

*The Work of Forgetting: Or, How Can We
Make the Future Possible?*
Stephane Symons

Richard J. Elliott
Birkbeck College, University of London

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As is the case with many clichés, there is often a great truth to not judging a book by its cover. However, it is arguably far more reasonable to expect to be able to, to some degree, judge a book by its blurb. The publisher description and back cover of *The Work of Forgetting* by Stephane Symons claims a dialogue on the issue of memory and forgetting between aspects of the thought of six figures: Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, Benjamin, Arendt, and Deleuze. One would expect from this a more or less equal treatment of these figures throughout the study.

Instead, what you get in the text is one obvious protagonist, Walter Benjamin, with the other five figures as a secondary cast who either support the hero in their approach to these philosophical themes, or stand in as foils for or antagonists to Benjamin's position. As such, Benjamin is framed as a particularly useful figure for framing 'creative' forgetting as an 'interruptive' force. This misleading setup makes a review more difficult, since the content of the book doesn't match up to what was expected from the pub-

lisher's description. I admit a very limited knowledge of Walter Benjamin, so I am not best placed to assess the potential successes or failures of this significant aspect of the reading of Symons' work. However, and fortunately, this is not the case with several figures that make up the 'secondary cast'. As such I will focus on the role of Freud, Heidegger and Nietzsche in Symons' text for my analysis here.

The section specifically on Freud, though totalling just 7 pages (pp. 93 - 100), is excellent, when considered in isolation. It manages to be thorough, insightful and concise. It sophisticatedly treats a number of texts of Freud's texts where he discusses forgetting, under the auspices of Freud's conservationist model of mind. One small caveat of criticism: Symons doesn't make clear the moves, recantations and developments of Freud's model of mind per se. But while this is significant in relation to the background claims attending Freud's conception of forgetting, Symons' analysis exposes and aptly discusses the similarities of Freud's claims across his works from the time of his topographical model of mind, to later ones such as 'the Mystical Writing Pad'. This demonstrates Freud's continued commitment to psychological conservatism about memory and the capacity for unconscious recollection throughout his oeuvre. Symons is insightful in bringing out the curious way that this metaphor of the 'mystical writing pad' is employed by Freud to represent the manner in which the mind both receives, omits or keeps from consciousness, and yet preserves the context of all experiences, all operating independently of the others, in the context of forgetting as a mode of repression.

The most significant problem with this work, however, is one of deep structural significance. The central discussion of the book doesn't seem to form a coherent argument. This is not to say that the intended aim isn't clear: Symons hopes to upset a foundational paradigm in 'memory studies', by advocating a far more prominent role to a conception of forgetting in the business of "formulat[ing] response[s] to historical events" (p. 4). The potential for forgetting as a means of relating to history, be that by self-relation or by socio-historical or communitarian relation, is an important subject. It is

on this front that Symons wishes to view a certain relation to the past as constituting certain conditions for a present self-relation. But the way in which Symons attempts to fulfil this intended aim is deeply incoherent. The main reasons for this is that the respective conceptions of memory and forgetting by all of the six interlocutors (be they secondary or primary) seem to be tracking such vastly distinct phenomena, that no unifying thread can be gleaned to form a central account or debate that frames them in the way Symons aspires to do. On their own, the respective discussions of these figures are often interesting and sometimes illuminating. But the attempts to link all of these figures in a cohesive fashion, particularly by means of emphasis on Benjamin's contribution to discussions of forgetting, is not convincing.

For example, Symons relies on a presumption of conceptual overlap between different conceptions of forgetting. However, not only does each respective figure track different phenomena with their respective conceptions of forgetting, but there appears to be no singular articulable function that such phenomena respectively share.

