

Clean Forgetting

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Avarice

Founded on incertitude and void, and yet with powers of recording and recall which allow us to reach much further back even than our own individual beginnings, human beings can find it disconcerting that those beginnings must for them always be a caesura in time. For everyone comes from nowhere, from a past that cannot be remembered. This anomaly can generate a kind of mnestic avarice, a feeling that some vital or indispensable part of ourselves is absent where it should be available to us, since the you you are must have been there long before there was an I for you to be, or remember being. One might regard the intense anamnestic libido attaching to the idea of recovering long-buried memories as a kind of surrogate for this essential unrecoverable mystery. Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* famously rewrites the Oedipus myth and offers it as the root of the epistemophilia that animates detective stories. Freud thought that the curiosity about the origin of children was a kind of primal curiosity, which is paired with the desire to know enacted in the analytic process, making the child the first psychoanalyst. In the theory of birth trauma, Otto Rank found 'the ultimate biological basis of the psychical' (Rank 1929, xiii), thus offering the earliest and most compelling formative instance of the unconscious on which psychoanalysis is based, and yet in the process undermining the whole of the psychoanalytic project insofar as it is centred on the excavation of personal and social experiences. Indeed, Rank considered that 'the primal repression of the birth-trauma may be considered as the cause of memory in general – that is, of the partial capacity for remembering', along with the origin of patriarchy, in 'establishing the uncertain descent (*semper incertus*) from the father as the foundation for the entire law (name, inheritance, etc.)' (Rank 1929, 8, 94). Freud's ambivalence about Rank's work is probably a dual response to its

appealingly grandiose view of the analytic process as ‘*a belated accomplishment of the incompleting mastery of the birth trauma*’ (Rank 1929, 5), along with the uncomfortable revelation that the whole of psychoanalysis may be a vast, dimly forgetful distraction from the primary issue of this primary issuing. Samuel Beckett's reading of Otto Rank during his psychoanalysis with W.R. Bion convinced him that he did in fact have (unpleasant) intrauterine memories. Beckett's reading about the birth trauma may be a similar effort at pulling rank in his psychoanalysis, a practice common among psychoanalytic patients who are assiduous readers.

Mnemonic avarice is encouraged by the strange denial, which recurs in different ways throughout history, of the possibility of complete and permanent forgetting. Plato taught that we have prenatal knowledge, which is driven out by the experience, traumatic we might now be inclined to call it, of infusing the life of the soul into a body, and which we must regather through life. Paul Ricoeur thinks that the uncertainty regarding whether all memories are in principle retrievable is part of the unsettling character of forgetting (Ricoeur 2004, 27). And Maurice Halbwachs believes that

there is no such thing as an absolute void in memory. No area of our past is so emptied of memory that every image projected there will discover only pure and simple imagination or impersonal historical representation, without ever catching hold of any element of remembrance. We forget nothing. (Halbwachs 1980, 75)

Removed from desire, and considered simply as a factual possibility, the idea that everything that has ever occurred to us (in both senses, outwardly and inwardly) might remain in some sense with, or in some sense available to us, is as hideous an atrocity as the idea of immortality, of which, needless to say, it is a version.

But it is very difficult indeed to separate memory from what we desire and demand of it, not least because of the role that memory plays in all desiring. The potency of allegedly ‘recovered memories’ lies in the sense they give that our lives may derive their essential meaning from

what we fail to remember. The need to remember everything is one of the most painful forms of obsessive-compulsive disorder, with patients suffering deep anxiety from the feeling of having forgotten something without being able to remember what, and embarking on exhausting routines of recording or retrieval to defend against this nagging void. Elaine Bass's memoir of living with a husband who suffered from this kind of obsession dramatises the appalling work of constant calling to mind it involved:

'I— er — I've — um — I've forgotten something — ' [...]

I opened my eyes. 'What do you mean?' I spoke gently. Angrily demanding that he explain himself did not seem to be a good idea.

Another long pause. Then, half glancing up, he repeated impatiently, as if I should have understood him perfectly well the first time, 'I've forgotten something.' [...]

'What kind of thing is it that you've forgotten?'

