THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF FORGETTING IN LATE MODERN CULTURE. A STUDY OF KIERKEGAARD'S "ROTATION OF CROPS" *AND NIETZSCHE'S* "ON THE USE AND ABUSE OF HISTORY FOR LIFE"[1]

Abstract: *This paper explores the main conceptualizations of forgetting in late modern philosophy and culture with a focus on those spaces of intersection between seemingly contradictory approaches. The first part will review and detail some of the main definitions of forgetting which informed late modern philosophy and literature, while the second part of this paper will focus on the fundamental definitions of forgetting formulated in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard because their interpretations were pivotal in the formulation of late modern as well as postmodern aesthetic. This study is part of the postdoctoral research I am conducting on the hermeneutics of forgetting in late modernity and postmodernity. My aim is to explore and bring to light the whole gamut definitions and interpretations of the notion of forgetting in an attempt to formulate a possible aesthetics of forgetting, as well as a catalogue of the imaginary figures of this concept.*

Keywords: *forgetting, historicity, temporality.*

Although there is a close connection between oblivion and the origins of writing – for instance the considerations in *Phaidros* on the emergence of writing and the decline of voluntary memory – literary theory has paid, so far, little attention to the concept of forgetting, *per se*, as compared to the fundamental role granted to remembering, to the Aristotelian *anagnorisis*. This relative neglect is owed, to a certain extent, to the neuter character of oblivion and, on the other hand, to the semiotic difficulty of defining this concept. In an article titled "An *Ars oblivionalis*? Forget about it!" ("An Ars Oblivionalis? Forget about It!", PMLA 1988), Umberto Eco shows his skepticism as concerns the possibility of existence of an *ars oblivionalis*, which he views more from the perspective of a semiotics of forgetting, impossible, from his point of view, because of the involuntary and passive character of forgetting. Nevertheless, the notion of forgetting underscores the European cultural and literary history. As Harald Weinrich shows in his 1997 book *Lethe. The Art and Critique of Forgetting,* European literary history and philosophy abound in examples of authors who have integrated forgetting in their poetics.

The *topos* of forgetting comes to the fore in almost all the instances of transformation and evolution of the written culture: at the moment of transition from oral to written culture as outlined by Plato; forgetting is also associated with the invention of the printing press: Heidegger saw this event as the primordial cause for the forgetting of Being:

> Maybe the transformation of the relation between Being and man, which appears with the proliferation of technology, is of such nature that Being has withdrawn from man and the modern man has profoundly forgotten Being (Heidegger, 1998: 86).

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In the *age of mechanical reproduction* the consumerist amnesia represents, for Walter Benjamin, a beneficial aspect of the process of reading – understood generically – in the sense of creating habits. In the phenomenology of late modernity, the discourse on forgetting circumscribes three main axes of research: the polarity remembering/forgetting, history and forgetting, writing and forgetting. Thus modern phenomenology can be defined in the following terms as concerns its approach to oblivion: the oscillation between the signifying impossibility of forgetting (Heidegger) and the appraisal of its positive aspects (Kierkegaard, Nietzsche), on the other hand. Thus, in his text on Parmenides, Heidegger uses the notion of "the absence of sign" as fundamental for the phenomenon of forgetting: "The essence of the idea of veiling of forgetting is given, first and foremost, by the word, 'signless', in the sense of not showing itself or of hiding itself" (Heidegger, *op.cit.*: 28). This quotation brings to light the fundamental *aporia* of a poetics of forgetting: forgetting is a signified lacking a signifier, since the presence of forgetting means the absence of the forgotten object. Jacques Derrida will resume the discussion on the motif of the veil in his own approach to memory and writing, but with a significant difference from Heidegger: although the "secret" or the "surplus" of the archive is forgotten, it manifests itself through traces such as cinder. From here we can infer that forgetting does have a sign but this sign is always something else than the forgotten object (the ruins of a city, the cinders of a cigarette, etc). As Søren Kierkegaard phrased it: "Whether or not a Lethe wells up anywhere, I do not know, but this I do know-that this art can be developed. But it by no means consists in the traceless disappearance of the particular impression, because forgetfulness is not identical with the art of being able to forget" (Kierkegaard, 1987: 294).

