Blessed acts of oblivion

on the ethics of forgetting

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Abstract

This paper explores the ethics of forgetting as a technology of the self. Forgetfulness is a feature of a range of contexts of political conflict and 'difficult' heritage. Such forgetfulness is often imagined as an imposition (as when states deny the freedom to remember) or a weakness (as when people are thought to repress uncomfortable or difficult memories). Here by contrast I examine a context of difficult heritage and political conflict in which people forget some things by remembering others, and I highlight the ways in which it is often hard to disentangle which process is primary. Rather than ask whether the point is what you remember or what you forget, alternative and more interesting questions are revealed, I suggest, by asking what kind of subject is the ideal end result.

Keywords

Forgetting, memory, Italy, Fascism, Predappio, ethics

'Duce, 100 years ago you started a glorious period. Today, we can finally remember it freely.'

- Inscription in the visitors' book at the tomb of Benito Mussolini, Predapppio, October 2022

Introduction

The epigraph above was noted by a journalist visiting Predappio, the birthplace and burial site of Benito Mussolini, the week of the one hundredth anniversary of his seizure of power in 1922 (Giuffrida 2022). The reference to Fascism as a 'glorious period' is characteristic of most of the inscriptions in the visitors' book in Mussolini's tomb I had occasion to read over the course of four years of fieldwork there. Predappio is Italy's premier site of neofascist tourism: Mussolini was born there in 1883, and from almost the moment he took power in 1922 he began the process of transforming what had been a small and entirely inconsequential settlement of a few hundred people into a new town of several thousand, built around key sites from his childhood, and designed to celebrate both his life and the genius of Fascist urban engineering. Since 1957, when his body was returned to the family tomb after a series of post-mortem misadventures that included being stolen and hidden in a convent by a successor to the Fascist party (cf. Luzzatto 2014), Predappio and the Mussolini family crypt receive hundreds of thousands of visitors every year, many of whom dress in black, and many of whom will leave a celebratory or hagiographic comment in the visitors' book.

The upbeat tone of this one is quite unusual though; most of the inscriptions in preceding years were more likely to bemoan contemporary Italian politics and wish wistfully for their Duce's return. The reason for the upbeat tone is that, in a very loose sense, that wish was fulfilled in October 2022. Almost exactly one hundred years to the day since Mussolini took power after the so-called 'March on Rome', Giorgia Meloni, leader of the post-fascist

‘Brothers of Italy’, was appointed Italy’s Prime Minister. This was the first time that an Italian government had been led by a direct descendant of Mussolini’s National Fascist Party (PNF), itself banned since the end of World War Two. Meloni named Ignazio La Russa, her party co-founder, whose father was secretary of the PNF, and whose middle name is Benito, as President of the Italian Senate, the second highest ranking office of state. All of this helps to explain the anonymous visitor’s unusually optimistic tone.

Much less unusual is the author’s concern with memory, which has long been a dominant focus for neofascist visitors to Predappio. Every year this very small *comune* is visited by ‘dark tourists’ (Lennon & Foley 2000), many of whom come to pay tribute at Mussolini’s grave, and to write their names and messages in the visitors’ book positioned in front of a large marble bust of his head and the Italian tricolour flag.

Fig 1 here

On three anniversaries in particular – those of Mussolini’s birth, death, and seizure of power – thousands of neofascists in black shirts or military uniforms descend on Predappio to march from the centre of town to the Mussolini family mausoleum, where flowers are laid and speeches are given, arms upraised in the (illegal) Fascist salute. A typical banner carried at one such march I observed read ‘those who do not remember the past are not fit to govern the present’.

Fig 2 here

This sentiment also mirrors claims often heard from the opposite side of the political spectrum in Italy – and abroad – regarding what are held to be predominantly ‘forgetful’

Italian attitudes to their Fascist heritage. Indeed, some commentators lay the blame for Meloni's election at precisely this forgetfulness in regard to historical Fascism, with specific reference to Predappio (e.g. Corner 2022).

Predappio captures an ambiguity often present in commentary on forgetting Fascism in Italy: is it an attitude or stance of forgetfulness? Or a simple absence of memory? As I have described elsewhere, people who live in the town often go to great lengths to ignore its Fascist heritage, despite the fact that – thanks to its unique urban fabric, the presence of Mussolini's body, and the constant influx of tourists – the town is thoroughly suffused by this heritage (see Heywood 2019; 2021; 2023; 2024a). I have described this avoidance as cultivated, and it is an avoidance that extends, unsurprisingly, to a sometimes forgetful attitude towards their town's unique history.