'That's just it. I don't know. It could be anything.' (Bass 2006, 20-1)

So strong is the appetite for memory and the assumption that it should be at our disposal that it leads to phantasmatic phenomena such as the 'collective memory' alleged to be shared by groups of people who in most cases cannot be said to have any kind of memory at all of the events concerned (Connor 2022). Such groups might be said therefore to benefit from what, in Plato's *Phaedrus*, Thamous calls 'a drug not for memory but for reminding' [οὐκουν μνήμης ἀλλὰ ὑπομνήσεως φάρμακον] (Plato 2022, 514-5) were it not for the fact that they cannot even be said to have forgotten what they cannot in fact ever have known. Such a usage, hugely widespread and serenely smiled at in academic writing, can of course be saved from the accusation of delusion or duplicity by the explanation that here 'memory' is used to mean something like commemoration, but this does not do much to save the expression from the suspicion that such commemoration exists precisely in order to supply what must be a gap.

The as-if or imaginary kind of remembering involved in ‘collective memory’ is matched by the kind of conscious or deliberate ‘forgetting’ said to be involved in erasure or concealment, even though these involve removal from knowledge or visibility rather than from memory. A reader would be right to anticipate that a book with a title like Gerald Szyszkowitz’s *Puntigam, or the Art of Forgetting* is an attack on the ways in which the memory of the Holocaust has been wilfully or culpably erased from memory. The art of forgetting is always seen nowadays as precisely artful, or as disreputable artifice. ‘History is the Opposite of Forgetting’ is the declaration made in the title of an essay about ‘the limits of memory’ in interwar France (Siegel 2002), and made nonsensically. For the opposite of forgetting is remembering, and history is emphatically and even apodictically not that. Indeed, insofar as history is what supplies the place of what has been forgotten – for what would possibly be its purpose otherwise? – history is in fact closely twinned with forgetting, which gives it its rationale. Writing a history of something which is in fact remembered, or perfectly well-known would be a pathological act. Yet, for every book like David Rieff’s *In Praise of Forgetting* (2016), there are many more that denounce as Francis O’Gorman does, the ‘Culture of Amnesia’ (2017).

Edward Casey set out in his *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* in 1987 to rescue the concern with and experience of memory which he believed had been abandoned in the modern world.

We have not only forgotten what it is like to remember – and what remembering is – but we have forgotten our own forgetting. So deep is our oblivion of memory that we are not even aware of how alienated we are from its treasures and how distant we have become from its deliverances. (Casey 1987, 2)

The intensely impassioned struggles of our day over what is called memory make it hard to nod along with Casey’s in his conviction of ‘memory’s declining prestige’ (Casey 1987, 6) though his emphasis on the experience of memory perhaps indicates that he might regard the instances of mnestic thymos that seem so urgent and unignorable in our period as concerned more with the idea of memory, especially in its artificial and ‘collective forms’, than with its experience. Casey

observes that the leading theories of memory of the last century, those of Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger and Ebbinghaus 'have approached remembering through the counterphenomenon of *forgetting*' (Casey 1987, 7). His effort 'to unforget our own forgetting' (Casey 1987, 10) can perhaps be understood as an attempt to focus attention on the act and experience of remembering rather than abstract memory.

Forget-me-not

Though it has taken me quite a while to get here, the remainder of this piece will focus not on the desire to combat forgetfulness, but on the countervailing desire for forgetting, and the difficulty of accomplishing it.

Forgetting is for the most part a background function – a failure of action rather than an action in itself – that is therefore much less thought about than remembering. Jocelyn Penny Small's comprehensive *Wax Tablets of the Mind*, on the history of ideas of memory in classical antiquity, pays scarcely any attention at all to forgetting, apart from a brief reference to Cicero's account of the story of Themistocles who said in response to an offer to teach him the arts of memory that 'he would be doing him a greater kindness if he taught him to forget what he wanted than if he taught him to remember' [oblivisci quae vellet quam si meminisse] (Cicero 1948, 426-7, quoted Small 104). Nietzsche is in the line of Themistocles in the principle he argues that

Forgetting is essential to action of any kind, Just as not only light but darkness too is essential for the life of everything organic. A man who wanted to feel historically through and through would be like one forcibly deprived of sleep, or an animal that had to live only by rumination and ever repeated rumination. Thus: it is possible to live almost without memory, and to live happily moreover, as the animal demonstrates; but it is altogether impossible to *live* at all without forgetting. (Nietzsche 1983, 62)

But forgetfulness is not the same as the willed forgetting of which Themistocles wishes to learn the trick. It is unusual for historians to find and approve historical evidence of forgetting, partly, perhaps, because of the difficulty of finding positive physical evidence of the fact of forgetting, since absence of evidence can never provide definitive evidence of absence. Anna Lucilla Boozer is unusual in this respect. Her account of the archaeological evidence of the Dakhleh Oasis in Southwest Egypt, which was occupied by many waves of settlers in its long history, concludes that ‘the process of forgetting enabled immigrants to the Dakhleh Oasis to develop stronger links to one another and to cultivate a local identity instead of holding on to their place of origin’ (Boozer 2011, 122).

