth permeates Heidegger's entire philosophy.

His enormously influential corpus thus constitutes a sustained effort to re-collect the authenticity of being as *aléthia* (as unforgetting or unconcealment) over and against *lethe* (as forgetting or concealment). The elemental desire that Proust and Heidegger variously exemplify—to somehow recover, through remembrance, an elusive human essence eclipsed by the dislocations of modernity—lingers today in characteristically postmodern feelings of existential ennui.

Post–World War II history and public moral sentiment decisively stifled the avant-garde programs of forgetting that emerged during early and high modernism. Fervent postwar affirmations of remembrance over forgetting indicate the continuing appeal of life and death as respective figures of memory and forgetting. Collective memory is now widely accepted as a medium with which to preserve the fragile dignity of life amid state-sponsored mass murder and other modern forms of atrocity. Jewish survivors of the Holocaust naturally sought to comprehend its incomprehensible meaning with the biblical vocabulary of memory. On the one hand, the Nazis' attempt to annihilate all Jews represented an effort to exterminate every trace of their culture, and thus banish memory of their life and heritage from humankind. On the other hand, parallels between Old Testament Israelites exiled from their homeland and European Jews systematically exiled to a living twentieth-century hell were impossible to ignore. The various terms by which writers attached a concise name to the mass murder of European Jews, such as *Holocaust* and *Shoah,* all derive from the Hebrew Bible (Young 1988, 85–86). By either measure, memory remained the only viable medium through which their history and defining communal traditions might survive. Elie Wiesel gestures to the grave resonance between biblical and post–World War II history when he says, "To be a Jew is to remember" (Rittner 1990, 31).

Patterns of remembrance originally distinctive of Jewish Holocaust memory, however, now supply the dominant cultural vocabularies and rhetorical forms according to which liberal-democratic societies in general interpret the moral lessons of all historical atrocities. Wiesel's internationally renowned Holocaust memoir, *Night,* for instance, is widely celebrated as a preeminent model of moral testimony because of its sworn resistance to forgetting. Its opening passages formally recall biblical imperatives to uphold one's covenant with God through memory; yet the author's version of such imperatives endows memory with a spiritual potency even greater than biblical scribes might have intended. For Wiesel, the conviction to remember is all that remains after the Holocaust has obliterated not only his personal faith in God but, more profoundly, the apparent presence of God in the world:

> Never shall I forget that night, the first night in the camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed.
>
> Never shall I forget that smoke.
>
> Never shall I forget the small faces of the children whose bodies I saw transformed into smoke under a silent blue sky.
>
> Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever.
>
> Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence that deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live.
>
> Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes.
>
> Never shall I forget these things, even if I were condemned to live as long as God himself. Never. (2006, 34)

Memory outlasts even the God who inexplicably vacated the now "silent blue sky," who was "murdered" in the fires of the crematoria, "which consumed my faith forever." Wiesel provides public witness to the atrocities from which he was somehow spared not in remembrance of a divine covenant but in spite of it. Remembering—or never forgetting—honors "those children" whose deaths he witnessed, who were deprived of the capacity to witness, who were not saved by any covenant. Forgetting is tantamount to a sin against humanity—a failure to accept the moral burden of testifying for those who cannot speak, of bearing witness to heinous crimes that must not go unanswered. Forgetting allows such monstrous crimes to exist in the absence of moral response and thereby compounds their destruction. It has become conventional wisdom in the aftermath of the Holocaust and other atrocities to assert, as Jean Baudrillard does, that "Forgetting extermination is part of extermination itself" (1995, 49) or to insist, with Theodor Adorno, that "the abundance of real suffering tolerates no forgetting" (1982, 312).

Logic of this sort permeates the canon of academic scholarship on social, collective, or public memory. Far from abandoning the ancient tropes of life and death, such scholarship has adapted those figures to explain the dilemmas of cultivating memory and history in late modernity. Pierre Nora's landmark studies in French national memory, for example, define the very idea of public memory as a nexus of state politics, civic heritage, and material culture. His account supplies one of the defining tropes of public memory scholarship writ large: *lieux de memoire,* or "realms of memory." To study public memory, using Nora as a model, is to study its public manifestations—its multimodal presence in the realm of public life.

Nora's oft-cited essay "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*" conveniently summarizes his core theoretical convictions. "A movement toward democratization and mass culture on a global scale," he argues, separates collective memory from state history (1989, 7). Historical perception is now "dilated, multiplied, decentralized, democratized" (14)—by all counts, memory is wider and therefore shallower. In Nora's reckoning, the multiplicity of memorial projects in postwar France reveals the decay of memory itself and, by implication, the imminence of collective forgetting. "There are *lieux de mémoire,* sites of memory," he says, "because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire,* real environments of memory" (7). Evidence testifying to the atrophy of civic memory exists everywhere, albeit in ironic form: modern culture is riddled with *lieux de memoire*—archives, historical sites, texts, symbols of the past, all proliferate seemingly without end—yet they remain mere fragments of the grand, unified memory that Nora seeks. Such dispersed, incoherently related *lieux de memoire* are not forms of memory at all, but portend its very destruction. "We speak so much of memory," Nora says, "because there is so little of it left" (7).

Nora describes the characteristically late modern abandonment of unified state history and cultural memory in terms that recall traditional antitheses between the vitality of memory and the depletions of forgetting. For him, memory signifies life, actuality, spontaneity—an organic force. Contemporary archival obsessions, in dramatic contrast, signify lost or lifeless memory; modern archives and recording technologies allow one simply to place remainders of the past in archival limbo, where they wither unattended. "Memory," he laments, "has been wholly absorbed by its meticulous reconstruction. Its new vocation is to record; delegating to the archive the responsibility of remembering, it sheds its signs upon depositing them there, as a snake sheds its skin" (13). The archive is, in his reckoning, "no longer living memory's more or less intended remainder" but "the deliberate and calculated secretion of lost memory" (14).[13] By this logic, a double anxiety over forgetting inspires Nora's ambitious effort to refurbish the bonds between national history and collective memory: not only the likelihood that contemporary archival fever disguises our neglect of a full, organic past but also that such fever evinces our forgetfulness concerning broader questions of how one might best commemorate the past at all. The result, in Nora's terms, is a kind of death.

Despite its deserved landmark status, Nora's conception of memory and forgetting is vulnerable to accusations of nostalgia: in lamenting the decay

of a formerly cohesive state history and civic heritage, he posits a vibrancy of memory that might never have existed in the first place. James Young's commanding scholarship exhibits, in contrast, an unusually candid suspicion against conventional forms of public memory, such as monuments and museums. He approvingly quotes Robert Musil's remark that "There is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument" (Young 1993, 13) in order to argue that monuments to the past, despite their intended function as stirring incitements to communal memory, can engender memories as inflexible as the stone from which they're made, allowing the public at large to abdicate its communal responsibility for maintaining a fuller, more productive relationship to the past in daily civic affairs. Young is at his most eloquent when he critiques installations in Holocaust museums that display piles of personal tokens (shoes, clothing, suitcases, hair) seized from concentration camp victims because they fail so deplorably in the larger objective of fitting memorialization:

> That a murdered people remains known in Holocaust museums anywhere by their scattered belongings, and not by their spiritual works, that their lives should be recalled primarily through the images of their death, may be the ultimate travesty. These lives and the relationships between them are lost to the memory of ruins alone—and will be lost to subsequent generations who seek memory only in the rubble of the past. Indeed, by adopting such artifacts for their own memorial presentations, even the new museums in America and Europe risk perpetuating the very figures by which the killers themselves would have memorialized their Jewish victims. (1993, 133)

A badly conceived monument, however nobly intended, exacerbates the potentially irreparable loss of "spiritual works" or past "lives and relationships" by sanctioning a morally flawed mode of commemoration. The parallel that Young deftly draws between the vantage of "the killers themselves" and that offered by contemporary monuments to victims of the Holocaust dramatizes his primary moral insight: such conduits to the past perpetuate, even unwittingly, the forgetting of an entire people originally undertaken by means of unspeakable murder.