But rather than dismiss such forgetful attitudes as merely instances of bad faith, here I want to ask how practices of remembering and forgetting work together to situate the self in relation to wider political narratives, perhaps especially so in contexts of 'difficult' heritage (Macdonald 2009). There is an extended Western tradition going back to the Stoics in which memory and technologies of remembrance are understood to play important roles in the cultivation of virtuous selves by emphasising the stability and continuity of the self in the face of change (and the same is true in some non-Western traditions – Cassaniti 2022). Echoes of this tradition may be seen to abound in contexts in which forgetting appears as an enforced duty, an obligation imposed upon people by the state or other powers (e.g. Mookherjee 2006), and in which to remember is to cultivate a memorious self in opposition to such compelled discontinuity.

Yet what of contexts in which some discontinuities of selfhood are actively pursued, rather than imposed? What of situations in which a stance of forgetfulness may serve to index

a fact about oneself – that one is a different person than one was – rather than to merely reflect or feign to reflect the absence of memory?

Here I want to explore forgetting as an ethical technology, rather than only as a form of public duty, imposition, or weakness of character. If memory and technologies of memorialisation fit easily within Western and non-Western traditions of self-examination and self-cultivation, what role might forgetting and forgetfulness play in ethics and in the ways in which people imagine their relation to themselves? If memory, as Seneca argued, is thought to foster a sense of stability and continuity of self that lends coherence to one's thought and action, what, if any, good might be thought to come from forgetting, and how do people go about it?

Memory Wars and Predappio

Given its history and heritage, concerns about memory have unsurprisingly been at the forefront of international debates about Predappio's place in Italian public culture. A furore erupted in the international press in 2017, for example, over plans to install a museum of Fascism in the town's imposing but derelict former Fascist Party Headquarters (*Casa del Fascio*).

Fig 3 here

For proponents of the project, such as Predappio's former mayor Giorgio Frassinetti, it was an opportunity to rescue his home from what he often called the *damnatio memoriae* into which he felt it had been cast by association with its most famous son. Turning that

association into a strength instead of a weakness by creating the nation's first museum to its totalitarian past in Predappio would be a way to reclaim that past and the memories associated with it, as instruments for the education of a younger generation who would otherwise forget the perils of Fascism (see Carrattieri 2018). For the project's many opponents on the other hand, a 'museum of Fascism' – especially one sited in Italy's most notorious site of Fascist heritage – would only encourage those who seek to memorialise Fascism. A number of alternative proposals with memory as their focus - such as a memorial to the Italian Resistance, or to victims of Fascist crimes – were put forward. Almost everybody, in other words, worries about how and what to remember in Predappio.

Predappio crystallizes a wider problematic of remembering and forgetting in relation to Fascism in Italy, and debates over the museum project reveal 'an obvious sense of anxiety regarding the history of Fascism' (Storchi 2019: 18). As a large body of scholarship has shown, whilst injunctions to remember Fascist crimes form some of the foundational components of the postwar Italian state and the basis of some its popular culture and social movements (see e.g. Passerini 1987), public memories of Fascism in Italy are also 'hazy, selective, and unreliable' (Malone 2017: 445; see also Corner 2002; 2005; Fogu 2006; Foot 2009; Mammone 2006; Pavone 2000). Whilst this lack of shared narrative is in part a consequence of a revisionist approach to Fascist historiography in Italy that emerged in the 1990s (see e.g. De Felice 1995), as far back as 1983 Luisa Passerini was writing of the ways in which 'there is no "work of memory" without a corresponding "work of forgetting"' (1983: 196) and noting that working-class memories of the Fascist period tended to focus on the rhythms of everyday life and to erase difficult or traumatic moments (1987; cf. also Heywood 2021; 2024b).

