Remembering and Forgetting

> "I shall remember you even if forget you." (The film, *How to Forget You*)

1. Introduction: Narrative and the recovery from trauma

1.1 How can we recover from trauma? This is an ever-lasting, and unresolved issue for human beings. Ranging from a painful personal experience of loss to more massive occurrences of war and killing, traumatic experiences are ingredients of what makes us human. One of the ways to recuperate from trauma is the use of narrative in psychological counseling, medical cure and more generally in narrative education.

1.2 To take up this issue, in the symposium at the annual meeting of PESGB last year entitled "Beyond Prescription: rethinking the education of creative writing in the age of wellness culture," Roshni Beeharry, Leilla Osman and Emma Williams tackled this issue. Centering on the theme of therapeutic writing to recover from trauma, they raised thought-provoking questions, challenging the idea of creative writing promoted in "wellness culture." Creative writing, they argued, had degenerated into a kind of medical prescription. Criticizing the "quick-fix culture of writing-as-therapy," they presented alternative approaches to rethinking creative writing as an educational practice, one that could guide us into "more profound engagement with human complexities" (Beeharry, Osman and Williams 2025).

1.3 One of the crucial questions left answered in this symposium was: *What kind of narrative would it be that actually can lead us to recovery from traumatic experience?* This paper will try to respond to this unanswered question. I shall do so by exploring the form of philosophical narrative – a way of recuperating from and living with pain through the power of thinking, and this in the use of literature and film.

1.4 Rethinking narrative means reconsidering the way we are engaged in language. With reference to Emerson and Cavell, I shall argue that the projective nature of language is a key to being released from trauma in the past and to transcending pain.

1.5 In the following second section, I shall illustrate the case of forgetting and remembering by analyzing the Japanese film, *How to Forget You* (2025), directed and scripted by Yu Sakudo. I shall elucidate some philosophical issues involving forgetting and remembering and one's relation to the past.

1.6 I shall then examine Paul Standish's response talk to Yu Sakudo's ideas and to his film. Some controversial issues with regard to the nature of language and narrative, and in relation to the past, will be clarified and the paradox of remembering and forgetting will be presented as a philosophical issue to be addressed. In the third section, I shall present an alternative mode of narrative reconstruction, which will help us transcend our pain.

1.7 I shall respond to the paradox in reference to Emerson's controversial remark, "I simply experiment with no Past on my back." Reinterpreting this remark in connection with his other remarks on grief, I shall try to show that Emerson's view on grief offers us a key to transcend our pain. And this involves reengagement with the projective nature of language.

1.8 In conclusion, some educational implications will be discussed in mental health education and history education – a kind of education that will direct us beyond ressentiment and self-indulgence in the past. Philosophical narrative directs us to the future.

2. *How to Forget You:* The paradox of remembering and forgetting

How to Forget You

2.1 In the aforementioned symposium, narrative was considered to be a way of returning to and reflecting on one's own past, and in some cases, of identifying the source of pain, confronting one's own past in writing. Another way of being engaged with language in recuperating from trauma is what is called "grief care" – a group method of sharing mutual grief, narrating orally the source of one's trauma, especially that of the loss of a beloved one. The Japanese film, *How to Forget You* (2025), deals with this issue of recovering from grief.

2.2 The film surprisingly begins with the photo of a young woman at a funeral – Miki, the fiancée of a young man, Subaru. Miki died suddenly in a traffic accident, and Subaru is left alone in this world without knowing how to deal with this experience of the sudden loss of his beloved one. As if encapsulating the theme of the film, Miki's mother, at the funeral, asks Subaru: "Please do not forget Miki."

2.3 The film, however, involves deeper philosophical issues of how to reconcile oneself with one's past, how to live with the presence of non-presence (with the occasional appearance of an illusory Miki), and most importantly, how to move on. Miki appears like a ghost many times in the film. The communication, however, is one way: Miki never utters words; and it is Subaru who always speaks to her.

2.4 Due to this effect, the imagery of death permeates the film – not only Miki's death, but also that of Subaru's father, who was killed in the course of a robbery when Subaru was a child. It also extends into the grief of others who come together in conversation to share their experiences of loss. The film depicts the inseparability of life and death, this world and the other world. Subaru is originally sceptical about a psychological counsellor, who proclaims his confidence that what is most important in counselling is listening to the voice of the bereaved.

2.5 Subaru murmurs in doubt: "Can you understand another person?" He is also reacting to the phrase, "recovery from trauma," as if to say that he would never recuperate from the death of Miki. Thus the story begins with the state of doubt and the sense of despair over the impossibility of reclaiming what is lost.