Across these various examples, however, Young preserves a commonplace opposition between memory and forgetting, understood as an opposition between life and death. To commemorate the past with a faulty monumental artifact is to compound the effects of mass murder by means of collective

forgetting. To be unmindful of the lacunae inherent in any effort at historical narration or commemoration is to ignore, and thus forget, the ways in which one may preserve its fuller dimensions in the liveliness of cultural dialogue. One might argue that the overriding objective of Young's scholarship is to distinguish forms of public memorialization suited to achieving a kind of redemption—sowing the most fertile cultural seeds left behind by Holocaust victims so they may yield prolonged life—from commemorative practices that encourage relations with the past so formulaic and insipid that they amount to widespread forgetting.

Young underscores the fact that the past as we inherit it in narrative or memorial symbolism contains both "life-sustaining" and "life-threatening myths by which we interpret the world," and calls on us to develop critical awareness of their differences (1988, 192). His work therefore features a remarkably astute moral and political attunement to the inherently selective, contested, and sometimes tragically ironic nature of public memory; but that attunement reaffirms standard incompatibilities between the liveliness of memory and the oblivion of forgetting. Taken together, Young and Nora's contributions to the field of public memory studies are qualitatively enormous (and rightly so). Their status as representatives of widely embraced critical approaches handily illustrates how the swell of academic reflection on social, collective, or public memory in recent decades preserves the traditional symbolism of recollection and oblivion, of life and death, as basic hermeneutic principles for understanding memory and forgetting in modern public culture.

Aside from understandable public and academic commitments to memory forged in the postwar era, one can find perhaps the most literal evidence that ours is an age in which memory and life are integrated as never before in a relatively banal phenomenon: widespread enthusiasm for the wonders of cutting-edge digital recording technologies.[14] The call to never forget is not only a moral and political slogan but, in the realm of digital innovation, a potential reality. Research divisions for Microsoft and Apple are developing technologies that fuse conceptions of individual life with digital memory storage. Microsoft's MyLifeBits project uses emergent technologies to digitally archive, on a personal basis, "a lifetime's worth of articles, books, cards, CDs, letters, memos, papers, photos, pictures, presentations, home movies, videotaped lectures, and voice recordings" (Microsoft Research 2008). Microsoft industry publications report that their lead researcher in this area, Gordon Bell, has donned such small-scale systems on a functionally permanent basis in order to record every waking moment of his life; he has gone

"paperless" and is "beginning to capture phone calls, IM transcripts, television, and radio" instantly. Life, in this conception, is an exercise in immediate data storage and retrieval, of ceaselessly accumulated digital memory from which nothing is omitted. Advertisements for Apple's iLife software similarly invite consumers to compile a personal multimedia archive for the production of various digital memorabilia, including "beautiful books, colorful calendars, dazzling DVDs, perfect podcasts, and attractive online journals" (Apple 2008). Here, too, life is equivalent to a process of data storage and dissemination in which nothing is lost: Apple informs its consumers that "iLife" software is "the easiest way to make the most out of every bit of your digital life."

Emerging digital memory systems radically augment the scope and duration of personal memory far beyond the lifespan of the person in question. This increasing equation of memory with digital technology as an extension of personal experience contradicts the argument, advanced by some commentators, that the contemporary age evinces disillusionment with, or even ignorance of, the traditional fruits of memory.[15] The lavish tradition of *ars memoriae* has indeed waned but the recent proliferation of digital memory systems designed for flexible personal use indicates that contemporary culture remains as invested as ever in improving and enlarging the realms of memory. Instead of representing a break with long-standing techniques designed to enhance personal life through the enlargement of memory, such technologies demonstrate that the ancient equation of memory with life, and of forgetting with irretrievable loss (or erasure and deletion, to use modern computing terms), survives in ever more sophisticated digital formats. These technologies accordingly suggest that we remain as obsessed with perfecting memory as a system of accumulation and retrieval as our cultural forebears. Life, according to the digital calculus of MyLifeBits and iLife, is no longer the source of memory; memory now comprises the ever expanding horizon of life. To live is to be recorded and retrieved, effortlessly. In this sense, we have improved *ad infinitum* upon the classical *ars memoriae*.

One cannot deny that the art and culture of modernity, with its many fixations on present and future progress, brought the once-noble art of memory to an ignoble end. One cannot deny that the modernist penchant for rapid change and novelty, as well as postmodern enthusiasms for ahistorical pastiche and temporal discontinuity, led naturally to various flirtations with forgetting. In the main, however, our age remains notable not only for its anxieties over the degradation of tradition and glaring omissions from the archives of official history but also for its optimism in the

power of increasingly sophisticated archival methods and increasingly ambitious memorial projects to counteract such losses. Massive public and private financing of archives and memorial centers, large and small; local and national political controversies over divisive historical episodes, from U.S. slavery to the Holocaust, involving advocates from across the social spectrum; numerous international efforts to promote awareness of human rights through the valuable medium of historical memory—all these developments typify powerful regional, national, and even global imperatives to remember in turn-of-the-century Western culture. Our age remains notable, in other words, for its passionate and democratically shared investments in cultivating memory as a medium of life and in viewing forgetfulness as a distressing symptom of absence, loss, and death.

Such worries are indisputably warranted in many cases. Yet the symbolism of life and oblivion, when taken as a universal framework for understanding our present-day relationship to former people and events, compels a reductive understanding of memory no less than forgetting, thereby overlooking their more complex interaction in public controversies over the meaning of the past. If one admits that even elaborate and sincere efforts at commemoration can produce politically or morally lamentable results (forgetfulness about the most valuable lessons of the past foremost among them), then one must concede the converse premise as well: not all forms of forgetting connote passivity, loss, ruination, or death in the context of public affairs. Some consciously considered public appeals to communal forgetting yield judicious responses to the dilemmas of the past in light of exigent cultural, political, or moral circumstances. Such responses potentially shape the boundaries and content of shared remembrance in desirable ways rather than merely diminishing its valuable store.

The conventional Western rhetoric of memory resists this more receptive approach to the subject of forgetting. To question the broadly accepted validity of that rhetoric, this chapter has shown, is to question the long-standing authority of tropes and figures intended to explain the virtues of memory and the vices of forgetting throughout Western history—a history well preserved in contemporary paeans to the fruits of institutional memory. Ancient and classical reverence for the power of memory, from biblical sources to Plato and Augustine, remains remarkably fresh in present-day beliefs that loss of memory amounts to both a severe moral failing and a lack of sustaining connection with divinity. Centuries' worth of celebrated poetry and literature bewailing the liquidation of human achievement and experience in the waters of forgetting continues to infuse modern fears over

the potentially disastrous and irrevocable decay of historical works and wisdom from one generation to the next. And the notion that relighting our faculties of memory in times of mental or existential darkness demonstrates a kind of cognitive or ontological growth (variously present in Descartes, Locke, Freud, Proust, and Heidegger) today finds contemporary application in pervasive assumptions that memory serves humanity best as a clear, comprehensive, and securely archived fount of profound insight. The durable public persuasiveness of such time-honored commitments to the redeeming, enlightening, and improving powers of memory explains how particular social, intellectual, and moral traditions have made it seem imperative that we think and speak of forgetting in such stridently negative ways.