The selectivity of memories of Fascism in Italy is paralleled in the treatment of Fascist heritage such as that which dominates Predappio (see Arthurs 2010; Carter and

Martin 2017; Malone 2017 Storchi 2013; 2019). Lucy Maulsby, for instance, highlights the way in which *Case del Fascio* like the one in Predappio have often been only partially cleansed of their architectural associations with Fascism, yet many Italians are ignorant of their history and original purpose (Maulsby 2014). Comparing the country with those who drank from the River Lethe in Greek mythology, she notes that such forgetfulness 'can be…understood as a collective inability to completely engage with the moral and ethical problems posed by Fascism' (ibid: 32). There is a noteworthy ambiguity in this analogy, as those who drank from the River Lethe did so deliberately, in conscious pursuit of forgetfulness, and echoing a classical tradition concerned with the importance and arts of forgetting (see below). This voluntaristic quality is quite different to the 'inability' gestured to in the subsequent analysis.

Arguments and rhetoric around defects in memory when it comes to Fascism are often framed in moral terms, as in both Maulsby's claim (and, for a very different set of reasons, that of neofascist marchers), that forgetfulness is an ethical failing. More broadly, memory and remembrance are obviously often framed as virtuous practices as duties to people or objects – as in invocations to remember so as to avoid the repetition of appalling crimes, or to pay tribute to the dead (see e.g. Kwon 2010).

This sort of perspective on the necessarily virtuous nature of memory is echoed in critical assessments of the Italian case beyond Maulsby's specific points about Fascist heritage. As Rosario Forlenza brilliantly documents (e.g. 2012; 2018; 2021), whilst it is certainly true that public memory in Italy surrounding World War Two and the Fascist regime has often been selective and generally oriented towards establishing the 'myth' of the anti-fascist resistance as a second Risorgimento or national rebirth (see e.g. Cooke 2011; 2012), to see remembering and forgetting in purely presentist and instrumental terms is to reduce 'memory, which is a fundamental concept of culture, to a by-product of politics,

created from above and isolated from a broader understanding of the social, cultural, and historical context' (Forlenza 2018: 141).

As Forlenza goes on to describe, this perspective also fails to account for 'the complex relationship between forgetting and remembering, which cannot be understood only in terms of the implementation of strategy by political parties and elites…memories of wartime experiences were threatening and painful, and haunted individuals for years; some therefore strove to forget. Silence and forgetting were ways of coping with the past; these mechanisms supported the attempt to build a new and different life…we are not only the past that we can remember, but we are also the past that we can forget' (2018: 173-174).

The question of individual practices of forgetting and their relation to wider public narratives connects these issues to a wider historical tradition of understanding memory and forgetfulness not just as public practices but as ethical technologies and ways of instantiating particular kinds of subjectivity and selfhood. Connecting arguments about public forgetfulness to this tradition may offer a way of thinking about both why people forget and how they do so that goes beyond imposed silence and absence.

Memory has an extended historical place as a virtuous technology in and of itself, one of the many means by which people from Seneca to Aquinas have practiced self-cultivation (see e.g. Foucault 1986). Here, in the range of writing devoted to *ars memoriae* or mnemotechnics, techniques of memorialisation are thought to be good not merely for what they allow one to remember but for what they do to the soul and the subject, for their role in self-examination, and for their encouragement of piety and religious obedience. Such practices are not confined to the West: Julia Cassaniti has described the ways in which Theravada mindfulness practices are rooted in an ethic of non-forgetfulness, in which memory – in the sense of connecting one's past and present selves is 'good' and forgetting is

'bad' (2022: 7). Here, in other words, memory functions as a technology of self-cultivation, good not only because it fulfils a wider social duty but because of its effects on the person.

Somewhat buried within the Western historical tradition of *ars memoriae* is an equivalent set of concerns in which memory is not a virtue but a problem. Ovid prescribed remedies for forgetting a lost object of romantic affection, Cicero tells of the wisdom of Themistocles, who wished to learn to forget rather than to remember, and Cornelius Agrippa thought mnemotechnics would lead to mental overload and madness from a surfeit of memory (cf. Zahora 2015). Nietzsche famously argued for the benefits of active and selective forgetting, and Borges' story of 'Funes the Memorious' fictionalises Cornelius Agrippa's fears coming true for a man who cannot forget, and so cannot think, because 'to think is to forget differences, generalize, make abstractions'. Some recent scholarship outside of anthropology has also returned to questions of forgetting in critique of the memory studies boom (Rieff 2016; Symons 2019), and there is an extensive psychoanalytic literature on pathologies of memory going back at least to Freud on mourning and melancholia (1917). What unites this buried undercurrent of literature is Forlenza's point about the Italian case: that despite a tendency sometimes to assume that memory has a necessarily positive ethical valence in relation to the construction of the self, 'we are also the past that we can forget'.

