

On Forgetting in Writing: *Agua Viva and Awaiting Oblivion*

In Plate's *Amnesiaiology: Towards the study of Cultural Oblivion* there is a clear tension between forgetting and the ability to express this term through the use of words (144). There is a problem at the very core of Amnesiaiology: in which, "the process of remembering produces memories; the process of forgetting produces—" (Plate, 145). The English language falls short (Plate, 145). But this language limitation is merely a reflection of western thought and its lacuna of forgetting. Plate's instinct to create an entirely separate field of study dedicated to Amnesiaiology is inherently flawed, as the act of forgetting and remembering are intimately intertwined. And memory, what Plate solicits as the product of remembering, is actually derived from a process that includes both forgetting and remembering (Plate, 145). For this paper I'd like to focus on the lacuna of vocabulary that inhibits Plate from establishing a traditional field of study for Amnesiaiology. I'll focus on two authors, Maurice Blanchot and Clarice Lispector, whose attempts to tackle this mode of forgetting through literature also indicate the struggle of ascribing vocabulary to forgetting. Writing begets context and the oversaturation of memory and both 'novels' are seemingly difficult to read. It's as if both writers are swimming upstream, against the very nature of writing itself. In the context of writing, it is difficult to articulate forgetting.

Prior to delving into the analysis, I would like to establish a few key terms. Plate utilises Proctor and Schiebinger's agnotology definition of forgetting and forgotten: "The study of ignorance making, the lost and forgotten" (Proctor and Schiebinger, vii; Plate, 144). I'd also like to draw on the OED definition of forgetting: "to fail to recall to mind" (OED). Oblivion is "the state or fact of forgetting or having forgotten; forgetfulness; (also) freedom from care or worry" (OED). Drawing from Plate, memory is "a dialectic involving both remembering and forgetting" (143). But more specifically, I'd like to draw attention to Gudmundstottir's framework of forgetting, where:

"Memory and forgetting are caught in each other's web, and the complexities of the processes at work should not be underestimated. In this study, the forgotten, forgetting, or oblivion, will be our main focus, but without attempting to fully extract these terms from the web of memory" (Gudmundsdottir, 9).

This framework is vital for the analysis of both texts, as it directly addresses the tension that Plate experiences when establishing the study of *Amnesiaiology*. For I believe it is this complex relationship between memory and forgetting that obstructs the ability to establish a separate field of forgetting, even one in the context of memory studies, as Plate attempts to do.

After establishing working definitions, I'd like to establish the relationship these terms have between each other. Since Sir Frederic Bartlett's *Remembering*, mainstream literature contends memory and storytelling are interlinked (Freeman, 1). In which one does not affect the other, but rather both become a convergence that creates an inseparable product in the form of narrative (Freeman, 2). Writing is built on memory and context. The act of writing in itself produces remembering. When we write, we are following the conventions of grammar and a shared language. When we write and read *literature*, we are partaking in the confluence of a shared imagination. Our minds conjure images based on memories and existing experiences. And it is this reason that authors struggle to write the act of forgetting. If we associate memory and storytelling, then narrative becomes the antithesis of forgetting. Thus, the struggle with finding literature that conjures forgetting lies in the requirement to eliminate an existing aspect of the narrative so make room for the act of forgetting.

Maurice Blanchot and Clarice Lispector both tackle this obstacle with their own methods. Blanchot does this through the anonymity of the characters; Lispector removes grammatical conventions and introduces a new syntax. In both works, I will analyse methods the authors use to achieve oblivion. Thus, in both works, there is a forgetting of an aspect of writing, in order to convey oblivion.

Anonymity and Anti-Narrative in the Oblivion: Blanchot's *Awaiting Oblivion*

In *Awaiting Oblivion*, Blanchot attempts to achieve articulating forgetting through the use of anonymity. The 'story' is set in a generic hotel room, one that the narrator, the man, notes the room is "no different from those he has always lived in... a modest hotel" (Blanchot, 7). Blanchot extends this anonymity through both characters of the book, in which both the man and woman do not have names or backgrounds, and thus no identity. But through this anonymity, the characters are able to ponder forgetting. The hotel room is "empty... and the words he uses apply only to the emptiness" (Blanchot, 7). Blanchot, through these attempts to describe the forgetting of identity, highlights the paradoxical feeling of attempting to describe forgetting. That is to say, forgetting contains a specific feeling of emptiness. Because to write about forgetting is to write about nothing; an absence. So to create substance, as Plate attempts when ascribing vocabulary of forgetting, would be to directly negate the very existence of forgetting.