The key to demonstrating the merits of forgetting as a strategically useful mode of public judgment is to avoid merely replacing the established dialectic with an equally reductive one (instead of privileging memory over forgetting, privileging forgetting over memory). The primary motivation of the chapters to come is to conceive of memory and forgetting in reciprocal rather than dialectical terms. By delineating the telling differences between desirable and undesirable forms of communal forgetting, one also discerns why conventional forms of public commemoration sometimes fail to accomplish their intended social, political, or moral purposes. The central problem that preserves the dialectic of life and death as equivalents of memory and forgetting is rhetorical: beyond the traditional language and symbolism of oblivion, liquidation, or amnesia, one may employ alternative heuristics in order to identify the positive contributions of forgetting as a mode of public judgment with respect to both the wisdom and dilemmas of the past.

Two

FORGETTING WITHOUT OBLIVION

The symbolism of oblivion hasn't always been used to the detriment of forgetting (at least not intentionally). A host of past and present thinkers have employed the dark imagery of forgetting in order to assert its conventionally unacknowledged merits; however, such putatively affirmative treatments of forgetting as willed oblivion, symbolic erasure, or strategic amnesia assign merely inverted significance to the traditionally reductive understanding of memory and forgetting (as life and death). The operative question is why notable past and present appreciations of oblivion—which reverse the negative significance of tropes and figures traditionally used to disparage forgetting—offer dubious rhetorical resources with which to devise a critical vocabulary that discloses the reciprocal virtues of memory and forgetting in public culture. To address this question we cannot rely on conventionally negative tropes of oblivion, liquidation, amnesia, and the like; we will need to devise a heuristic framework better suited to reveal the positive contributions of forgetting within particular communities of memory.

The less renowned *ars oblivionis* emerges from the same cultural antecedents as the *ars memoriae*. The mythological dyad of Lethe and Mnemosyne, true to the Greek penchant for balancing dialectical alternatives, expresses simultaneously antithetical and intimate relations between memory and forgetting. The explicit symbolism of the mythological rivers is that Mnemosyne engenders a divinely tinged capacity for recollection whereas Lethe induces primordial amnesia. But the heavenly recollection associated with Mnemosyne in Greek myth, or the *philosophía* repeatedly affirmed in Plato's philosophy, is a rare and blessed kind of memory. By contrast, the forgetfulness that besets those who imbibe the waters of Lethe is a nearly universal human condition, an event necessary for the soul's embodiment in human form. Forgetting, in this generous interpretation, helps perpetuate the eternal cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth that defines human existence.

From these ambiguous beginnings, Lethe retains profoundly indeterminate meaning, simultaneously evoking oblivion and renewal, death as well as rebirth, in the provenance of memory.

Classical practitioners of the *ars memoriae* recognized that one's trained memory might need occasional forgetting, just as Mnemosyne depended for its sense and value upon Lethe, its symbolic other.[1] Themistocles, who reputedly pined for an *ars oblivionis,* is the pedagogical counterpart of Simonides, legendary father of the *ars memoriae.* In *De oratore,* Cicero relates an anecdote in which Simonides offers to instruct Themistocles in his art of memory. Themistocles brusquely refuses, insisting that he would vastly prefer to acquire skill in forgetting. According to Cicero, Themistocles' memory was so absorptive that "nothing that had once been poured into his mind could ever again flow out of it; for him, an ability to forget what he did not want to remember was preferable to being able to remember whatever he had heard or seen just once" (2001, 2.300). The mythological pairing of Lethe and Mnemosyne finds its pragmatic double, as Cicero's anecdote suggests, in the classical insight that forgetting might be occasionally useful as a means to domesticate unusually plentiful accumulations of memory.[2]

From its earliest days, the art of memory raised questions concerning the self-sufficiency of sheer recollection. Unbounded memory inevitably became undesirable. Forgetting offered a countervailing faculty necessary for sustaining memory in its proper scale and order. This line of thought, although far less renowned than both classical and modern appreciations of memory, developed in a variety of theological, intellectual, artistic, and even political projects. A loosely collated *ars oblivionis* does exist; one may appeal to it when arguing for the relative value of forgetting, as a flurry of recent scholarship has done.[3] Considering the potential virtues of forgetting to present-day public life, ethics, and decision-making raises the crucial question of whether the traditional tropes and symbolism of that stepchild tradition represent a true departure from conventional idioms of memory and forgetting.

The following analysis shows that representative tropes of forgetting in the *ars oblivionis,* which has received renewed attention in memory studies of late, provide a highly circumscribed and possibly outmoded conceptual vocabulary with which to investigate how social agents advocate forgetting to persuasive and productive ends in modern public affairs. Time and again, such an approach seeks to assign merely enhanced value to forgetting under the existing rubric of oblivion, thereby failing to question the larger dialectic in which it symbolizes a kind of absolute void pitted against the plenty

of memory. Displacing this dialectic, and thereby fashioning an alternate set of terms or symbols with which to study communal forgetting, would both validate the relative merits of forgetting on novel grounds and provide deeper insight into the subtler, nondialectical intimacies of memory and forgetting as mutually constitutive dimensions of public culture. The analysis supports this thesis in order to justify its subsequent proposal for adopting a conceptual vocabulary better suited to investigating the rhetoric and politics of public forgetting in terms other than those of oblivion.

The Counter-tradition of Oblivion

A variety of rhetorical practices supply, as in the classical art of memory, the signature tropes of the so-called *ars oblivionis.* The spread of writing in classical Greek culture yielded a lasting set of metaphors with which to illustrate the notion that discrete instances of forgetting can assist one's intellectual growth. Plato's likening of the memory residing in one's soul to a wax tablet inspired a litany of similar metaphorical treatments: later writers commonly cited him in presuming that the souls of some individuals received firm and enduring impressions of truth, whereas others captured only its wispiest traces, easily dissolved in time.[4]

Plato's lofty imagery was inspired by a comparatively mundane feature of classical education: writing on wax tablets. The wax tablet was a handy, inexpensive device for acquiring and preserving knowledge, but it contained a finite amount of text. One smoothed the tablet's surface in order to create a fresh tabula rasa whenever space for writing ran short. Commentators throughout history have subsequently invoked the image of the wax tablet to illustrate the abstract premise that receptacles of knowledge (mental or otherwise) should be routinely cleared of detritus in order to ensure their proper functioning (Weinrich 2004, 20–21; Yates 2001, chap. 2).

Indeed, the habit of willfully forgetting in order to replenish the storehouse of memory forms a minor chapter in the history of the *ars memoriae.* At the highpoint of the Italian Renaissance, when intertwined rhetorical and mnemonic techniques attained arguably their greatest prominence, handbooks on rhetoric typically included a chapter detailing procedures for forgetting (*arte dell'oblio*). Such chapters advised readers to forget by inverting standard mnemonic techniques: whereas one focused on vivid psychological images in order to remember certain *topoi,* one conjured mental images of decay, withering, erasure, and the like in order to dissolve psychological

imprints that had outlived their utility (Bolzoni 1995, 143–48; Weinrich 2004, 200). Søren Kierkegaard later recommended this same strategy in more straightforward terms: "If there is something you want to forget," he wrote, "then try to find something else to remember; then you will certainly succeed" (1991, 152).

The ideal of forgiveness, variously interpreted in Judaism and Christianity, likewise comprises an essential resource of the *ars oblivionis*. The phrase "forgive and forget" is a modern cliché, but it distills, in banal form, centuries of theological reflection on redemption and social justice. Such reflections, as in the classical tradition, routinely used images of writing, erasure, and the clearing of space to endow forgetting with vital religious meaning and purpose.

