Between Forgetting & Remembering

Imagine, dear reader, waking up each day without a memory of those around you. Amir Nassar’s literary navigations meander between the total recall of Borges’s Funes the Memorious and the complete forgetfulness of diving into Lethe, river of the underworld. Is a life where one never forgets worth living?

Essay / Amir Nassar December 16, 2024

With editorial interventions of Michal b. Ron

1.jpg

[1]Amir Nassar, Into the Silence, analog photography, 2024

Forget
Verb
Origin: *Old English forgietan*

To lose the power of recalling to the mind: To fail to remember something previously known or experienced.
In a physical sense, to lose one's grip on reality: To become disconnected from what is concrete, leading to an erosion of the links between past, present, and future.1
To diminish or dispose of that which is no longer necessary: To let go of memories,

Memory / Forgetfulness

FRENCH *mémoire, oubli*

GERMAN *Erinnerung, Gedächtnis, Vergessen*

GREEK *mnêmê, mnêmosunê, memnêmai, Lêlhê, lêsmosunê*

LATIN *subverine, menini, obliviscor*

[...]

thoughts, or objects that are no longer of importance.[2]

Yatanaasa
Verb
Origin: Arabic □□□□□□□□□

To feign forgetfulness: To pretend to have forgotten something intentionally.
To deliberately forget: To consciously decide to forget something, often as a coping mechanism.
The mind's turn against itself: A process where the mind suppresses or distorts memories, possibly as a form of self-protection.[3]

Forgetting has a constant relation to memory, which is not-forgetting, or a form of counter-forgetting, which then becomes a natural state, established through a selective effort of the mind. The English (forget) and the German (*vergessen*) suggest a kind of fluid power that carries away the traces of an experience, which is then out of reach. The effacement in the French word *oubli* (Low Lat. *oblitare*, "to erase, to efface") conveys the idea of a more controlled relation: here, effacement is an object of analysis in itself; forgetting ceases to be the counterposition of a methodically selective process of remembering or recollecting, and in artistic creation it characterizes the condition of a decisive transition to another order of meaning.[4]

The discourse surrounding memory, like memory itself, is elusive and subject to lapses and distortions. It is in this forgetfulness that a new poetics of forgetting emerges. We inhabit, it seems, an era steeped in cultural amnesia—where the very act of forgetting becomes a silent yet profound narrative of our time. This short piece seeks to trace the contours of forgetting in several literary texts, to uncover its silent workings, its hidden poetics, for man, by nature, is a "forgetful being (animal *obliviscens*)."[5]

Forgetting Nothing

In this exploration, one cannot forget the figure of Funes the Memorious from Jorge Luis Borges' work—a character who, paradoxically, embodies the antithesis of forgetfulness. When discussing memory and its absence, Funes emerges as one of the most significant figures in literature, a stark reminder of what it means to remember everything and forget nothing. Although Funes might seem like an obvious choice for any discussion on mnemonics, I want to delve deeper into this story to extract a few key elements.[6]

Borges's short story opens with the words, "I remember," suggesting a man lost in the act of reminiscence, savoring the memory of a distant figure he once knew and reflecting on how their paths crossed. This figure is Funes, a young man whose life takes a dramatic turn after a fall from a horse leaves him crippled. In the wake of this accident, Funes's memory becomes astonishingly infallible, granting him the extraordinary, yet burdensome, ability to recall every detail of his existence perfectly. This transformation marks the beginning of a profound exploration of the implications of such an unfaltering memory:

"He remembered the shapes of the clouds in the south at dawn on the 30th of April of 1882, and he could compare them in his recollection with the marbled grain in the design of a leather-bound book which he had seen only once and with the lines in the spray which an oar raised in the Rio Negro on the eve of the battle of the Quebracho."[7]

"In their Age of Total Recall, memory is never lost. Only the art of forgetting."[8]

We further understand that Funes is now unable to forget anything, his whole existence antithetical to forgetfulness:

“He could reconstruct all his dreams, all his fancies. Two or three times, he had reconstructed an entire day. He told me: I have more memories in myself alone than all men have had since the world was a world. And again, My dreams are like your vigils. And again, toward dawn: My memory, sir, is like a garbage disposal… In effect, Funes not only remembered every leaf on every tree of every wood but even every one of the times he had perceived or imagined it.”9

Would anyone truly wish to live a life where nothing is ever forgotten—heartbreaks, deaths, misfortunes, painful memories? To live, one must forget certain details; to survive, one must let go of some of the past. But more than that, forgetting is essential to think, conceptualize, and form abstract ideas. Borges writes, “To think is to forget a difference, to generalize, to abstract. In the overly replete world of Funes, there were nothing but details, almost contiguous details.”10 Funes’s world, overwhelmed by an endless succession of minute details, renders conventional thought impossible.