The attempt at willed forgetting of this kind is evidenced in the history of amnesty, sometimes supposed to date from the agreement in 403 BC of the opposed factions in Athens to cease their contention with each other (Loraux 2002; Joyce 2022). Far from simply allowing forgetfulness to take its bleary course, amnesty proves to be as arduous as the archaeological work of its anamnestic double.

The feeling that we have no choice but to forget forms a strange pair with the phenomenon of unforgettability, which gives the experience of something we have no choice but to remember. In the case of the theory of trauma which has spread like Japanese knotweed beyond therapeutic culture to the point of being so thoroughly ‘in the true’, in the formula popularised by Foucault, as to be part of the root system of our thought rather than something we are capable of actually thinking about, the forgotten and the unforgettable are painfully conjoined. In the case of trauma that which cannot be remembered nevertheless seems autonomously to remember *itself*, and even, against our will and interest, to remind itself, or remember *to* remember itself. This may be seen as a conflict between remembering, as the calling to, or keeping in mind of memories, and a mechanical kind of *memorising* (a word which surprisingly is not used in this mechanical sense until the early nineteenth century).

The fantasy of trauma (fantasy here defined not as falsity but as what we want to be true, *even when it is*) can give a certain glamour to the

very disturbances of memory that are held to be its infallible signature. Thus we find Binjamin Wilkomirski, the author of *Fragments*, one of the considerable number of Holocaust hoax memoirs produced during the 1990s, defended in an essay of 2001, on the grounds that his made-up concentration camp memories are a kind of recoding of his genuine experiences of a traumatically broken childhood, thus making his very fabrication a kind of verity. The many inconsistencies in Wilkomirski's account are taken, not as evidence either of systematic fraud or self-deceiving confabulation, but as confirmation, on the principle of *credo quia inconstanter*, that some genuine trauma or other must have been suffered (just not the one claimed). As such, rather than being convicted of aiding the perpetrators of the Holocaust in covering over or contaminating the evidence of their crime, the very fact of 'forgetting' is taken to be the same kind of authenticating disturbance of memory as affects genuine Holocaust victims, meaning that he is entitled to his share of the moral rewards due to the victims of trauma in general. So 'the book's status as a testament to witness is so far unimpeached' (Bernard-Donals 2001, 123). allowing Bernard-Donals to conclude stertorously that 'we are required to bear witness to a trauma that forced Bruno Doesseker (the author's birth name) to choose the language of the disaster to stand in for a disaster of his own' (Bernard-Donals 2001, 134).

It is difficult to focus on the problem of how to forget without it turning into the opposite problem of how to call to mind, or keep in mind. This is because of the most pervasive, persistent and, one is tempted to say, persecutory misrecognition that affects human beings, namely the unrelenting suspicion that merely forgetting can never be enough. This is oddly coupled with the omnipotence fantasy already evoked that nothing can ever be completely forgotten. It is an omnipotence fantasy in both the senses identified by Freud in his 'Ratman' case-study, in that it offers the fantasy of omnipotent power to the subject, even as it makes them anxiously subject to the omnipotent power for the desire of omnipotence that they cannot themselves control.

Of what might clean, that is to say, complete, utter and irreversible forgetting, consist? On the one hand, it would be a forgetting that is so

entire that you forget both what you have forgotten and that you have forgotten it. This is close to the Freudian idea that repression must always be double, in that it represses some intolerable awareness and also represses the fact of the repression. Beckett often returns to the conundrum of whether such complete forgetting can exist. His Molloy describes a schizoid ritual of perpetuating erasure in relation to his mother:

I called her Mag, when I had to call her something. And I called her Mag because for me, without my knowing why, the letter g abolished the syllable Ma, and as it were spat on it, better than any other letter would have done. And at the same time I satisfied a deep and doubtless unacknowledged need, the need to have a Ma, that is a mother, and to proclaim it, audibly. For before you say mag, you say ma, inevitably. (Beckett 1973, 17)

Molloy's mother seems to be an exponent of the art of forgetting as well as its object. Molloy uses a Laputan code of numbered knocks on the skull of his blind mother to communicate his intentions to her. In order to convey the idea of 'money', for example, he stuffs a banknote under her nose or in her mouth while administering the four knocks intended to bring it to mind. But he comes to recognise the futility of his endeavour:

For she seemed to have lost, if not all notion of mensuration, at least the faculty of counting beyond two. It was too far for her, yes, the distance was too great, from one to four. By the time she came to the fourth knock she imagined she was only at the second, the first two having been erased from her memory as completely as if they had never been felt, though I don't see how something never felt can be erased from the memory, and yet it is a common occurrence. (Beckett 1973, 18)

That final perplexity about whether anything can be forgotten so utterly as to be completely erased from ever having existed pops up nervously throughout Beckett's writing. In *The Lost Ones*, for example, the location of the mythical way out dreamed of by the inhabitants of

the cylinder 'transfers from the tunnel to the ceiling prior to never having been' (Beckett 1972, 19).

The fly in the Lethean ointment is that clean forgetting seems to require a kind of reservation or preservation of what has been forgotten, precisely in order to defend against its unwilled or accidental resurgence, which must always be possible with something that has been completely wiped from memory. Hence the apparently antic overdoing of a legal formula like 'cease and desist', but which sensibly means not just stop, but stop and refrain from ever starting again. The word *clean* implies reduction, or simplification, in the sense that cleaning is essentially a categorial passion, driven by the desire to reduce admixture, and to assert the undivided one against the many contaminating kinds of manyness. This seems to be winked at (a phrase which conveniently joins alluding to ignoring) in the etymological kinship between the English word *clean* and German *klein*, small. But the cleanness of clean forgetting can never be complete, because to be complete entails the residual complexity of having to remember to forget, lest one remember by inadvertence. The need to remember one's forgetting, and to remember to keep anamnastically renewing one's amnesia, persisting in one's desisting, means that forgetting can come to have something of the same stubborn perseverance as memory.

We might pause here to note the strangely potent work performed by the prefix *for-* in English, closely twinning that of *ver-* in German, in the drama it seems to mime of the act of annihilation. The prefix *for-* has, among its many senses, the idea of prohibition, exclusion, or keeping at a distance, as in *forfend*. It can also imply omission or neglect, as in the thirteenth-century *forheed*, to disregard, or *forgo*. It can also signify distraction, as in twelfth-century *forraught*, perverted, led astray. But, as well as implying these modes of nonfulfilment, the prefix *for-* also conveys the opposite sense of pushing through to a limit, doing something completely or through and through, which develops the sense of exercising excessive or overwhelming power, or going beyond the limit. Thus, the sixteenth century *fordin* means to fill with noise. This completeness can lead to chiasmic reversal, so that to be *fordone* is to be *undone*, or, indeed, as we still say, *done for*. These

two meanings of the imperfect and the complete come together in *forget*, paralleled by German *vergessen*, both of which derive from Old Germanic **getan*, to have, hold, which develops into *get*. The primary meaning of the word therefore seems to be to miss one's hold, or lose one's grasp, but allows us also to conceive a kind of getting or having that goes so far to excess as to destroy its possession. German words in *ver-* retain even more of the meaning of negating intensification: *verschreiben*, *verführen*, *verwesen*.

Radical forgetting joins with a kind of radical remembering in traditions of radicalism as such, religious, philosophical and political. All radicalism involves eradication, an attempt both to remember the forgotten roots of evil and unhappiness and to put them right by removing them at their source. There is a glint of dentition in all such efforts. For where has the desire for the digging back to the root and ripping it out come from? What if this radical desire for purity and primitive recommencement were part of the root system that needs root and branch eradication? What if the will to put things right right from the point at which they started to go wrong were one of the symptoms of the wrong turn itself? What if the doctrine of original sin were the proof of it? If not, where did it come from? If it came from somewhere else than from the root, then the theory of the need for return to radical beginnings has some explaining to do.

The urgency imparted by the idea of the radical is intensified by the fact that the history of remembering and forgetting is so powerfully bound up with ideas of honour and disgrace, sin and piaculation. Stephen C. Barton points to 'the sociopolitical dynamics of the ancient world according to which (and put at its simplest) *to remember is to honour and, conversely, to forget is to damn or to shame*' (Barton 2007, 330). The duty of remembrance which is articulated so repeatedly in the Old Testament is shadowed by the fear of forgetting, which is represented as a disgraceful omission rather than a mere inattention: hence the nervous redundancy of a double injunction like 'remember, forget thou not' (Deuteronomy 9.7).