On the other hand, late modern philosophy put into play a valorization of oblivion inspired by the motif of the beneficial drug (*nepenthe*) which casts away suffering: "For the one who suffers, sublime joy is when he no longer beholds himself and forgets himself" (Nietzsche, 2008: 31). Both for Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, the approach to forgetting is constructed on the dialectic remembering/forgetting; for both philosophers, this problem is both a phenomenological and an ethical one. For Nietzsche, this forgetting of the self coincides with the "non-historical" with a ante-historical condition and a discourse on origins: "However this condition – non-historical, profoundly anti-historical, is the matrix not only of every unjust deed but, even to a greater extent, of every just deed" (Nietzsche, 2010). In literature, there were two main tendencies seemingly running against each other: on the one hand, there were the Avant-garde artists, who, animated by Nietzsche's appraisal of forgetting, embraced this concept and incorporated it into their aesthetic which was henceforth meant to deal only with the present and the future and never the past. On the other hand, such modernist authors as: Rilke, Mann, Proust, Gide, or Robert Musil, showed their diffidence as concerns an aesthetic of oblivion and set out to explore the intricate relations between memory and writing. The Avant-garde authors aimed at destroying the unity of the subject, as Helga Geyer Ryan and Helmuth Lethen explain:

> Forgetting, as propagated by the avant-garde, was supposed to break the feedback effect of memory on identity, an effect which idealistic philosophy had made to appear inevitable. […] Moreover, forgetting allowed political action to be justified on a voluntaristic basis (Geyer Ryan, Lethen, 1989: 307-308).

These ideas were regarded by modernist writers such as Robert Musil or Thomas Mann as "mythologizations". In their opinion, "such thinking underpinned historical events with a kind of catastrophe theory which would not be in keeping with

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the evolutionary speed with which morals and mentalities were developing" (Geyer Ryan, Lethen, *ibidem*: 308).

What lay at the basis of all these takes on the historicity and temporality were, to a large extent, the philosophical writings of Friedrich Nietzsche as well as the aesthetics and ethics elaborated by S. Kierkegaard. Therefore, in order to better understand the larger context in which late modern notions of historicity and temporality were developed, we will have to take a closer to the works of these two philosophers whose ideas had such an immense impact on the modern and postmodern ethics and aesthetics. I will first review some of the main themes which appear in Nietzsche's seminal "The Use and Abuse of History for Life" and in Kierkegaard's "Rotation of Crops" (*Either/Or*) and will conclude by extracting and pondering on the main motifs and points of encounter of the two philosophers on the notion of forgetting. Although I will focus on these two texts, which represent the core of the authors' interpretations of memory, the theme of forgetting emerges in other texts too: in Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* (1887) and throughout Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*.

Besides the intersections which appear in the philosophers' approaches to remembering and forgetting, there are some other points of interest which they share. First of all, they were both concerned with the problem of the individual rather than the masses. Secondly, they both placed themselves in a marginal or, rather, *ex-centric* position to their contemporaries and the established and generally accepted theoretical models of their time (Hegel and Marx, in the case of Nietzsche, Hegel, Martensen and Schlegel for Kierkegaard). As Hayden White showed in his *Metahistory*, Nietzsche tried to find an intermediary space (a niche) between these two poles: Christianity, on the one hand, and Positivism, on the other hand. Both philosophers were acutely aware of the subversion of the true religious sense by what could be called a politics of charity. Each gave his own interpretation to this phenomenon but this common preoccupation is fundamental for understanding their ultimate scope. In the two texts I will discuss Nietzsche and Kierkegaard place themselves in a theoretical stance which proposes to overcome the dichotomy interiority/exteriority (Kierkegaard) and good/evil (Nietzsche). This effort of surpassing these binary oppositions in which European philosophical thinking had been so thoroughly entrenched, confers a high degree of originality to the way in which the two authors treat the problem of memory. Another common feature to Nietzsche and Kierkegaard is the auctorial distancing which, given the avowed connection between their private, personal lives and their own interpretations thereof, on the one hand, and their writings, on the other hand, might seem paradoxical. However, Nietzsche's irony and Kierkegaard's pseudonyms are not meant to signify the authors' undermining of their own narrative credibility but to increase the level of complexity of the proposed interpretations.