2.6 Gradually, however, Subaru learns to open up his heart to others in grief – those whom he has met in his hometown in Gifu prefecture – in the mountain side in this western part of Japan. Again, first, he is skeptical as he observes those who share their experience of loss. However, Subaru meets a man who still talks to his dead wife as if she were still alive. He also senses the deep grief of the man who organizes the grief care group and who himself has lost his wife. Subaru also struggles with his mother, who is crazily obsessed with the search for robber who killed her husband: living with the memory of her husband, she cannot get rid of the past from her life.

2.7 In interacting with those people who struggle to find a way to live with and without the dead, Subaru gradually realizes the way to accept

the reality of the Miki's death. And this process of skillfully depicted with the illusory figure of Miki who occasionally returns.

2.8 In the ending to the film, there is a turning-point in Subaru's struggle with the loss of Miki – he happens to listen to the recorded voice of Miki on the day before her death. And then, Miki's illusionary figure appears and Subaru holds her gently, whispering, "I shall remember you even if I forget you."

2.9 A number of philosophical issues are raised by the film. First and foremost is the question of how to become reconciled with the experience of loss, in particular, that of the beloved one. The film depicts Miki naturalistically despite her non-presence – hinting at the paradox of the presence of non-presence. Subaru encounters the fantastical appearances of Miki, seeing her not as a ghost but as a real person present to him. Is Miki a fantastical construction of Subaru's?

2.10 Second is the question of what it means to "share" one's grief with others', and whether it is possible to do so – one that is exemplified in Subaru's initial refusal to share his trauma with others in grief care.

2.11 Third, there is a subtle and paradoxical relationship between remembering and forgetting, a very subtle border between them. What is the answer implied in the title of the film, *How to Forget You*? And related to this point, fourth, what is the use of narrative in recuperating from trauma. Can one become reconciled with the past through narrative.

3. The paradox of the immemorial and the unforgettable

3.1 In his response paper to Sakudo's talk, Paul Standish thematizes the paradox entailed by remembering and forgetting in a philosophical way (Standish 2025). His philosophical analysis helps reinterpret and draw out the potential of the film.

3.2 First and foremost, Standish discusses the inseparability and the paradox of remembering and forgetting, such that "to remember something is to ignore, or forget something else" (p. 6). The relationship between remembering and forgetting, however, is not limited to this. There is a paradox in remembering what cannot be remembered, and which at the same time is unforgettable. Standish refers here to Lyotard's illustration of this in terms of childhood and what he calls "the jews."

> Both childhood and "the jews" are necessarily forgotten, and the only justice to them is the acknowledgement of this

> forgetting. The danger is that this forgotten is imagined to be recoverable: this illusion amounts to a forgetting of the forgetting. (Standish 2025, p. 10)

3.3 This is Lyotard's warning against the assumption of representation – our hubristic and potentially violent idea that we can capture and represent what happened in the past and what exists beyond our grasp. The implication is that the suffering of people in the Holocaust cannot be recuperated in memorialization of the remains of the past and even in the testimonies of those who underwent torture.

3.4 Standish cautions us that Lyotard's expression, "the jews," is intended to refer to what is "radically other to Western thought, with its urge to conceptualize and encompass. . . . This is not a matter of nationality or nature. It is rather that representation is anathema to them: they cannot speak for themselves" (p. 9).

3.5 Likewise, childhood is something we can never reclaim fully, especially in its eulogized recollection. "The infant cannot speak for itself, cannot represent itself" (p. 8). In both cases, if we forget this fact of the "immemorial," we shall fall into an "anthropomorphism of recollections" (p. 10).

3.6 From here, Standish draws out the way we deal with the loss of the loved one as follows:

> In retrieving a human life through various forms of representation (photographs, narratives), there is the risk of hiding the non-presence that was inherent in their lives. *Remembering that we cannot remember this* – that is, cannot recapture this, cannot hold them fully to ourselves, just as we never could hold them fully in or understanding – *is part of what it takes to treat [the dead] well.* (p. 12)

3.7 While Standish's account of remembering and forgetting is not a direct response to or interpretation of the film, *How to Forget You*, we might say that the sense of ambiguity with regard to remembering and forgetting that permeates the film can be interpreted from this perspective. And the way the film unfolds, intentionally without a clear answer, shows its resistance to any facile representation of those who are lost. And the framework of thinking Standish presents sounds true to the fundamental sense of separateness as part of the human condition.