Drawing on Emilio Lledó, Gunnthorunn Gudmundsdottir highlights a dichotomy of remembering/life/learning and forgetting/death/emptiness (Gudmundsdottir, 11). But Gudmundsdottir posits that death does not necessarily mean the end or nothingness. On the contrary, Gudmundsdottir posits the association of death and forgetting evokes a sort of rebirth for both the author and the reader. In which, in practicing forgetting/death/emptiness, the author and reader alike are able

to derive new meaning from their oblivion. Such sentiments persist in Blanchot's *Awaiting Oblivion*. For it is through this absence of words and identity, that the characters are able to ponder forgetting in the first place. It is their immovability, the death of context and plot, that creates the void, a space to contemplate the meaning of forgetting.

More specifically, Blanchot meditates on forgetting through the existence of the void, and the characters' interactions with it. Blanchot's forgetting is evoked most vividly when the unnamed man addresses the void that hangs above him and the woman. A void that if examined with:

“patience that enabled him to eliminate without violence all irrelevant concerns, he would not hesitate to conclude that the void was located at a place that he could have situated had he been capable of applying his mind more seriously to the task” (Blanchot, 15).

The man acknowledges that entering the void would necessitate the absence of plot and character. *Awaiting Oblivion* as a piece of literature allows Blanchot to explore forgetting without such consequences as forgetting people, his life, and his entire being. Thus, in *Awaiting Oblivion*, Blanchot is able to remove such ‘irrelevant concerns’ without personal consequence. The man can only truly enter the void “had he been capable of applying his mind more seriously to the task” (Blanchot 15). That is, he is not able to fully enter the void because he is, as many humans are, incapable of truly separating forgetting from remembering.

Another obstacle that adds to the man’s inability to forget is the paradoxical efficacy that forgetting can not tolerate. The problem that lays therein forgetting, and what Plate struggles with, is the self-awareness of forgetting. As aforementioned, forgetting is “to fail to recall to ones mind” (OED). Thus you are not able to consciously forget. Thinking about forgetting will directly negate the ability to forget. The man in *Awaiting Oblivion* acknowledges that he is unable to enter the void fully when he is conscious about entering the void. This tension also holds true in Plate’s question as to “why we know so little about forgetting” (Plate, 145). It is because, unlike memory studies, there is a tension that lies between being able to forget, while also being able to study the act of forgetting.

Following Plate’s logic then, forgetting produces oblivion. So, to work around the lacuna of forgetting vocabulary, instead we could use oblivion as an indicator of forgetting within literature. A prime example of writing around forgetting; writing that cultivates oblivion; is Clarice Lispector’s *Agua Viva*.

The Void: *Agua Viva*

Although never directly addressing oblivion or a void, Lispector cultivates a more immediate state of forgetting. Lispector's syntax of *Agua Viva* is a way to deconstruct the predetermined context that writing implicitly contains. Although similar to Blanchot in the anti-narrative, Lispector goes beyond to further break down the context of writing through the abandonment of syntax. The narrator addresses her unconventional approach to writing and the meaning behind it. On page 16, she expresses:

“I know what I am doing here: I’m improvising. But what’s wrong with that? Improvising as in jazz they improvise music, jazz in fury, improvising in front of the crowd.

It’s so odd to have exchanged my paints for this strange thing that is the word. Words— I move cautiously among them as they can turn threatening; I can have the freedom to write this” (Lispector).

Writing is often a product of a delayed moment, but through Lispector's syntax her words are brought into the present. That is not to say that she is writing in the present tense, but rather, writing for the presence of the reader. She does this by “improvising in front of the crowd” (Lispector 17). Her syntax is her improvisation; her crowd, the reader. Her writing is freeform and sticks to little grammatical conventions in order to break away from the pre-supposed context of writing as a communication form. And in writing in the presence, she eliminates what writing conventionally does for the reader; writing that creates a historical record; writing in memory. Her words are as alive and movable as she is. This is an alternative method of writing breaking free from context. And within her freeform writing, the narrator creates her own void.

It is important to take notice that Lispector enters the void/oblivion without ever arriving at a vocabulary specific to forgetting. Forgetting is in the implicit nature of words. She addresses their precariousness when describing words as a subject she must “move cautiously among them as they can turn threatening” (Lispector 16). Similar to the man’s struggle in *Awaiting Oblivion*, words are a threat to oblivion; as words evoke context, memory and efficacy. Through a careless use of words, the narrator could easily deconstruct the void she has made for herself.