Kierkegaard's "Rotation of Crops" is part of the first half of *Either/Or,* first published in 1843. The book is presented as being edited by a certain Victor Eremita. But the presumable editor's credibility is constantly undermined by certain demystification techniques at which Kierkegaard constantly resorts in his opus. For instance, Eremita says that the first part, "Either" is written by an author called "A" and that the second part, "Or", by an author called "B"; the two parts are presented as contradictory and the editor advises the readers to prefer author B. Author A represents the hedonistic, purely aesthetic viewpoint, while author B, the ethical stance.

The "Rotation of Crops" appears towards the end of the part narrated by A. It pertains, therefore, to the aesthetic interpretation. The complete title of the essay is "The

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Rotation of Crops. An attempt at formulating a Theory of Social Prudence" and it begins in a most frivolous and playful way:

> People with experience maintain that proceeding from a basic principle is supposed to be very reasonable; I yield to them and proceed from the basic principle that all people are boring. Or is there anyone who would be boring enough to contradict me in this regard? (Kierkegaard, *op. cit.*: 285)

The deliberate use of tautology (to begin from a principle) undermines the narrator's credibility from the outset and launches the whole discourse in a ludic sphere. The whole ensuing discussion will be centered on the problem of boredom, considered by the author as the root of all evil. Since, according to A, boredom is the root of all evil, then every effort and artifice should be directed at avoiding boredom by all possible means. First of all, A shows that even the painful and difficult moments in life should be reinterpreted in such a way they will procure enjoyment upon recollection:

To forget-this is the desire of all people, and when they encounter something unpleasant, they always say: If only I could forget! But to forget is an art that must be practiced in advance. To be able to forget always depends upon how one remembers, but how one remembers depends upon how one experiences actuality (Kierkegaard, *op. cit.*: 293).

This reflective form of engaging boredom should be carried out according to the principles of crop rotation which, in its turn, falls under "the universal rule of the relation between *recollecting* and *forgetting*. It is in these two currents that all life moves, and therefore it is a matter of having them properly under one's control" (*ibidem*: 292).

There are several techniques through which one is able to master the method of "crop rotation". There is the technique of self-control, which involves the principle of limitation, "the sole saving principle in the world":

> Not until hope has been thrown overboard does one begin to live artistically; as long as a person hopes, he cannot limit himself It is indeed beautiful to see a person put out to sea with the fair wind of hope; one may utilize the chance to let oneself be towed along, but one ought never have it on board one's craft, least of all as pilot, for it is an untrustworthy shipmaster. [….] To forget-this is the desire of all people, and when they encounter something unpleasant, they always say: If only I could forget! But to forget is an art that must be practiced in advance. To be able to forget always depends upon how one remembers, but how one remembers depends upon how one experiences actuality. The person who runs aground with the speed of hope will recollect in such a way that he will be unable to forget. Thus *nil admirari* [marvel at nothing) is the proper wisdom of life. No part of life ought to have so much meaning for a person that he cannot forget it any moment he wants to; on the other hand, every single part of life ought to have so much meaning for a person that he can remember it at any moment (*ibidem*: 292).

The principle of *nil admirari* hints, etymologically, at the idea of becoming detached from all contingency, not remaining paralyzed, seduced or enslaved in the admiration of the beauty of the outer world. Rather, the beheld object should be used as a pretext for personal reinterpretation and controlled at one's will. Another technique that A suggests for preventing boredom is that of indulging in arbitrary pleasures, selecting completely random moments on which to focus one's attention. According to A, boredom underscores the whole of the created world, it is a primordial evil that motivated the coming into being of the world:

> The gods were bored; therefore they created human beings. Adam was bored because he was alone; therefore Eve was created. Since that moment, boredom entered the world and grew in quantity in exact proportion to the growth of population. Adam was bored alone; then Adam and Eve were bored together; then Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel were

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> bored *en famille.* After that, the population of the world increased and the nations were bored *en masse* (*ibidem*: 286).