3.8 If so, what is the role of narrative, the recounting of the past as the process of recovery from trauma? In *How to Forget You*, various

forms of narrative play a crucial role in Subaru's and other people's recovery from the loss of loved ones. In Subaru's case, his narrative is not straightforward: he originally refuses to narrate his past in the group therapy. He is also originally sceptical of a psychotherapist who seems to speak as if he can "understand" the trauma of the patient through their narrative.

3.9 Subaru's recovery, however, is not possible without his narrating his past (his relation to Miki) with other people – with Mr. Ikeuchi who has lost his wife, with Mr. Ushimaru who lost his wife and who organize the group, with Yoko, his mother with whom Subaru exchanges tokens of mourning over the dead, and most importantly, with the dead Miki, to whom Subaru in a sense keeps speaking in the film. The film raises the philosophical question of whether narrating one's trauma is possible and whether it can lead to the recovery of one's soul.

3.10 The question, then, is what the sensible and healthy way of thinking about oneself and one's past might be. In another text, "Reading Narrative," Standish criticizes "an inward turn of the self", which he finds in the dominant form of narrative education. In contemporary education, "narrative therapy" is prevalent, and this facilitates a "confessional understanding of the self" (Smeyers et al. 2007, 55). There is the problem of unity and linearity entailed by such narrative.

3.11 Along such a path, differences are reconciled and harmonized, and this covers over what cannot be grasped, even by oneself. Second, there is the assumption somehow that "we should be the authors of our lives" (p. 61). It is this "I" that knows myself best. But this blocks hospitality of thought, the receptiveness to the other (ibid.).

3.12 As a consequence, "the authenticity of the voice" in the telling of the story and the regaining of the integrity of the self is undoubtedly accepted, and this reinforces romanticized or sentimentalized conceptions (p. 63). Such mode of narrative, Standish points out, can hide from us the ways that "we may be strangers," to others and to ourselves (ibid.).

3.13 While narrative might be a key factor in dealing with trauma in the past, we need to acquire a mode of reengagement with language, one that will do justice to the difficulty of thinking of lives that are finished, the ending of life. However much you talk about your loss and grief, you cannot touch, you cannot get to, the source of pain and suffering. Subaru's silence, his initial refusal of narrating and sharing his past with others is probably in tune with Standish's criticism of narrative.

3.14 In the aforementioned response paper, Standish says:

> The real life of this human being who has died was one of exposure in language, defined by separateness, unresolved, not captured in a narrative; and the interpretation of that life in language inevitably remains open, defying closure. (p. 12)

3.15 If the lives of the other cannot be reconstructed or reclaimed by narrative, and if such narrative reconstruction cannot only be a subjective and possibly sentimental representation of the other, how can we do justice to the reality of the one who is dead?

3.16 Surely we cannot live without narrating our own past. The challenge is how we can release ourselves from the trodden path of the past, from the repetitive recounting of the dead by freezing and fixating her or him in the memory, and from our own entrapment in our own language.

3.17 Faced with these challenges, there seems to be a subtle but potentially significant difference between Sakudo's film and Standish's take on the past and the narrative. This relates to one's attitude towards the past and more generally to the use of and the nature of language in narrative.

3.18 In Sakudo's film, perhaps, there is a kind of retrospective drive that is much stronger than in Standish's description of the immemorial. Or to put this better: in *How to Forget You*, the last remark by Subaru, "I shall remember you even if I forget you," still retains Subaru's hope of reclaiming the memory of the past with Miki. The possibility of Subaru's subjective reconstruction of Miki, her being assimilated into the world of Subaru, cannot be fully negated.

3.19 Did Subaru do full justice to the reality of the non-presence of Miki? And how could he obtain the momentum to move on, leaving the past, in the final scene? What eventually was the answer to the question of "how to forget you." Faced with these questions, the ambiguous ending of the film does not offer any clear answer.

4. How to move on? Emerson and the transcending of grief

> I simply experiment, an endless seeker, with no Past at my back. (Emerson 1990, p. 173).

4.1 How to carry one's past, and still move on? How can we celebrate the moment of conversion – from grief to joy, from trauma to hope? The

answer to these questions seems to involve the way we narrate the *reality* of the lives of the dead, the presence of its non-presence. The film, *How to Forget You* raises this issue. Miki's mother says to Subaru, "Don't forget Miki." Subaru's mother, Yoko, neurotically preoccupied, cannot abandon the past. Ikeuchi is an extreme case of living with his dead wife, as if to deny that she has died.