Biblical origins of the sacred *ars oblivionis* are, like its profane counterparts, strikingly ironic. The notion that God keeps a Divine Book, which lists both the names of sinful souls he has doomed to oblivion and of those he will spare this fate, appears early in the Hebrew Bible. Moses pleads to God on behalf of the Israelites for worshipping the golden calf: "But now, if you will only forgive their sin—but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written." God's response confirms the existence of such a tally: "Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book" (Exod. 32:32–33). As early as the book of Exodus, then, the question of forgiveness is fundamentally related to the question of forgetting—in this case, in a manifestly negative sense.

Subsequent books of the Hebrew Bible, however, dramatically invert the idea that forgetting—having one's name blotted from the Divine Book—is a sign of damnation. These books redefine the object of forgetting as one's sin rather than one's very name. One psalmist prays, to the contrary, for God to "blot out all my iniquities," to be forgiven as such, and by the time of Jeremiah the act of being forgiven means that one's sins will be forgotten: "I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more" (Ps. 51:9; Jer. 31:34). In their later forms, writing and erasure as metaphors for forgetting thus defined it not as an occasionally necessary intellectual faculty but as an integral component of spiritual forgiveness.[5]

Christian texts developed the ideal of forgiveness as a form of forgetting, and with it the standard tropes of writing and erasure, into the central article of Christian faith. Jesus subtly but surely invokes the imagery of writing, forgetting, and forgiveness in the Gospel of John when "scribes and Pharisees" beseech him to condemn an adulterous woman. Jesus rebukes them, proclaiming: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to

throw a stone at her" (John 8:7). The gospel reports that Jesus repeatedly "bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground" (John 8:6, 8:8) as he listened to the scribes and Pharisees rail against the woman's sin. Having dispatched her accusers, Jesus stands up from his writing and absolves her: "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again" (John 8:11). The significance of Jesus' writing in the sand graphically performs the moral lesson of this parable. He adopts the role of secretary as the scribes and Pharisees accuse the woman of iniquity, but the gospel fails to record the content of his writing. Inscribed in sand, it is lost to memory instantly. As in Jesus' parting words to the woman, her sin is lightly forgiven because it is already forgotten—no formal condemnation is needed, no record of it survives. The so-called Divine Book has become a repository of memory no more durable than a sheet of sand.

Europeans in early modernity fused this patently Christian imperative to forgive by forgetting with the classical symbolism of oblivion in diverse ways. During the sixteenth century, for instance, John Calvin wrote that forgiveness obligates one "willingly to cast from the mind wrath, hatred, desire for revenge" and "willingly to banish to oblivion the remembrance of injustice" (1977, 912). Theological injunctions to forgive by banishing memory of offense to oblivion found martial and political equivalents in standard clauses of European peace treaties during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Agreements between warring Christian states in this period commonly formalized the end of bloodshed with a ritual of state forgiveness—a clause announcing an era of "amnesty and oblivion," which imposed a duty on former combatants to terminate all lingering hostilities, including attributions of blame for the original conflict (Weinrich 2004, 171–72; Fisch 1979; Joinet 1989). The Treaty of Westphalia (1648), for example, obligated its signatories to "perpetual oblivion and amnesty" regarding offenses committed during the Thirty Years' War. Following the French Revolution, Louis XVIII similarly declared a new era of "union and forgetting" (*union et oubli*) on ascending his throne (Ardant 1990, 57). "Remedial oblivion," Lowenthal adds, was similarly "a common tool of seventeenth-century English statecraft, with 'Acts of Oblivion' exempting from punishment men who had borne arms against Charles II or had opposed William III" (1999, xi). The trope of "amnesty and oblivion," as illustrated by these examples, codified in state policy the etymological kinship of *amnesty* to *amnesia;* "amnesty" descends from the Greek *amnestia* ("forgetfulness") and *amnestos* ("forgotten") (Ayto 1990, 236; Barnhart 1988, 400; Partridge 1966, 228, 253). Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century public declarations embodied, by virtue of this kinship,

a transmutation of ancient theological figures of forgetting into secular and legal compacts: oblivion no longer signified the otherworldly realm to which knowledge of personal sin was banished but a ceremonial prerequisite for granting political amnesty in the world of statecraft.[6]

Routinely smoothing a wax tablet in order to continue writing, occasionally removing items from the mental storehouse of memory, blotting one's sin from the sacred book, or redacting traces of wartime animosity from the slate of political relations—such recurrent gestures illustrate the essential tropes of the *ars oblivionis*. These loosely affiliated traditions of forgetting have inspired an alternately implicit or explicit revival of interest in the subject.[7] The central difficulty here is whether the traditional language and symbolism of forgetting provides optimum heuristics for examining the rhetoric and politics of forgetting as a strategically valuable public practice.

A critical liability compromises the value of forgetting as defined by the representative tropes of the *ars oblivionis:* in each case, forgetting signifies negation. Forgetting holds productive value in these situations precisely because it lacks productivity. Forgetting produces a tabula rasa, deletes mental impressions, and mandates nothing less than "amnesty and oblivion" (or in more literal phrasing, amnesty *as* mnemonic oblivion—as amnesia). Forgetting so defined changes the nature of memory insubstantially, by subtraction (or in more dramatic terms, oblivion and amnesia). New memories, as well as those that remain, are essentially untouched by its discrete and unalterable truncations.

The metaphor of forgetting as a proverbial slate cleansed consequently rests on two questionable assumptions: (1) that the effects of forgetting are irreversible (erased text cannot be recovered, mental images can be displaced by new ones, and state amnesia can obliterate a recent wartime past); and (2) that forgetting and memory remain mutually exclusive in nature (however much the former tidies up a literal or metaphorical space in which the latter flourishes). Whether they concern personal recollections or international accords, such procedural templates amend the content of memory while leaving intact its traditional incompatibilities with, and dialectical superiority over, forgetting. By this calculus, memory remains a font of plenty (its only fault is its seemingly inexhaustible yield), whereas forgetting continues to signify destruction, lack, absence, and amnesia, however domesticated they appear. The timeworn antithesis between memory and forgetting holds, even in such seemingly mutual schemas.

Marc Augé's evocative treatise *Oblivion* (2004) fittingly illustrates such tendencies in contemporary thought. Augé purports to upend conventional

wisdom concerning the purely destructive aspects of forgetting by arguing that "oblivion" is as indispensable to life as memory. But his version of this point implies a well-trod conception of memory, taken from the *ars oblivionis,* as a durable and uniform source of presence unaffected in its basic substance by forgetting: "It is quite clear that our memory would be 'saturated' rapidly if we had to preserve every image of our childhood, especially those of our earliest childhood. But what is interesting is that which remains. And what remains—remembrances or traces . . . is the product of an erosion caused by oblivion. Memories are crafted by oblivion as the outlines of the shore are created by the sea" (20). Erosion and oblivion carry romantic, nostalgic connotations here: the romance of decay, and nostalgia for a past we cannot recover. Augé's imagery recalls a series of familiar dialectical antitheses, despite his insistence on the primordial harmony between memory and forgetting. Memories are akin to the shore, "oblivion" to the sea that shapes it; forgetting helps to form memory, but only in its negative image—as an "erosion" that demarcates its borders; memory is defined by substance, solidity, whereas forgetting is defined by liquidity (as with Lethe), or lack of substance; memory is a product—that which oblivion helps to craft—whereas forgetting consists in ephemeral "traces." Hence the imagery of oblivion and liquidation shelters in Augé's vivid prose the very dialectic he intends to reject.