Therefore, the reflective aesthete must endeavor to make all possible sacrifices to avoid falling in this eternal return of boredom (even though, since it is presented as the primordial cause for creation, any such endeavor would have to be utopian): he must abstain from forming relationships that would cause him to get too attached: "always guard against contracting a life relationship by which one can become many" (*ibidem*: 297). Moreover, he will also have to refrain from obtaining any official post because in that way the "individual ceases to be himself the manager of the operation, and then theories can be of little help" (*ibidem*). All these efforts are directed at finding a way outside the ancient scheme of creation which, as the narrator pointed out, is catalyzed primarily by the principle of boredom. It becomes clear that for A, what is at stake is a sort of recreation of the world in the likeness of the image of the Creator: the "artistically achieved identity between forgetting and recollecting is the Archimedean point with which one lifts the whole world" (Kierkergaard, *op. cit.*: 298).

While Kierkegaard's focus in this text was more on the aesthetic dimension of the process of forgetting/remembering in its relation to boredom, in Nietzsche's "The Use and Abuse of History for Life" the major concern was the re-evaluation of historicity, more precisely revising some of the contemporary/traditional ways of interpreting history which were flawed in his view. It is, nowadays, common currency to regard Nietzsche's interpretation of forgetting as an entirely positive and beneficial process; herein also lies the source of some of the criticism against his definitions of historicity. However, Nietzsche's understanding of forgetting is not as univocal and uncomplicated as it is made to appear. It refers only to a specific context and should be understood primarily as a response to the other approaches to historicity of his time which he was criticizing himself.

"The Use and Abuse of History for Life" first appeared in the volume *Untimely Meditations*, which was published in 1876. Nowadays, this text is customarily regarded as an explicative text to *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). It is prefaced by a quotation from Goethe: "Incidentally, I despise everything which merely instructs me without increasing or immediately enlivening my activity" (Nietzsche, 2010). Then, from the outset, Nietzsche affirms his position as concerns the sense he wants to give to the study of history:

> In the spirit of Goethe's words, we must in all seriousness despise instruction without vitality, knowledge which enervates activity, and history as an expensive surplus of knowledge and a luxury, because we still lack what is still most essential to us and because what is superfluous is hostile to what is essential. To be sure, we need history. But we need it in a manner different from the way in which the spoilt idler in the garden of knowledge uses it, no matter how elegantly he may look down on our coarse and graceless needs and distresses. That is, we need it for life and for action, not for a comfortable turning away from life and from action or for merely glossing over the egotistical life and the cowardly bad act. We wish to serve history only insofar as it serves living. But there is a degree of doing history and valuing it through which life atrophies and degenerates. To bring this phenomenon to light as a remarkable symptom of our time is now every bit as necessary as it may be painful (Nietzsche, *ibidem*)

The essay proper begins with a discussion on the blissful ignorance of animals, which Nietzsche explains in terms of animals' complete lack of remembering:

> One day the man demands of the beast: "Why do you not talk to me about your happiness and only gaze at me?" The beast wants to answer, too, and say: "That comes about because I always immediately forget what I wanted to say." But by then the beast has

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> already forgotten this reply and remains silent, so that the man keeps on wondering about it (*ibidem*)

This faculty of complete forgetfulness is lacking in man; for this reason, Nietzsche believes, man gradually loses the capacity for happiness as well as freedom. However, through this analogy the author does not aim at re-instituting some sort of paradisiacal state of ignorance for man but rather the ways in which history and time impact on his memory and state of mind. His main concern is the deconstruction of three approaches to the study of history which he labels in the following way: the *monumental* method, the *antiquarian* method, and the *critical* method. In his opinion, each one of these approaches is limitative because it is either too literal or too liberal towards history and thus completely misses its ultimate scope: that of teaching the new generations a way of living and being, a *praxis*, which is anchored in its own time yet mindful of the past too. The monumental type of historian uses the past as a model for imitation but the problem here lies in the fact that the past is thus "always in danger of being altered and touched up and brought nearer to fiction" (Nietzsche, *op.cit.*). The antiquarian method, on the other hand, is biased by a "highly restricted field of vision. It does not perceive most things at all, and the few things which it does perceive it looks at far too closely and in isolation" (*ibidem*). Of the three methods, it is the critical one that will receive most of Nietzsche's support:

> Once again this is in the service of living. In order to be able to live, a person must have the power and from time to time use it to break a past and to dissolve it. He manages to do this by dragging the past before the court of justice, investigating it meticulously, and finally condemning it. Every past is worthy of condemnation, for that is how it stands with human things: in them human force and weakness have always been strong. Here it is not righteousness which sits in the judgment seat or, even less, mercy which announces judgment, but life alone, that dark, driving, insatiable self-desiring force (*ibidem*).