4.2 All those characters *cannot forget* the past: the past, it seems an axiom for them, is something one should remember. And they narrate the past in a fixed mode of language. Subaru is a figure who is sceptical of such modes of relation to the past and of such attitudes towards the dead. It is as if Subaru realizes that such a way of living cannot respond to the paradox of the immemorial and the unforgettable. These characters in the film, however, eventually and in their different ways, gradually do learn to leave the past.

4.3 Here Ralph Waldo Emerson's provocative remark offers insight into the ambiguous ending of the film and into the unarticulated feelings of Subaru. In the first quotation above, from his essay, "Circles," Emerson apparently asks us to abandon the past and expand our lives into a new circle. He encourages us to experiment, with "no Past" on our back, where the capitalized "Past", a kind of idealization: this implies not that we should completely forget the past or deny what has happened but that we should not dwell on the past in a spirit of *ressentiment*.

4.4 Emerson's Nietzschean resistance to *ressentiment* and to the romanticization of the past is also echoed in his tragic essay, "Experience," where he writes after the death of his own child: "I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature" (Emerson 1990, p. 218). we can never do justice to the reality of the dead and of death itself in our retrospective mourning: neither in an idealization of the dead nor in a cold objectification.

4.5 In the aforementioned response to Sakudo, Standish writes:

> The commemoration of the loved one can work in a way that objectifies them, idealizes them: it presumes to know them and capture the whole, and in so doing it turns them into an alibi for our living of our own lives. Such an attitude is in danger of losing sight of separateness; desirous of capture, it loses sight of the fact that "souls never touch their objects", and of the "silent waves" that wash between us. The one who died was not a fixed personality, with an identifiable set of desires and fears; nor is she what Sartre would call "the sum of her acts." (Standish 2025, pp. 11-12)

4.6 In "Circles," Emerson talks about the expanding circles of conversation in which one is, with words, projected onto the new realm of life in encounter with the words of the other:

> Conversation is a game of circles. In conversation we pluck up the termini which bound the common of silence on every side. The parties are not to be judged by the spirit they partake and even express under this Pentecost. (Emerson 1990, p. 170

It is this unexpected opening through language that directs us to the way for transcending pain.

4.7 To follow up such projective thinking, Standish refers again to Lyotard. In contrast to the idea of the "project" in business management, "to project" is, in literal or etymological terms, to throw forward (Standish 2025, p. 8): Lyotard expands this by way of a contrasting of the project and the program.

4.8 In similar vein Stanley Cavell emphasizes the projective nature of language – where "new meadows of communication" open as words project into new contexts (Cavell 1979, p. 172). Our relationship with language, with criteria, is both fatal and free: existing criteria can open to a new criterion. Emerson, Lyotard and Cavell – all seem to indicate that a key to living in the paradox of the immemorial and the unforgettable lies in this projective nature of language.

4.9 In Thoreau such a conception of language extends into his ingenious contrasting of the mother tongue with "the father tongue" – "a reserved and select expression, too significant to be heard by the ear, which we must be born again in order to speak" (Thoreau 1992, p. 69). The contrast is not separate from a sense of an internal relation between language and mortality, and hence of what it is to have a soul: matters of life and death, of having a soul and not losing it, stand in some kind of relation to a readiness to abandon the familiar and to letting go of the past.

4.10 For Emerson and Thoreau, the reengagement with language is a key to releasing oneself from "a state of secret melancholy" (Cavell 2004, p. 18), while at the same time it releases the dead, the distant other, from its idealization.

4.11 Acknowledgement of separateness is an answer to the questions of "How to forget you?" and of how to live in the paradox of the immemorial and the unforgettable.

5. Conclusion

> The knowledge of the self as it is always takes place in the betrayal of the self as it was. That is the form of self-revelation, until the self is wholly won. (Cavell 1971, p. 160).

5.1 At the end of the film, *How to Forget You*, the sustained image of the scenes is one of *departure* – Subaru's leaving of the hometown where he has undergone this therapeutic experience as he heads for his house in Tokyo. In the apartment where he has lived with Miki, Subaru throws away the plate of curry and rice that Miki had made for him. And from a dark room, a kind of secret place in which she hid for many years, Yoko, Subaru's mother, clears away all the clutter, the tokens of memory of her husband. A young couple, who have undergone a crisis in life, get married and celebrate with their friends.

5.2 Yet these endings, these points of departure, are presented exactly as scenes of uncompromised resolution. Rather, they are depicted with a quiet, subdued manner as if to present moment not of dramatic, but of little rebirths in the ordinary, of, as Emerson more or less puts this, conversion from the attained towards the unattained self (Cavell 1990, p. 10).