Forgetting, as defined by these persistent connotations, remains such a delicate topic of contemporary social analysis and ethical reflection that even those who wish to recognize its potential harmony with memory nevertheless assign it what one might call an integrated but unequal status. Harald Weinrich, for example, defends the *ars oblivionis* as a worthy tradition of art and criticism, but he ultimately espouses a conventionally adversarial stance toward forgetting insofar as he maintains that "Forgetting is always at our side, ready to spring out at us, whenever we want to remember. A memory that is to endure must therefore engage in a daily struggle against forgetting" (2004, 186–87). Paul Ricoeur, moreover, considers the degree to which forgetting shapes our sense of the past as a supplement to memory and history; yet he classifies forgetting as an effacement that memory would resolve—as a symptom of blocked or manipulated recollection—thereby reinforcing what the author himself calls "the asymmetry between forgetting and memory" (2004, 416–43, 448–52, 503). David Gross similarly appears to offer an account of memory and forgetting as equally necessary dimensions of individual and collective life but concludes his study by insisting, "It seems imperative that the value of memory be reaffirmed. For memory . . . allows

us to recover and unfold again aspects of the past that, claims to the contrary notwithstanding, are perhaps not yet over and done with" (2000, 152). Such otherwise notable studies concede the limited value of forgetting only by default, as if resigned to tolerating its periodic necessity while nevertheless ardently reaffirming the putatively universal imperative to remember for the sake of individual and communal life.[8]

Scholars are thus willing to afford circumscribed value to forgetting in the context of social commentary or ethical reflection according to the conventional terms of the *ars oblivionis*. But these conventional tropes preserve the image of forgetting as an enigmatic and largely unmanageable basis of action; hence it is difficult to know what one affirms, exactly, in affirming absence or negation, oblivion or liquidation, as practical measures. The Spanish moralist Baltasar Gracián's commentary on the suspect nature of any so-called art of oblivion aptly summarizes the fundamental impasse here: "Know how to forget!" he exhorts, only to add: "This is more a stroke of luck than an art" (Weinrich 2004, 173).

Forgetting, long considered only a harbinger of oblivion—a negation, erosion, or absence—can be redefined as an organized public practice that may vitally shape both historical wisdom and the cultures of memory that perpetuate it. Memory can be a form of forgetting; and forgetting can offer a medium for reconfiguring memory, or *re*membering its content, in auspicious ways, to be investigated, not as a literary figure of negation or a merely evocative *topos* of social commentary and ethical reflection, but as a strategically productive component of public life, ethics, and decision-making.

Public Forgetting: Essential Heuristics

Memory and *forgetting* are not necessary antonyms. *Forgetting* and *amnesia,* regardless of ordinary usage in public affairs and popular psychology, are not obvious synonyms; their most direct link is by way of a detour through the etymology of *amnesty. Forget* descends from the Old English *forgietan,* a composite of *for* and *gietan,* the latter akin to Old Norse *geta,* meaning "to get." To forget, at its root, means to miss or lose one's hold.[9] The word strongly connotes losing one's grasp of something, not the thing itself, or being errant in grasping something that one could still attain. Yet another classical metaphor for memory—that of an aviary, or birdcage—emphasizes this very connotation: "Possessing knowledge means having the bird in your aviary," whereas we "make mistakes," or forget, "because we grab hold of

the wrong bird" (Draaisma 2000, 27). Kierkegaard also touched on this nuance when he posited, "One is not ignorant of what is forgotten, since one is ignorant only of what one does not and never has known; what one has forgotten, one has known" (1964, 295). *Neglect* seems a more direct synonym for forgetting than *amnesia,* which manifestly connotes the profound, potentially absolute loss of memory's object. By implication, to forget something (in personal or collective reminiscence) might mean that one has prepared, as a result of for-getting, to grasp it in a different or altogether new way. Wading in the river Lethe might herald the rebirth rather than death of memory.

One can justify this separation of forgetting from amnesia on grounds other than those of etymological nuance. Forgetting resists its equation with amnesia even in the context of infamous crimes against humanity. Margalit illustrates this point with a revealing insight: "When Hitler asked, 'Who today remembers the Armenians?' the resounding answer should have been, 'We all do.' Or, at least, 'The enlightened world does.'" "The irony in Hitler's question," Margalit continues, "is that in fact he counted on his listeners to remember the Armenians" (2002, 78). The operative claim here is not that appeals for the public to forget dimensions of its past are universally acceptable, especially when they justify indefensible crimes against humanity (in such cases, they should be condemned without question). The operative claim is, instead, that Hitler's justification for state forgetting represents an extreme limit case that proves a more general rule: asking others to forget something ironically draws attention to, and brings to mind or memory, that very thing. "It is pretty clear that just being told to 'forget it,'" Margalit insists, "does not quite secure forgetfulness: if anything, it increases the chance of remembering" (56). Memory contains dimensions of forgetting; and forgetting, it turns out, often reproduces (however indirectly) a degree of shared recollection.

Forgetting achieves persuasive effect as a rhetorical form—that is, as a speech or language act intended to influence thought, debate, or action in public affairs—not by asking audiences to become literally oblivious about segments of their shared past. On the contrary, the act of proposing that communities forget select aspects of their institutional memory directs public attention to the question of what those communities have remembered, according to which rhetorical forms and limitations, and in accord with whose interests. In their pragmatic outcomes, public appeals to forget neither solicit immediate and complete amnesia nor insert yet another selective interpretation of the past alongside myriad partial recollections that

comprise the ordinary fabric of collective memory. Rather, such appeals function rhetorically by calling on the public to question whether communal affairs would be improved by radically altering the normative form and content of collective memories that have hitherto defined its past, and hence its current identity. In this context, the rhetoric of public forgetting need not be opposed to or contrasted with life—in this case, that of an entire community—but may constitute a formative and periodically advisable source of its well-being. The following heuristics offer unconventional and especially incisive resources with which to examine the ways in which public forgetting operates vitally in the formation and transformation of particular cultures of memory as well as the means of public judgment they promote.

Adaptation

Ongoing studies in cognitive psychology that document surprising intricacies among memory and forgetting suggest instructive parallels between the role of forgetting in personal memory and in public culture. Cognitive psychologist Daniel Schacter alludes to the long-standing habit in our culture of judging the relative strengths and flaws of memory according to moral ideals in the title of his book *The Seven Sins of Memory* (2001). The title is ironic insofar as Schacter's work upends centuries' worth of conventional wisdom concerning the relative virtues and vices of human recollection. The so-called sins he examines (such as mental blockages, reconstructions, misattributions, or loss of recollections) have all been interpreted by the philosophical, theological, and psychological schools discussed in the previous chapter as errors in memory, as deviations from its normal functioning, and therefore as portents of its most dreaded end—forgetting. Schacter inverts such logic in contending that "it is a mistake to conceive of the seven sins as design flaws that expose memory as a fundamentally defective system. To the contrary, I suggest that the seven sins are by-products of otherwise adaptive features of memory, a price we pay for processes and functions that serve us well in many respects" (184). The proclivities for blockage, distortion, dissolution, and reconstruction that pervade human memory, which have vexed centuries' worth of commentaries on the subject, reveal the "adaptive strengths of memory" rather than "inherent weaknesses or flaws" (6).

The key to Schacter's rejection of long-standing conventional wisdom on this subject is his emphasis on *adaptation* in personal memory, which provides a profoundly different criterion by which to evaluate its functions than, say, preservation. By this measure, the distortions, deletions, and

reconstructions that populate the family of forgetting, in its broadest designation, do not simply precede or follow memory (preparing a tabula rasa for its accumulation without fundamentally shaping its nature or scope). They instead comprise some of its most important internal dynamics. Schacter thus offers a nondialectical account of memory distortion, decay, and even loss by recognizing that patterns of mnemonic revision and adaptation are necessary, integral dimensions of memory itself.