Deuteronomy provides the warrant for the strange tradition, which is both particular to Judaism and ubiquitously imitated, of the duty to

remember to forget Amalek. Amalek is the name of the leader of a tribe believed to inhabit the Negev in Southern Israel. Tradition says that when the Israelites were escaping from captivity in Egypt, Amalek treacherously attacked the women and children at the rear of the column. In 1 Samuel 15, we read that the Lord God commands Samuel to 'smite Amalek and utterly destroy all that they have' (1 Samuel 15.3). Saul, to whom Samuel gives the order to destroy Amalek, spares Agag, the king of the Amelekites. The Lord is psychotically enraged by this incomplete fulfilment of his orders to blot out Amalek, until Samuel himself completes the commission by publically hewing Agag into pieces (1 Samuel 15.33).

Amalek thereafter becomes a vehicle for what might be called the cathexis of utterness. The need for the complete obliteration of Amalek is both physical and cognitive, for the very memory of Amalek must be blotted out. The requirement to 'blot out' Amalek, along with God's own resolution 'I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under the heaven' (Exodus 17.14) and the promise of Moses that 'the LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation' (Exodus 17.16), have sometimes been taken to require not just remembering to forget, but the destruction of every form of the evil for which Amalek is a synecdoche, wherever it may assert itself, from generation to generation. This is an ethical problem, given the prohibition on visiting the sins of the father on the children (Sagi 2015, 39). *Myosotis scorpioides*, the pretty forget-me-not, is also known as scorpion-grass for the spiral coils of its inflorescence.

The very name Amalek has a strange tendency to propagate, a propagation of evil which might be regarded historically as the evil of propagation itself. Amalek is also used as the name not only for the Amelekites who followed Amalek, and their descendants down through the ages, but any and all persecutors of Jews who revive or perpetuate the evil performed by Amalek, or are just reminiscent of it. Amalek is, for example, an alternative name for Haman, the servant of the King of Persia who issues a commandment that all Jews in the kingdom shall be annihilated (Esther 3.13), and is hanged himself for his pains when Esther reveals his plan to the King. This story is recalled in the feast of Purim, during which it is customary to read

from the story in the Book of Esther, and for the audience to shout and make noise using a *gragger* or rattle to drown out the name of Haman whenever it is articulated. This parallels the practice of writing the name of Haman on two stones or pieces of wood, then clapping them together until they are rubbed out. Michael Wex writes that ‘the traditional way of testing a new pen is to write “Amalek” (in Hebrew letters, of course) and then scribble over it until it is “blotted out” ’ (Wex 2005, 123). A related practice is to write the name of Amalek on the soles of one’s shoes, to make of one’s walking an amnestic engine. The Yiddish curse *yemack shmoy* ‘may his name be blotted out’, expresses the same wish.

However, as Michael Wex slyly observes, ‘Since Amalek is mentioned in the Torah, which is eternal and unchangeable, the commandment can never be fulfilled’ (Wex 2005, 123), so the final defeat of Amalek is assured never to be able to be assured. This is military good sense as well as metaphysical paradox. Writers about totalitarianism from Orwell onwards have noted that power can never be complete, that is perpetual, unless it is incomplete, because at risk from an external Amalek, or an internal one everywhere ready to spring up to betray the revolution. On the other side, and somewhat more wisely, as certain military commanders reminded us at the beginning of the ‘Shock and Awe’ campaign of bombing of Baghdad in the first Gulf War in March 2003, such assaults must always hold back from total obliteration, since one must always leave sufficient infrastructure and communications intact for the enemy to be able to decide to surrender. If Amalek (racism, slavery, capitalism, masculinity, sin) were ever to be utterly destroyed, which is to say utterly evicted from mind, our helplessness against it would be greater than ever.

Part of the complexity attaching to the idea of complete forgetting is that the art of forgetting is so entangled with the art of writing, which is so important an accessory to the defeat of forgetting. Umberto Eco decides that there could never be an art of forgetting that would match the arts of memory practised in classical and Renaissance Europe, because of the principle that writing, on which negation depends, must always nevertheless have a positive form:

If an art of memory is a semiotics, then we can understand why it is not possible to construct an *ars oblivionalis* on the model of an art of memory. If one did, the *ars oblivionalis* would also be a semiotics, and it is proper to a semiotics to make present something absent. (Eco 1988, 258)