> Forgetfulness, with its power to tear one away from the fullness of meaning, offers a means of perpetuating memory. Memory thinks but only manages to do so through forgetting if, instead of signifying loss, flight, or abandonment, memory allows us, on the contrary, to reconstitute a reference. We choose what counts.11

Though Borges described Funes’s story as a “long metaphor of insomnia,” it still offers valuable insights into the nature of remembering and forgetting. Consider, in a theoretical exercise, a character whom we might call Lydia the Oblivious or Lucas the Forgetful, who can never retain any of their memories. What kind of world would such a character inhabit? What would their day-to-day life look like? A life as tragic, I would argue, as the one Funes endures. Memory requires continuity, where each day builds upon the previous one. While the mind may alter or forget certain details, this continuity is essential for constructing a meaningful existence. To live in a world devoid of memory, where each day begins as a *tabula rasa*, is to embody the very essence of nihilism.

Imagine, dear reader, waking up each day without a memory of those around you. You must piece together your current situation each morning, relying on others to explain where you are and what has happened. Unable to retain memories, you start anew every day, accumulating information only to forget it by the next. You have no recollection of your loved ones—a concept Hollywood has exploited ad *nauseam*. Is this fate more bearable than that of Sisyphus? Can we imagine Lydia or Lucas happy?

> “Man may well ask the animal: why do you not speak to me of your happiness but only look at me? The animal does want to answer and say: because I always immediately forget what I wanted to say— but then it already forgot this answer and remained silent: so that man could only wonder.”12

Forgetting All

It is here that we encounter the meandering stream of Lethe, the river of forgetfulness. In Greek mythology, Lethe is the name of a feminine divine deity, as opposed to Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory. She is, in a figurative sense, the mother of oblivion. However, what interests us here is Lethe, the river in the underworld that confers forgetfulness to the souls of the dead. The element of water is crucial, as those wandering souls drink from the river Lethe to free themselves from their past experiences and lives in preparation for rebirth in a new body.

In Virgil, we find the following lines:

The souls that throng the flood
Are those to whom, by fate, are other bodies ow'd:
In Lethe's lake they long oblivion taste,
Of future life secure, forgetful of the past.[13]

When he leaves the battle (in books 2 an 6) and returns to his mother, Hector does not want to drink the wine she offers him (6.258-62). “Do not break my limbs: I am afraid of forgetting force and combat;” to forget is to lose. He does not want to lose his warrior-like force and knows that he only has this force if he has a clear head, and in his heart, the force to think about it, which is how he constitutes it. Forgetfulness opens the way for the opposite to happen, leading to loss, alienation, and disaster.[14]

We come upon Lethe again, the river of forgetfulness, in the poetry of Dante, John Milton, and John Keats, each using it to explore themes of memory and oblivion. In *The Divine Comedy*, Lethe has the power to erase the memories of the dead from their earthly lives as they enter the realm of the afterlife. Keats employs it to reflect on the ephemeral nature of human experience. Milton invokes Lethe in *Paradise Lost* to highlight divine justice, depicting forgetfulness as a desolate and grim landscape. The river of oblivion flows through a bleak wasteland, where the loss of memory leads to a stark, frozen continent of eternal storms and ruin:

Far off from these a slow and silent stream,

Lethe the river of oblivion rolls

Her wat’ry labyrinth, whereof who drinks,

Forthwith his former state and being forgets,

Forgets both joy and grief, pleasure and pain.