One may draw an instructive analogy between Schacter's account of personal memory and corresponding issues of public memory. To view public memory as adaptive instead of preservative is to posit that acts of memorial revision, reconstruction, and even symbolic rejection are intrinsic rather than extrinsic factors in the evolution of public memory. These transmutations help to produce and reproduce visions of the past responsive to the dilemmas of contemporary public exigencies. In principle, such symptoms of forgetting in its many appearances are not dialectically opposed to the liveliness of public memory; they are often vital for its perdurance.

Of course, one must not overextend the analogy. Personal recollection flourishes by countless acts of amendment and reconstruction, but it can also suffer from an overabundance thereof. The premise that there can be too much memory, or burdensome mnemonic accumulation, parallels the notion that there can be too much forgetting, or mnemonic dispossession. Drawing an analogy between Schacter's account of personal memory and that of public commemoration does not allow one to conclude that collective memory and collective forgetting are one and the same. Memory and forgetting are intermingling forces that nevertheless retain nominally distinct identities, aligned neither in a dialectical antithesis nor as interchangeable (and therefore arbitrary) labels for the same phenomenon. Their intimacy in the context of public culture, as the present discussion conceptualizes it, implies rhetorical practices with which one invokes the prospect of forgetting not in order to negate collective memory per se but in order to transform its sense and value—to remember anew, in politically or morally transformative ways.

Hence, the episodes of public forgetting examined in the following case studies do not culminate literally in collective amnesia. Warring nations or adversarial publics that agree to an obligatory state of "amnesty and oblivion" do not effectively forget their mutual hostilities or prejudices by fiat, with no chance that they might resume. Such amnesty and oblivion is notional, not actual: it binds adherents to proceed *as if* they had actually acquired amnesia of mutual antagonisms and transgressions. In fact, the

presumption that their mutual enmity is indeed forgotten and obliterated might make future conflict more likely rather than less; the trope of amnesty and oblivion resembles a forcible and potentially unhealthy repression of the past, not its erasure, and that which is repressed may return in forms more intense than before. Favorable instances of public forgetting consist in public speech acts or symbolic gestures designed to interrupt customary patterns of communal memory, strategically amending or even redacting its contents in order to denaturalize the normative authority of burdensome, seemingly unalterable historical obligations. Instances of forgetting in this spirit suggest how the prevailing appearance, sense, and value of the past could be radically adapted to better serve the political and moral needs of the present. Such is a very different outcome from presuming that the rhetorical work of forgetting entails proscriptions for communal obliviousness in which the past is mysteriously banished to a realm of no return.

Counter-memory

The *telos* of public forgetting so conceived is not amnesia but counter-memory as Michel Foucault describes it. For Foucault, counter-memory involves not simply an opposition of one historical narrative against another but a complete transformation of the scope and substance of historical understanding in its existing forms. Foucault's classic essays "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (1977a) and "What Is an Author?" (1977b) illustrate this principle. His genealogical method defines the relation between past and present, between self and history, not according to continuity, inevitability, or identity, but according to ruptures, accidental outcomes, and irreconcilable differences between former and contemporary epochs. Foucault intends this manner of thought to undermine one's assured belief in the essential sameness of the past and present. Hence, Foucault's history of authorship in "What Is an Author?" is strikingly at odds with conventional wisdom: an author is not one who writes great literature according to inborn talent and vision; an author is a legal and political function used to identify and classify hierarchies of discourse, to establish copyright laws and means of punishment for their violation (1977b, 124). Foucault's text insinuates that re-remembering, as it were, the history of authorship produces a vastly different account of the same phenomenon—one in which the object in question is altered unrecognizably in relation to its previous form. In "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," Foucault more expansively contends that history as we normally understand it encompasses not a unified

narrative of truths and values seamlessly joining past and present but an arbitrary interpretation of events that conceals its investments in certain modalities of power. The history of history itself, as Foucault perceives it, betrays such investments. Until the nineteenth century, he observes, organized history celebrated those "great national ensembles" that "capitalism needed" for economic expansion; as such, "History was a discipline by means of which the bourgeoisie showed, first, that its reign was only the result, the product, the fruit, of a slow maturation, and that this reign was thus perfectly justified" (1998, 423). To tell the story of the great national past, in other words, was to ideologically justify bourgeois hegemonic power in the guise of seemingly undistorted, universally representative history.

Following these insights, public forgetting provides a language and rationale for abdicating traditional modes of historical narrative and communal remembrance in order to expose the arbitrariness of the past as we presently conceive it, thereby illuminating unacknowledged ways it could assume a radically different character. "We want historians to confirm our belief that the present rests upon profound intentions and immutable necessities," Foucault writes. "But the true historical sense confirms our existence among countless lost events, without a landmark or a point of reference" (1977a, 155). In this light, public forgetting neither negates the past *in toto*, as we currently remember it, nor prevents its translation into future recollections. It rather suspends, or even rejects altogether, the past's prevailing and seemingly natural truth, value, and destined course of development as they have yet been conceived in collective reminiscence. This suspension or rejection opens a rhetorical and political space in which one may voice an entirely new collective sentiment concerning the contingent meaning and utility of the past in relation to the present. Public forgetting culminates not in termination but in the type of transformation that Foucault ascribes to counter-memory: "a transformation of history into a totally different form of time" (160).

Critical History

By implication, public forgetting embodies a conception of public time consistent with the Nietzschean vision of history that Foucault inherits. In Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal return, history unfolds not by linear temporality but according to epochal cycles in which every end is also a beginning, in which every eschatological event paradoxically inaugurates a new era. Nietzsche rejects the dialectical philosophies of history that other

nineteenth-century German thinkers promoted by formulating a philosophy of history in which difference holds unqualified positive value. Difference rather than primordial sameness, he insists, returns eternally in order to transform and produce historical time anew, without finality or entelechy. Public forgetting, in its most productive invocations, resides at the nexus of such a simultaneous end and beginning in the context of public time. Expressions of public forgetting do not call for mere termination of prevailing traditions of memory but reject their traditional forms as a warrant for calling into being a new, politically and morally transformative historical consciousness.

It is therefore consistent to say that public forgetting, as defined in this book, enacts Nietzsche's vision of critical history. His classic treatise "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" (1997) defines his iconoclastic attitude toward the role of history in public affairs. One might be tempted to interpret Nietzsche's comments on forgetting in this tract as an unqualified corrective to rampant human woes. Nietzsche imagines that human beings covet animals' carefree disregard for the past: "Man says 'I remember' and envies the animal, who at once forgets and for whom every moment really dies, sinks back into the night and is extinguished for ever. . . . Man, on the other hand, braces himself against the great and ever greater pressure of what is past: it pushes him down or bends him sideways, it encumbers his steps as a dark, invisible burden" (61). Humans are all too human in remembering too much. Constantly straining under the accumulated weight of the past stifles our ability to attend to present-day needs and interests. Of all modern thinkers, Nietzsche is most closely associated with the thesis that history can become burdensome to immediate personal and public endeavor.

One would nonetheless take liberties with this proposition if one interpreted Nietzsche to mean that forgetfulness should be the universal human condition, that we have license to invoke it haphazardly. "Forgetting is essential to action of any kind," Nietzsche maintains (62); but for him this statement does not support the conclusion that we should emulate beasts of burden by living a completely unhistorical existence. Nietzsche rather intends to prove the thesis that "*the unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and of a culture*" (63; emphasis in original). Nietzsche is far from an indiscriminate relativist on the question of forgetting. Acts of concerted forgetting, in his estimation, require discriminating ethical judgment. One's decision to "from time to time employ the strength to break up and dissolve a part of the past" requires clarity "as to how unjust the existence of anything—a privilege,

a caste, a dynasty, for example—is, and how greatly this thing deserves to perish. Then its past is regarded critically, then one takes the knife to its roots, then one cruelly tramples over every kind of piety" (75, 76). Modern readers might flinch at Nietzsche's vivid language in light of its later appropriation by Nazi party ideologues; one may measure the perversity of that appropriation, however, by the fact that the Nazis interpreted the meaning of Nietzsche's assertions here in a manner directly opposed to his intent. His conception of critical history presupposes that acts of willful forgetting can be acts of justice. They require one to identify with utmost clarity those "unjust," unbidden vestiges of the past (privileges, castes, dynasties) whose only value or authority lies in their agedness, whose very existence thus suppresses creative, spontaneous works and deeds in the present. Forgetting, in Nietzsche's formulation, does not reflect a casual relativism in which any and all elements of the past are equally valuable or valueless. It demands rigorous ethical scrutiny concerning which remainders of the past promote or obstruct the enhancement of contemporary life.