This is evident on both supposed sides of the debate, between both conservationists about memory and those who conceive of forgetting as having efficacy for productive ends. Symons treats Heidegger's notion of *Seinsvergessenheit* (the 'forgetting of Being') and the prospects of its recollection in some fashion as a heuristic for re-engaging with the question of Being. Symons argues (p. 25) that Heidegger opens up a similar argument to that of Freud in respect of the relationship between forgetting and memory. Likewise, Symons writes that both Heidegger and Freud "inserted the concept of an immemorial past into philosophical systems" (p. 90). Symons emphasizes Heidegger's call for a "recalling thinking" or "thoughtful recollection", presumably in the context of becoming attuned to the disposition of the ancient Greeks whose thinking was deeply wedded to the truth of Being. But Heidegger is not seeking a return to this way of thinking, but rather elsewhere claims that this recollection "can no longer remain in its Western isolation", viewing it as a "precondition" for a new dialogue with the "East Asian world" (Heidegger,

VA 43/158'), as a means of openness to what he calls "the beginning of the infinite relationship, in which the earth is contained." (EHD 177/201)² Obscure Heideggerese aside, it is evident that it is not a recognition of, and return to, an immemorial memory, conserved despite Being's being forgotten, that Heidegger is seeking. The 'remembrance' of Greek thinking is a precondition for a new kind of thinking, to overcome Western metaphysical thinking, Heidegger claims.

It is also difficult to figure out how Symons arrives at his claim that Heidegger is waging a philosophical battle against transience (p. 101). After all, in *Being and Time*, resoluteness comes as a result of acknowledging Dasein's being-towards-death, the pivotal recognition of one's own transience. It might be more plausible to argue that it is not transience per se that is Heidegger's concern. Rather, it is the subjectivist disposition towards transience that he criticizes in, to use a prescient example, Nietzsche's "supreme thought of the will to power" as "stamping Becoming with the character of Being". This unpublished phrase from Nietzsche's notebooks was one which Heidegger never tired of bringing up in his monolithic 1930s lectures on Nietzsche. But this is a far cry from Symons' claims about Heidegger.

The similarities which Symons sees between Heidegger and Freud on memory are not substantiated. Freud is identified as another figure who prioritizes this kind of emphasis on memory. Freud thinks that *all things forgotten are repressed*. A specific kind of recollection is possible by means of unearthing all repressions, in line with Freud's deep (and arguably highly problematic) conservationist account of mind. The stark disparity between Heidegger and Freud should be enough to show that calling these two figures into a common enterprise under the auspices of their respective conceptions of memory and forgetting should be considered highly questionable. Remembrance of things forgotten qua lifting repressions (Freud) is so

¹'The Thing' (pp. 157 – 179), in *Vortrage und Aufsätze*, 7th ed. Pfullingen: Neske, 1994 (Written: 1936 – 54) (in *Poetry, Language, Thought*)

²'Elucidations of Holderlin's Poetry', trans. Keith Hoeller, New York: Humanity Books, 2000

far from working through to either a new sense of resoluteness (early Heidegger) or engaging in thinking to somehow overcome the en-framing of Western metaphysical technicity (later Heidegger), that little similarity can be robustly drawn or defended.

Symons' attempts at discussing the expressed aims of this volume are frequently couched in frustratingly obfuscating language. Symons writes, "Creative forgetting [...] replaces the firm conviction that the present ought to immunize itself against the past with the precarious hope that, vice versa, the past can be immunized against the present" (p. 16). But seemingly no explanation is provided for such cryptic sentences. On the very next page, this creative forgetting, we are told, is able to "expose the *internal* limits of mythic violence [...] the mythic drive to perpetuate violence is acted upon by an expression of the quality of impermanence that marks the realm of history in toto. Forgetting is made productive when such a deeply rooted impermanence is uncovered within the heart of a type of power that seeks to be all-encompassing" (p. 17). This is an unbelievably poorly written succession of sentences. Terminology is utilised, but given no clarification, development or further exposition. The text quickly fails to give any of these and moves on to a 'Note on Primo Levi', one of several such 'notes' throughout the book. These 'notes' throughout the text might sometimes be interesting (e.g. the one on Adorno, pp. 76 – 80), but it is often unclear how they contribute to the central argument, if at all. As such, they appear only to be unnecessary digressions, as the content of these 'notes' aren't direct or focused enough to warrant their intrusion into the argument of the text. I'm not convinced that clarification of such points would lend themselves to supporting a robust, contradiction-free position of any kind. But since such clarification isn't provided, the reader is not in a position to know for certain. As a result, this constitutes a serious stylistic failure of the work.