From this quotation we can see that for Nietzsche the primordial ethical principle is life itself and it is with consideration to this vitalist notion that all approaches to history should be taken. Despite the differences between the areas of investigation of the two authors, there are however a few recurrent ideas in the works of both which give a very specific interpretation of the notion of forgetting and help us further understand the deep implications of their analyses. From the perspective of temporality, both philosophers seem to privilege the "instant", the "now", the "singular moment", the present understood in its full creative force. For Nietzsche, the possibility for happiness – both individual and communal – resides in one's capacity of living in the present, of completely forgetting about the past. The same idea can be found in Kierkegaard's notion of arbitrary endeavors and complete detachment which entail one's capacity of living in a sort of discrete arrangement of time.

The most important notion that both philosophers associate to the idea of forgetting is that of forgetting as creative force, as *poiesis*. Thus, Kierkeggard's concept of "reflective forgetting" is a way of precluding boredom as well as a foundation for a fundamentally aesthetic way of living by which one is able to control one's destiny. For Nietzsche, this creative power can be translated in the "plastic force" which refers to the capacity of reconfiguring and incorporating the past in the unfamiliar, of healing wounds and making amends. Thus, for Nietzsche, the remembering of history will be similar to the process of adaptation, a creative process by which the new will not have to be a copy or encomium of the old, but a sort of musical variation on a known theme.

The third common denominator of the two texts is the already mentioned principle of "nil admirari". It presupposes a detachment from the contingency of life and a contemplative stance towards it. Nietzsche saw its dangers in a certain idolatrous

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regard to history which he criticized in relation to Hegel's philosophy. For Kierkegaard, this refers to a certain practice of life by which one should be able to forget (or remember poetically) past events at one's will.

As part of the same "agenda" of a practice of life, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard both seem to subscribe to the principle of limitation which, for Kierkegaard is the warrant of one's resourcefulness in life and for Nietzsche a full-fledged insight in the needs and imperatives for leading a creative life (as well as living in the present):

> And this is the general principle: each living being can become healthy, strong, and fertile only within a horizon. If it is incapable of drawing a horizon around itself and too egotistical to enclose its own view within an alien one, then it wastes away here, pale and weary, to an early death. Cheerfulness, good conscience, joyful action, trust in what is to come – all these depend, with the individual as with a people, on the following facts: that there is a line which divides what is observable and bright from what is unilluminated and dark, that we know how to forget at the right time as well as remember at the right time, that we feel with powerful instinct the time when we must perceive historically and when unhistorically. This is the specific principle which the reader is invited to consider: *that for the health of a single individual, a people, and a culture the unhistorical and the historical are equally essential* (Nietzsche, *op.cit.*)

As we can notice from the above excerpt, for Nietzsche the idea of forgetting, or "the unhistorical", is not the one-way solution as Nietzsche's critics seem to believe; for him, both remembering and forgetting play a major role in the reconstitution of history. Without forgetting, a people would not be able to start over, to reconstruct its identity after a traumatic event, nor could it construct and live the present other than as a mirror of the past (which would be but a false mirroring of the past in the present).

Finally, both philosophers resort to the image of the child in order to convey their understanding of the relations between good and evil, on the one hand, remembering and forgetting, on the other. In Kierkegaard's "Rotation of Crops", the narrator says that the shortcomings of boredom can be witnessed in relation to children who, as long as they are enjoying themselves, they behave well. The image of the child is, however, more poignant for Nietzsche who uses it in order to hint to the unhistorical condition: "The child, which does not have a past to deny, plays in blissful blindness between the fences of the past and future" (*ibidem*).

We can see that all these different perspectives on remembering and forgetting create the map of a quite complex network of significations in relation to these concepts. Therefore, the interpretation of late modern authors will have to take into account these fundamental notions and see the ways in which they were transmitted, adapted, altered or denied. On the one hand, it is clear that such a notion as the "plastic force" of history is very much akin to the aesthetic of the Avant-garde. On the other hand, the permanent interplay and tension between remembering and forgetting which appears in both philosophers' works, informs both modern and postmodern aesthetics.

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