Nietzsche's definition of critical history does not, by the same token, entail willed collective amnesia, a declaration of amnesty and oblivion, whether it concerns the past *in toto* or acutely odious relics of it. Some contemporary commentators interpret Nietzsche's philosophy as frustratingly abstract and impractical, but his account of forgetting evinces a sober realism: however we may desire to break from the constraints or injustices of the past, we are ineluctably part of the lineage they form and would not exist as we do without them. Nietzsche's insistence that we cannot abrogate at will the heritage of which we are a culmination—that we cannot forget as such—tempers his conviction that, on occasion, we must judiciously abolish the most decadent remnants of our past:

> For since we are the outcome of earlier generations, we are also the outcome of their aberrations, passions and errors, and indeed of their crimes; it is not possible wholly to free oneself from this chain. If we condemn these aberrations and regard ourselves as free of them, this does not alter the fact that we originate in them. The best we can do is to confront our inherited and hereditary nature with our knowledge, and through a new, stern discipline combat our inborn heritage and implant in ourselves a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature, so that our first nature withers away. It is an attempt to give oneself, as it were *a posteriori*, a past in which one would like to originate in opposition to that in which one did originate. (76)

Amnesty and oblivion compound the decadence of the past precisely as we contest its authority over the present. To declare oblivious amnesia is to trade the outworn and burdensome illusions of our inherited past for an equally illusory historical consciousness of our own invention.

Critical history, as Nietzsche envisions it, accommodates strategic instances of unhistorical forgetting undertaken not in an effort at termination but in mindfulness of the eternal return. In forgetting, our judgments indeed dispel portions of the past; but by the same gesture, the past returns inescapably in a profoundly different configuration—one radically adapted to the needs of the present. Consistent with Nietzsche's philosophy writ large, forgetting is an exercise of self-discipline rather than delusion, a form of judgment in which we overcome our own invented or received perceptions of former times, people, and events as a mechanism for overcoming whatever self-defining flaws we have inherited from them. Forgetting propels the cycle of the eternal return in public time, ensuring that every consciously determined historical end is simultaneously an opening not simply to a new future but to a novel past with enhanced value and significance to present-day affairs.

But how can one assess more concretely the nature of that value and the future it heralds? What discernible end should a novel past serve beyond being novel? To this point, the claims that collective forgetting need not amount to amnesia and oblivion (Schacter), that its interruptive presence annuls the apparently apodictic nature of established histories (Foucault), and that one may forget in order to overcome the unjust or outmoded constraints of past traditions (Nietzsche) all stress the desirability of choosing to symbolically sever or recombine particular traditions of memory. The practical gains that accompany such actions, however, remain generally theoretical in Foucault's and Nietzsche's philosophies. Foucault emphasizes that the genealogical method renders normative expressions of historical truth and value available for potentially transformative political questioning, yet he characteristically declines to define the mode of politics such questioning would entail. Nietzsche declares the need to overcome the past, admirably recognizing the difficulties and dangers inherent in doing so, but says little about the type of future that such a gesture would inaugurate. Beyond the broad conviction that forgetting produces new forms of life and memory based on transformed conceptions of the past, how can one assess the civic goods that such forgetting engenders? Beyond being productive in general, what specific political goods should public forgetting ideally produce? And, most important, *when*—in what circumstances—does public forgetting help

a community to realize those goods? Hannah Arendt's emphasis of natality in her political philosophy provides compelling answers to these questions.

Natality

Arendt's description of public remembrance, as an indispensable medium for the constitution and reconstitution of political community, might seem incompatible with an affirmative model of public forgetting. Arendt stresses that the political deeds which call the *polis* into being would not endure, and thus the *polis* would not survive from one generation to the next, without the kind of organized remembrance that speech affords. She lauds Greek poets for practicing such reciprocity of speech and action: their epic tales bestowed "immortal fame . . . upon word and deed to make them outlast not only the futile moment of speech and action but even the mortal life of their agent" (1993, 46). Public memory allows human works, words, and deeds to attain "some permanence," she writes, "arresting their perishability" so that "these things would, to a degree at least, enter and be at home in the world of everlastingness, and the mortals themselves would find their place in the cosmos, where everything is immortal except men" (43). Ephemeral words and deeds establish the *polis* but the *polis* itself achieves "some permanence" as an everlasting space for their perpetual reduplication, for the attainment of immortality as such, in rituals of public remembrance. "The organization of the *polis,*" according to Arendt, is quite simply "a kind of organized remembrance" (1998, 198). By this logic, forgetting appears to loom large throughout her philosophy as a force that would relegate works, words, and deeds to their customarily perishable status, that would disassemble the everlasting legacies of speech and action upon which the *polis* is founded and so herald its collapse.

On closer inspection, however, Arendt recognizes that organized remembrance must consist of a creative activity in the present rather than an unthinking *mimesis* of the past. Cultivating natality, or beginning again through collective speech and action, is a vital aim of communal recollection rather than mere repetition of the same. Arendt supports this claim with characteristically lucid eloquence: "The end of a tradition does not necessarily mean that traditional concepts have lost their power over the minds of men. On the contrary, it sometimes seems that this power of well-worn notions and categories becomes more tyrannical as the tradition loses its living force and as the memory of its beginning recedes; it may even reveal its full coercive force only after its end has come and men no longer even rebel against it"

(1993, 26). In Arendt's dexterous thinking, the ongoing reconstitution of the *polis* conserves the value of its original constitution. Works, words, and deeds that attain "some permanence" in public lore should perdure because of their ability to inspire novel works, words, and deeds in the pursuit of contemporary political excellence. Stephen Browne, in commenting on Arendt's politics of remembrance, observes that "far from being merely nostalgic or retrospective, such work is always and at once new, discursive, and unpredictable" (2004, 48). Public remembrance is valuable in Arendt's account less as a medium of preservation and more as a continual device for the *re*production—or better, re*invention*—of the *res publica;* it signifies not so much proof of a polity's unbroken connection with its origins as a resource for the continual remaking and reaffirmation of its public identity. Any veneration for "everlastingness" in Arendt's writings conforms to the supremely vital project of cultivating natality in political speech and action, of beginning again, which envelops it.

Arendt's cardinal concern for preserving conditions of natality provides, by the spirit if not the letter of her philosophy, a warrant for pursuing the political goods of public forgetting as a procedure of radical commemorative reconstitution, as a necessary source of commemorative adaptation rather than simple termination or loss. The faculty of forgiving among fellow political agents is perhaps the most easily relatable (albeit somewhat controversial) source of natality in her writings. Forgiveness as Arendt speaks of it does not take place with the assistance of divine agency in a supernatural realm; it is a ritual of speech and action initiated and realized by members of the polis in the secular time and place of civic politics. The terms of forgiving as such, and the forgetting it implies, are distinct from religious idioms of forgiving and forgetting found in the *ars oblivionis,* where the sinner's past is literally blotted out, relegated to oblivion. The effect of forgiveness in Arendt's philosophy is not blotting out (or amnesia) but something like covering up, to use Margalit's phrase (2002, 126, 183–209), in which the bare presence of the past is preserved in a noticeably altered form that paradoxically draws attention to the very act of covering—that is, to one's public avowal to treat portions of the past in a self-consciously revised manner.