5.3 In the very last scene, and in contrast to earlier scenes in the film, the illusory figure of Miki does not return to Subaru. Subaru has, as it were, learned to stand on his own feet, acknowledging his separation from Miki. The film as a whole presents a kind of therapeutic process in which the characters convert their mourning in pain into the morning of joy in living with the other and acceptance that separateness and separation are parts of this.

5.4 Towards the end of the essay, "Experience," Emerson describes the unexpected, sudden arrival of light after going through mourning as follows:

> By persisting to read or to think, this region gives further sign of itself, as it were in flashes of light, in sudden discoveries of its profound beauty and repose, as if the clouds that covered it parted at intervals, showed the approaching traveller the inland mountains, with tranquil external meadows spread at their base, whereon flocks graze and shepherds pipe and dance. (Emerson 1990, p. 328)

5.6 Here is described the moment of conversion: one's whole being has gained a new momentum to move on. This is the moment of self-transcendence, released from the existing framework of thinking. But it

is worth recalling here also a thought expressed in Cavell's interpretation of Emerson's expanding circles: "power seems to be the result of rising, not the cause" (Cavell 1992, p. 136).

5.7 The film does not offer us a clearcut answer to the question of how to forget you. Following the perspective of Emersonian circles, we might say that Subaru perhaps does not find an answer until he finds the courage to "raise himself above himself, to work a pitch above his last height" (Emerson 1990, p. 168).

5.8 In his ending remark to Miki, "I shall remember you even if forget you," Subaru learns how to acknowledge separation from the dead without being preoccupied with the past. He learns not to trap Miki in his fantasties of narrative.

5.9 Seen in this light, the film thematizes an Emersonian sense of moral crisis (Cavell 2004 p. 17) ("the moment of crisis" [p. 13]) and the mourning period of "secret melancholy" (cf. p. 18). "Despair is not bottomless, merely endless; a hopelessness, or fear, of reaching bottom" Cavell 1992, p. 76). Do not despair over despair, Cavell implies. He encourages the reader to stand on the border between melancholy and cheerfulness (Cavell 2004, p. 18).

5.10 In the response paper to Sakudo, Standish writes:

> If we are loyal to [the dead] and care about them we need to struggle to find ways to recollect them. But we must do this with a healthy, if painful, sense of impossibility, and with the humility this awareness should arouse. To remember them too definitively is not only to delude ourselves: it is to do violence to the openness and challenge of the life they had. (Standish 2025, p. 12).

5.11 Such humble recognition of the past, of the loss and the dead, points us to *education as therapy*, a kind of education that is "therapeutically motivated," involving "moments of crisis" (2004, pp. 4, 13). Cultivating the humble sense of the incomprehensibility of the other, it directs us to self-transcendence – to the undergoing of crisis but release from *ressentiment*.

5.12 Such a way of thinking has implications not only for therapy or mental health education, but also much broader across ranges of subjects. For example, in history education where private pain has ramifications for public pain, the pain of those who suffered in the past, we may acquire the mode of learning historical facts that are inseparable from tensions and wounds.

5.13 Education as therapy also necessitates the presence of the other, including those non-present, and the conversation with her or him. This echoes the idea of friendship in Emersonian moral perfectionism (Cavell 2004, p. 16).

5.14 As Cavell writes:

> the moral life is not constituted solely by consideration of isolated judgments of striking moral and political problems but is a life whose texture is a weave of cares and commitments in which one is bound to become lost and to need the friendly and credible words of others in order to find one's way. (Cavell 2004, p. 16)

5.15 Therapeutic experience is generated through the power of one's words, in a reencounter with the other and in release from the language in which one has been trapped. Narrative counseling in this sense can be reconsidered not as geared towards identifying the source of pain in the past, but as helping us acquire a projective mode of language, in translation from the mother to the father tongue.

5.16 This is not to find the *true* self, but to go along the unending path of the attained and unattained self – just as Subaru does not find his real self in the end. In this sense, the power to recuperate from trauma is generated through one's own power of thinking and language, through subjecting oneself to the projective power of language. Such reengagement with language can be cultivated not only in language education but also in art and the watching of films.

5.17 Subaru learns to acknowledge the separateness of Miki and he acquires a readiness to leave, finding his world in the end. Cavell writes:

> The world need not be settled, nor cynically set aside as unsettlable. It is a condition in which you can at once want the world and want it to change – even change it, as the apple changes the earth. (Cavell 2004, p. 18)

5.18 He finds his words, finds where to stand, and how to sense the gravity of his weight on earth. Can we call this a moment of recovery from loss, and hence a moment of rebirth? He can now become reconciled with the past. He has learned to move on, with no Past on his back.

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