Beyond this flood a frozen continent

Lies dark and wild, beat with perpetual storms

Of whirlwind and dire hail, which on firm land

Thaws not, but gathers heap, and ruin seems

Of ancient pile; all else deep snow and ice.[15]

A second Olympus is established next to the gods, a domain of forgetfulness. After all, the gods themselves are involved in the affairs of mankind, whether they control them or not. Forgetting as a way of repairing evil becomes, more absolutely, the condition of the conquest of another world, where in theory nothing is ever forgotten, nothing good, but also nothing evil.

[…]

The word [*lêsmosunê*] is created not as a negation, but as an analogy and as an active counterpart to memory, a complementary power, which is said to possess the art of driving away misfortune, as Helen’s drugs are able to do in volume 4 of the *Odyssey*. Lesmosyne provides a respite from sorrows and pains, and forgetfulness is her work of magic.[16]

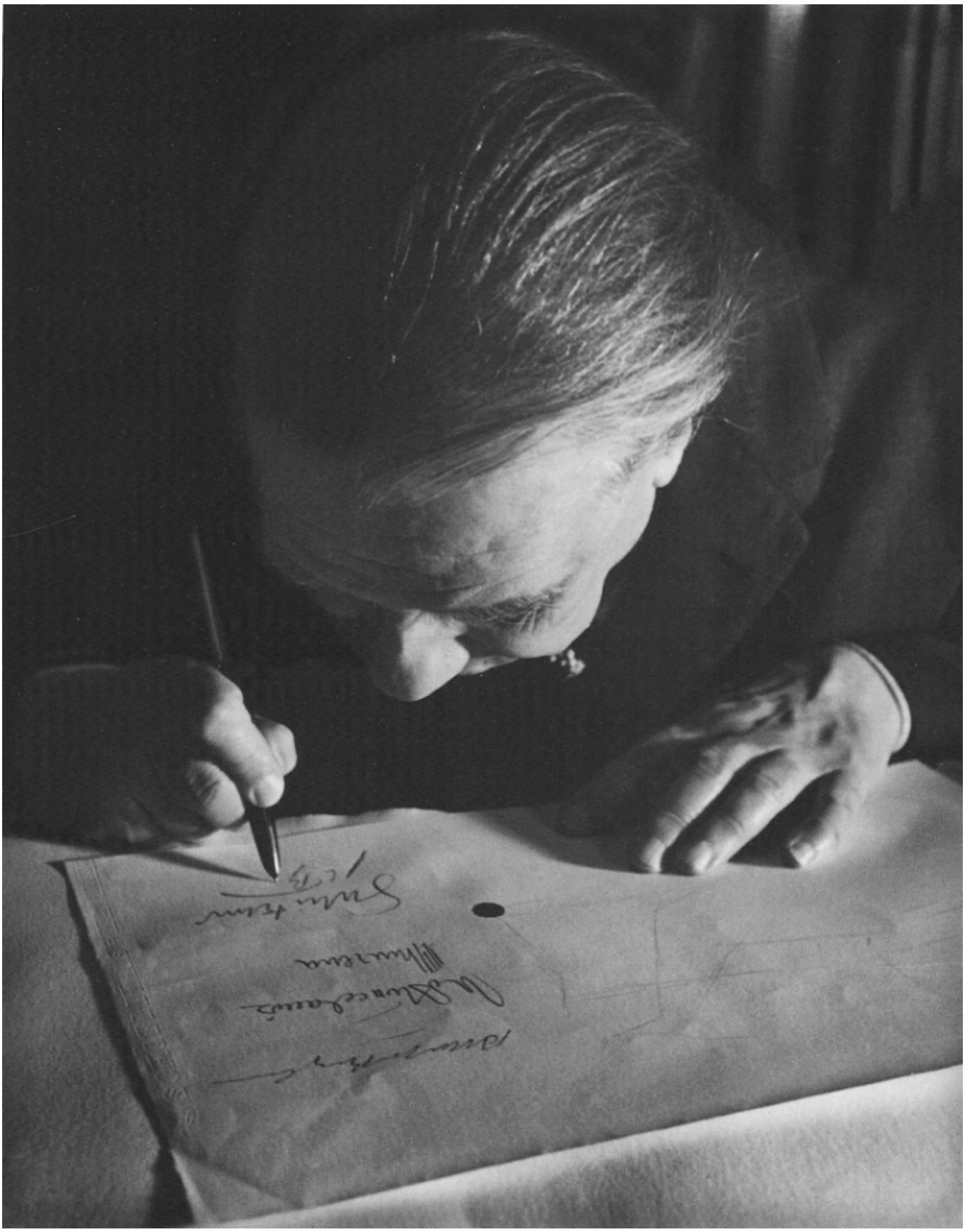
Through these references, Lethe symbolizes the complex interplay between memory, identity, and the human condition. As if it is imperative to forget all that has passed during worldly life before the passage into the afterlife. Redemption is sought in forgetfulness.