This proclivity to employing jargon is pervasive in Symons' characterization of Nietzsche, too. The mature works of Nietzsche at one level seek to uncover deeply efficacious yet unpleasant facts about our history. This sometimes lends itself to occasionally unhelpful comparisons between the *Genealogy*

of *Morality* and Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*. In the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche offers a showcase of past relations of power and value as a means of showing how modern Europeans arrived at the psycho-social constitution they have inherited. This seems a deep exercise in retrieving a particular sort of memory. It is also in this same work, however, that Nietzsche posits the capacity for actively forgetting as a natural endowment of a healthy human psychology. The Second Essay of Nietzsche's *Genealogy* (hereafter *GM*) acts in part (though admittedly a large part) to document the cases where this endowment for forgetting has been vetoed by 'bad conscience', namely the forced imposition of certain social and moral commitments within the individual's psychology. Symons doesn't mention these important references to forgetting once in his discussions of Nietzsche. He limits his emphasis instead to a very early text of Nietzsche's, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* (hereafter *HL*). While there might be some very interesting similarities between *HL* to *GM* on this issue, it seems strange to focus on a text from an earlier, more speculative period of Nietzsche's works, a time when he was still refining his own distinctive philosophical ideas, when the mature works constitute rich and fertile texts available to be plumbed for discussing Symons' central claims. As such Nietzsche comes across as a monolithic figure with a static conception of forgetting, to the detriment of the obvious developmental movements his thought takes with respect to this conception.

However, the text Symons does focus on, *HL*, is framed as a "recovery of a vitalist process of infinite renewal or an *ontologized* becoming". All of this is at the very least a highly questionable if not downright erroneous reading of Nietzsche. Again, this is where Symons' portrayal of Nietzsche falls foul of the lack of nuance in addressing Nietzsche's development. Symons characterizes him as, for example, the philosopher who posits "the Overman's affirmation of an *ontologized* becoming and renewal" (p. 59). But in *HL*, Nietzsche characterizes the man who sees becoming everywhere as one "condemned" to do so, as one situated in a self-undermining, self-defeating position (*HL* 1). Further, Nietzsche writes that the 'doctrine' of "sovereign

becoming” would expectantly make a people perish “of petty egoism, ossification and greed” (*HL* 9): hardly singing praise. In much later works, when Nietzsche speaks of Becoming in a positive tone, there is no reason given from any of Nietzsche’s published works for reading an ontological dimension into becoming, not least the books in which the figure of the Overman appears.

Symons also makes erroneous claims about the status of renewal in the aforementioned quote. One of Nietzsche’s central claims about affirming the eternal recurrence, a crucial if obfuscating thought within the Nietzschean enterprise, involves being able to eternally affirm a life’s cycle, wholly devoid of novelty. As such it is difficult to see how this accounts for offering genuine renewal. This problem is deepened by the discussion of metaphor of the ‘child’ in Nietzsche, as described by Symons as “a metaphor for the possibility of genuine change” (p. 145). Rather, the child represents the ‘innocence and forgetfulness’ because ‘Becoming’ (the necessary transience of all things) for Nietzsche is devoid of all guilt. This is why Nietzsche frames the child as the ‘third metamorphosis of spirit’ in his self-proclaimed magnum opus, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, as the one who comes after the great battle against the absolutism of the pervasive morality, and the metaphysics which buttresses it. Only with Being orienting one’s fundamental metaphysical conception can one posit any kind of moral world-order, and because Nietzsche rejects Being in favour of Becoming, that moral world-order drops out. The ‘child’ is ‘innocent’ because there is nothing to be ‘guilty’ about, in relation to the world-order. The child’s expressiveness and creativity comes through an untrammelled expression of all its instincts, no matter their standing on past Christian-moral readings of them. This is one reason why it is confusing when Symons claims that Nietzsche “takes recourse to a metaphysical and even moral framework” to understand the metaphor of the child (p. 162). As such this ideal of Nietzsche’s project is presented in a confused fashion by Symons.

The issues Symons’ book raises are important ones. However the presentation of these issues, the figures preoccupied with them, and the central

argument to which they are supposed to be tied, are all treated in a severely deficient manner in this study.