Often monuments to disgraced persons are themselves subject to defacement or defilement, in a strange kind of lustral sully, which embodies something like the purifyingly appropriative force of pollution evoked by Michel Serres: daub a wall, or spit in your soup, and you secure it as yours, both *propre*, clean, and *property* (Serres 2010). In August 1643, an ordinance drawn up by the Committee for the Demolition of Monuments of Superstition and Idolatry was agreed by both Houses in London. According to its terms, idolatrous images were not merely to be removed from places of worship in England, they were specifically to be defaced, since, as Julie Spraggon explains, ‘the act of defacing such objects was a symbolic gesture making a bolder statement than merely removing them could’ (Spraggon 2003, 76). The evidence remains visible in East Anglian churches, in which the images of saints and angels purged by iconoclastic Puritans are often left intact apart from the razing of their faces. They are preserved in their state of dissolution, as a permanent icon of the evil of iconicity. Joe Moshenska (2019) has shown how the instinct to defile and debase was also expressed through the debasing reduction of icons to children’s playthings, which has the advantage that the work of forgetting can be permanently performed by those who are in fact unaware of the humiliation they are effecting in their play. Rather than being put to death, the images can keep the condition of being-put-to-death literally and permanently in play. This act of defilement in play makes it a fort-da-procedure, the fricative fretsaw of now-you-see-it-now-you-don’t onanism.

In such procedures, it is as though it is not the person who is the bearer of the shame, but the fact of their being offered at all for the particular kind of solemn remembering known in holy-talk as ‘remembrance’. But then the disgracing of a monument, as documented in the 1994 film *Disgraced Monuments* directed by Mark Lewis and Laura Mulvey, makes a new monument of the disgracing

itself, which can easily harden into an even more perduring sign, of the vileness of the defiler and the divinity of the defiled. It cannot have been lost on those doing the hacking and daubing in the seventeenth century that among the Christian images being so treated was one of the central images of Christianity itself, the great religion of ostensive pathos, in the patiently defaced face of the abused redeemer, subject to mockery and abasement.

Amnesty

Near the beginning of his literary-philosophical history of forgetting Harald Weinrich points out that Latin *oblivisci*, to forget, is a deponent, meaning that it has an active meaning but the form of a passive verb, and observes that ‘Such a formal characteristic fits in well with the psychic meaning of forgetting, which is in fact situated halfway between activity and passivity’ (Weinrich 2004, 3). We might add to his observation the fact that a deponent verb is so-called because of its ‘setting aside’ (*de + ponere*), mislaying, or forgetting of its original passive sense. The question dramatised by the anamnestic conundrums with which I have here been dallying is essentially that of whether either forgetting or remembering can really be said to be things we do, as opposed to actions that occur to us or that we concur with. It does not appear currently as though the salutary and amicable instinct to forget our hatreds, including the hatred of hatred itself, is making much headway against the sanctified irascibility of the various campaigns against Amalek. History may suggest that amnesty’s most intimate ally is the precious gift of fatigue. Sooner or later, it seems, we, or those who succeed to our position as we, will forget what the importance of all that importance was. It is hard to decide to know how we might ever resolve to do this, other than in retaining an appetite for distraction over deterrence.

I began with mnestic avarice, and have ended up persuading myself, if nobody else, that the amnestic avarice of clean forgetting is a mirror of the mnestic avarice that demands that nothing go unremembered. I hope that the trap I may seem to have laid for myself is obvious. For

how can this not lead me to say that we should endeavour to put such efforts behind us – to forget them, precisely, with all the obvious possibilities of recursive self-contradiction that might involve? Luckily, people, and academically-minded people in particular, are very rarely persuaded by the arguments by which they pretend to set such store. If people, even academically-minded ones, are persuaded by anything, it is by interesting and attractive examples, especially when they offer the bonus of being admired by other people for following them. It is a sovereign principle of human conduct that people will work ten times harder to earn a compliment than they will to avoid a criticism. This is not necessarily a good thing in itself, since it depends on what earns compliments, but it does suggest a more effective way of reducing nastiness, aggressive zealotry and epistemic arrogance than moral argument, which is petrol employed as fire retardant. At any one time there are probably in any social group the same proportions of people who are driven by the gratification of being right, or, better still, the solidary sensation of being In The Right, as compared with those who find doing good, and thinking up other ways of doing it, absorbing. The question is which gets approving attention. Rather than getting those in the former group to expunge all of their vengeful appetites of expunction, we might try being more enthusiastic in our admiration of people who seem more interested in doing good than being right. As mature primates tend eventually to discover, it is better to substitute ‘Stop screaming this minute, Johnny, or there’s no ice cream for you!’ with ‘Ooh, *look* at the pretty ducks!’

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