Who Forgets?

In a way, the soul may forget its past experiences, but some things resist oblivion. Writing, with its captivating duality, occupies both realms—forgetting and remembering. We write to unburden, to surrender our memories to ink, freeing ourselves from their weight. In doing so, we allow the text to carry what we no longer need to hold. Yet this very act of release transforms memory into permanence, entrusted to the page until it too fades, caught in the inevitable cycle of remembrance and forgetfulness: *tempus edax rerum*.17

> The concept of the archive shelters in itself, of course, this memory of the name *arkhe*. But it also shelters itself from this memory which it shelters: which comes down to saying also that it forgets it.18

800px-Jorge_Luis_Borges_1963.png **[2]**



[3]
Alicia D'Amico (1933-2001) - Libro "Grandes Maestros de la fotografia argentina" Bagó
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The deeds of certain people are immortalized. We still remember Caligula, Nero, Nebuchadnezzar, and many others who left their imprint on history. A cornerstone of modern politics is peoples' resilience and resistance to never forget the calamities that have befallen them: famines, wars, holocausts, and genocides. We shall never forget, chants the mob. Who shall remember then, and who shall forget? Who gets to ask this question? Are we truly free of history's onus/encumbrance to remember?

A covenant of memory exists between God and religious believers: although the believer may sin and sometimes forget about God, God remains ever-mindful of the believer. This creates an asymmetry between human forgetfulness and divine remembrance. As St. Augustine expresses in his *Confessions*: 'I call upon you, my God, my mercy. You made me, and even when I forgot you, you did not forget me."19

And yet, is one's life better lived if one tends to forget more? Can we adapt Socrates's famous statement, 'The unexamined life is not worth living,' to say instead, "A life where one never forgets is not worth living?" Perhaps, in the end, we may often forget and remember more deeply in our forgetfulness. Who of us hasn't attempted a Proustian recovery of time past? Even as we turn time over, like an hourglass, one should perhaps retain the awareness of one's forgetting, oscillating between the delicate line of memory and oblivion.

2.jpg **[4]**

[5]Amir Nassar, Glimpses, analogue photography, 2024

- 1. Online Etymology Definition: https://www.etymonline.com/word/forget#etymonline_v_11803 [6].
- 2. Author's definition.
- 3. Author's definition based on the connotations of the Arabic verb.
- 4. Jean Bollack, "Memory / Forgetfulness," *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. Barbara Cassin, trans. and ed. Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra and Michael Wood (Princeton University Press, 2004), 636.
- 5. Harald Weinrich, *Lethe: The Art and Critique of Forgetting*, 1997, 1.
- 6. I use both *forgetting* and *forgetfulness* interchangeably, though the former describes a specific action, while the latter refers to an ongoing state or condition that people or things may inhabit.
- 7. Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones*, 1994, 90.
- 8. Kodwo Eshun, "Further Consideration of Afrofuturism," CR: The New Centennial Review 3.2 (Summer 2003): 287.
- 9. Borges, *Ficciones*, 90.
- 10. Borges, *Ficciones*, 92.
- 11. ollack, "Memory / Forgetfulness," *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, 645.
- 12. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, 1874
- 13. Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6.703, translated by Theodore C. Williams..
- 14. Bollack, "Memory / Forgetfulness," *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, 638.
- 15. *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, "Paradise Lost, Book II", 2007, 342.
- 16. Bollack, "Memory / Forgetfulness," *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, 639-40.

- 17. Time, the devourer of all things.
- 18. Jacques Derrida, “Archive Fever: a Freudian Impression,” *Diacritics 25.2* (Summer 1995): 9.
- 19. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, 1998, 262.

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