Forgiveness holds crucial political value in Arendt's philosophy for its capacity to release a polity from debilitating perceptions of its past—a past that limits a community's capacity for political action in the present. Forgiving allows political actors to counteract the effects of processes seemingly beyond their control. This potent source of communal agency appears to interrupt the ostensibly irreversible dominance of the past over the present:

"The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility—of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing—is the faculty of forgiving" (1998, 237). Arendt recognizes, as Nietzsche did, that lasting consequences of actions undertaken in the past condition our actions in the present—but they must not predetermine them. The *vita activa,* politics itself, is inconceivable in Arendt's system without the capacity to begin anew, to be released from commitments to a past not of one's choosing. Organized remembrance should indeed preserve former works, words, and deeds, even bestowing on them a kind of immortality, but in the form of institutional models for contemporary speech and action, not as predeterminations thereof. "Forgiving," Arendt proclaims, "serves to undo the deeds of the past. . . . Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever" (237). Forgiving releases us not from the past as a whole but from its specific "consequences," from ostensibly irreversible chains of events initiated through prior actions (including our own), the course of which only appears unalterable.

Ingrained customs of institutional memory constitute prime expressions of such onerous irreversibility. Normative memories of past deeds and events need not, as a rule, depict present actions as necessary outcomes of predetermined historical processes; but twentieth-century history in particular has shown that they can, and often do. In such circumstances, public memory endows communal history—its future as well as its past and present—with the ethos of irreversibility as Arendt describes it. Unexamined reverence for that "one single deed" of which she speaks can constrict "our capacity to act" such that we "remain victims of its consequences forever" (or at least indefinitely). Forgiveness, as seen through this conceptual lens, transmutes public perceptions of temporal irreversibility into a source of immediate agency and thus replenishes the communal capacity for political action, for politics as such.

Forgiving, as a feature of the *vita activa,* requires a measure of forgetting. One remains free from irreversibility, from the apparent automatism that natural or historical processes engender, by willfully counteracting the influence of the past over current speech, judgment, and action—an influence commonly embodied in those works of public memory that preserve its authority as such. Describing Arendt's doctrine tritely as one of forgiving and forgetting, however, diminishes its gravity. Forgetting, to the extent that it is compatible with her thought, does not sanction self-deceiving

proclamations of amnesty and oblivion. It avoids the sheer pragmatism that Paul Ricoeur, for example, finds so unacceptable in state pronouncements of amnesty, which seek to mitigate the effects of past injustices on "strictly utilitarian" grounds (by simply declaring they are forgotten) without forging deeper political or moral commitments (2004, 472). Rejecting apparently predetermined courses of action enjoined by previous deeds or withdrawing normative expressions of our obligations to the past—to forget as such—is a politically essential rather than merely utilitarian capacity in Arendt's philosophy. For her, nothing less than political freedom depends on it. It is consistent with the general ambition of Arendt's thought to say that the entire sphere of human existence known as the *vita activa*—in which decision-making by speech, judgment, and action holds at bay the politically destructive forces of violence and totalitarianism—withers when the present appears as merely an unalterable product of the past, when the past represents an incontestable blueprint for contemporary conduct.

Forgiving, as well as the forgetting that this study perceives at its heart, is only one of two crucial ways in which Arendt believes that political actors may mutually reset the proverbial clock of communal time. Forgiving allows individuals to release one another from the past they share, thereby neutralizing its putative irreversibility; but forgiving by itself does not dispel the uncertainty of the future, particularly one in which the normal course of events no longer appears predestined or assured. "The remedy for unpredictability," Arendt continues, "for the chaotic uncertainty of the future, is contained in the faculty to make and keep promises" (1998, 237). Suspending, or rejecting altogether, normative perceptions of the past in which its course of development appears intractable is a necessary prelude to inaugurating a new constellation of sociopolitical relations based on the promises of which Arendt speaks. Political agents must absolve one another from burdensome obligations to the past in order to preserve their collective ability to initiate the political deed *par excellence:* the act of beginning again, of establishing a new accord. "The two faculties belong together . . . binding oneself through promises," Arendt writes, "serves to set up in the ocean of uncertainty, which the future is by definition, islands of security without which not even continuity, let alone durability of any kind, would be possible in the relationships between men" (237). If forgiveness enables communities to derive a measure of collective agency over their past, then the forgetting that such forgiveness entails allows a community to do so by reinventing its constitutive norms and representative identity in light of "the oceans of uncertainty" that engulf its perceived future.

Lingering over the question of forgiveness as a political principle unto itself is not the aim of this discussion. Its purpose, rather, is to pursue the larger implications concerning natality, forgetting, and public time that political incarnations of forgiveness suggest. The foregoing interpretation of temporal and historical dynamics in Arendt's thought yields a critical analytic principle with which to distinguish desirable from undesirable instances of public forgetting. Public forgetting, as this book defines it, is an occasionally necessary procedure for transforming a public's perceived subservience to its past into an expression of its agency over the future. To this extent, the value of public forgetting consists not simply in eliminating prevailing modes of remembrance but in reconstituting existing sociopolitical relations so that new, politically and ethically transformative modes of remembrance can emerge. Judicious forgetting enables one, in Arendt's parlance, to make promises (to construct new sociopolitical relations) in light of the future as one now envisions it.

Public forgetting promotes or enacts a dramatically new communal perspective on the past in which former works, words, and deeds undergo radical alteration, losing their previous meaning and authority. The prime effect of this alteration is to simultaneously modify, in equally dramatic fashion, present-day sociopolitical relations originally founded in fidelity to that past. Public forgetting is a vital undertaking for public bodies not merely in order to terminate a past no longer serviceable to contemporary life or institutional politics but as a mode of speech and action that preserves the polity's ability to reinvent itself, to begin anew through collective action, in response to immediate or anticipated uncertainties that threaten its integrity.

The firmest grounds for an affirmative conception of public forgetting lie in this political good: its potential to generate novel public obligations by radically reinterpreting the perceived sense and value of a community's past, present, and future—in short, a tandem commemorative and political refashioning. By implication, public forgetting assumes the detestable appearance of forced amnesia when it suppresses the individual or collective capacity to begin anew, when it stifles one's ability to fashion novel sociopolitical relations (or to make and keep promises, the very hallmark of political freedom, as Arendt would have it). Public forgetting is laudable when it enhances the *res publica,* when it stimulates pluralist speech and action, and condemnable when it undermines communal practices in which such pluralism thrives. Public forgetting refers, in sum, to especially dramatic acts of counter-memory undertaken in order to identify novel grounds for public judgment about the meaning and value of the past, thereby inaugurating a new era of qualitatively transformed sociopolitical relations.

Conclusion

Forgetting, as defined in this chapter, resides at the center of transformative junctures in the political formulation and expression of public time, memory, and tradition. In its most pernicious forms, forgetting resumes its timeworn place among the forces of violence and repression. In its most prudential forms, however, forgetting enacts a mode of public judgment regarding the political or ethical relevance of the past as well as the value of contemporary sociopolitical relations founded in compliance with its apparent lessons. Using the conceptual framework assembled in this chapter, the following chapters explore the rhetorical and political prudence of conventionally underappreciated forms of forgetting by attending to the speech, language, and symbolism in which leaders and ordinary individuals alike call on their fellows to forget.

PART 2

PUBLIC FORGETTING: ALTERNATE HISTORIES, NEW HEURISTICS