She continues to stress the importance of words as a living entity when she expresses that “this is not a message of ideas that I am transmitting to you but an instinctive ecstasy of whatever is hidden in nature and that I foretell.” (Lispector, 17). Although Lispector does not write directly about forgetting, she is attempting to convey a feeling beyond words. Words are the tools of knowledge. It is through words that we are able to communicate ideas— but Lispector is trying to convey something different. Instead of words, Lispector wants to convey “an instinctive ecstasy of whatever is hidden in nature” (Lispector, 17). Much like Oblivion, this “instinctive

ecstasy” does not lie in the existence of words, but something beyond the meaning of words (Lispector, 17).

Through Blanchot, Lispector and Plate, there is a clear struggle to establish vocabulary for the Plate reading. And yet, intriguingly, the narrator in *Agua Viva* is a painter that abandons art and, instead, turns to words. If we revisit our understanding of the relation of narrative and memory, should art not be the way out of writing? To use a visual medium to avoid writing as a whole? The narrator in *Agua Viva* creates an argument for writing over art when she talks about “X”:

“Is “X” the breath of the *it*? the cold radiating respiration of it? Is “X” a word? The word only refers to a thing and is always unreachable by me. Each of us is a symbol that deals with symbols— everything a point of only reference to the real. We desperately try to find an identity of our own and the identity of the real. And if we understand ourselves through the symbol that is because we have the same symbols and the same experience of the thing itself: but reality has no synonyms” (Lispector, 72).

From her articulations here, it is clear that “X” is not the vocabulary of forgetting that Plate is looking for; “X” is not oblivion. Yet, there are aspects of “X” that might point one towards the feeling of forgetting. The narrator describes “X” to contain a “cold radiating respiration” quality (Lispector, 72). “Cold” is associated with death; death as part of the triptych of forgetting/death/emptiness. Yet, unlike Plate or Blanchot, Lispector does not use ‘oblivion’ or ‘the void’. To put a name to the act of forgetting/death/emptiness would be too specific, too binding. When the narrator asks “Is “X” a word?” She is not asking about the technicality of “X” as a word (Lispector, 72). Rather, adhering to the understanding that human communication begets the use of “symbols”, ie: words (Lispector, 72). “X” is a tool in the way that words in narratives convey a didactic overarching theme. It is not words that we should focus on, but rather the dialectic quality and the feeling we can derive from them. Does “X”, this mysterious, redacted entity even possess the ability to be encapsulated by words? The narrator argues not. Instead, the choice of words to convey feeling is to tap into the shared symbols of communication. The narrator acknowledges that to write is to enter into the “same symbols and the same experience of the thing itself” (Lispector, 72). But acknowledges the futile efforts of putting words together to convey meaning, because “reality has no synonyms” (Lispector, 72). In the phrase “reality has no synonyms”, Lispector wishes to convey the intangibility of entering the void. It is not a concept well attended to being encapsulated, because it is one that’s essence is in the negative space of a feeling.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both *Awaiting Oblivion* and *Agua Viva* create a the use of “X” illustrates quite well the capturability of forgetting into vocabulary. Since memory and storytelling are interlinked, both works needed to deconstruct the inherent structure of the narrative in order to ‘make room’ for forgetting. Following Gudmundsdottir’s framework, when honouring the relationship between memory and forgetting, narrative opens itself up to address the lacuna of forgetting. Forgetting, unlike remembering and memory, is a concept which relies on what it is not. This then creates a lacuna in vocabulary— one that, with understanding, realises that it does not need to be filled. The lacuna itself is the vocabulary Plate attempts to achieve.

Works Cited

- “Forget, V., Sense 1.b.” Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, September 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6592841714>.
- Freeman, Mark. “Telling Stories: Memory and Narrative.” *Memory*, edited by Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz, Fordham University Press, 2010, pp. 263–78. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1c999bq.22>.
- Gudmundsdottir, Gunnthorunn. “Intro.” *Representations of Forgetting in Life Writing and Fiction*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016.
- “Oblivion, N., Sense 1.a.” Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, December 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4681760178>.
- Plate, Liedeke. “Amnesiology: Towards the Study of Cultural Oblivion.” *Memory Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, Apr. 2016, pp. 143–55. DOI.org (Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698015596016>.
- Stavans, Ilan, and G. Sheehy. “Memory and Literature.” *Agni*, no. 48, 1998, pp. 79–90.