Anthropology has long recognised forgetting as a constituent part of memory (e.g. Trouillot 1995), along with the fact that, as Ricoeur puts it, 'Recounting one drama is forgetting another' (2004: 452). Ethnographic interest in social practices of forgetting has been relatively sporadic and unsystematised however, a fact noted by a number of those who have written on the subject (e.g. Battaglia 1993: 430; Carsten 1995: 317; Vitebsky 2008: 244). Whilst some work emerged during the memory studies boom of the nineties (Augé 1998; Battaglia 1992; 1993; Carsten 1995; Cole 1998; Forty & Küchler 1999; Taylor 1993),

just as the *ars oblivionalis* emerged alongside the *ars memoriae*, relatively little has been said on the subject since then (though see Connerton 2008; Harrison 2004; Vitebsky 2008).

Paul Connerton notes that Euro-Americans are habituated to think of forgetting as a moral failure of sorts (Connerton 2008: 59), and much of that earlier anthropological work on forgetting set up an implicit or explicit contrast between this Euro-American perspective on forgetting as failure and non-Western contexts in which more or less ritualised versions of forgetting lead not to disintegration and social anomie but to what Connerton calls 'the formation of a new identity' (ibid: 63), or, in Battaglia's case, in an echo of Renan's famous characterisation of a nation as united by forgetting, even to 'society' itself (1993: 430).

Whilst there is much that is ethnographically specific to these anthropological accounts, the echo of Renan – and Western traditions of problematizing memory, from Cornelius Agrippa through to Borges, Nietzche, and Freud – should lead us to pause before assuming a sharp distinction between forgetting as moral failure in Euro-American contexts and as productive elsewhere. Indeed, while Battaglia makes an argument about the way Melanesian views of partible social personhood allow them easily to incorporate the idea that some parts of the dead should be remembered with the thought that other parts should be forgotten, again the point returns us to the more general view that selves are always composites of what is forgotten and what is remembered.

Keeping in mind the duality of memory and forgetting as ethical technologies – the idea that any art of memory as a way of establishing continuity of selfhood will necessarily also involve the art of forgetting – points a way out of a classic problem for scholars (and practitioners) of forgetfulness: how to remember to forget without remembering.

In thinking about ways in which people might actively engage in processes of forgetting, Umberto Eco famously described the impossibility of a true *ars oblivionalis*, a conscious technique of effacement comparable to the techniques of memorialization, since

any such technique would be semiotic in form and inherent to semiotics is the making present of something absent: a sign that stands for something will bring that thing to mind no matter what form the sign takes, so saying 'there is no rose' nevertheless brings the picture of a rose to mind (1988: 258; and see Candea 2022). As Jon Elster puts it, 'the commandment "forget him" requires an effort that can only inscribe in memory the object that one is demanded to forget' (1990: 81).

This point makes evident a problem with the assumption that ritual behaviour around memory and forgetting is necessarily about inducing a certain sort of inner state (the presence of memories or their absence). Whilst it might be intuitive to imagine that practices of remembrance serve to accomplish something like this in a simple sense by bringing to mind the object of memory, the same cannot easily be said of practices of forgetting – it is not straightforward to imagine a practice that could induce the absence of memory, as Eco and Elster make clear.

The idea that forgetting is an imposed 'commandment' intended to induce the inner state of forgetfulness but unable to do so successfully seems to sit behind the view that memory should be understood as virtuous 'resistance' to such commandments, as in James Scott's notion of 'hidden transcript' (1990). A thought like this seems also to be at work in critiques of forgetful Italian attitudes to Fascism (just as it is more obviously at work in the neo-Fascists' invocation of memory, as well as in wider antifascist injunctions to remember Fascist crimes). That is, the implication of such critiques is often that while the post-war Italian state has thoroughly failed to come to terms with the nation's Fascist past, it remains open to Italians themselves to do so.

There is then a certain disjuncture between the collective and the individual often built into our ideas about forgetting as an external imposition: because such imposition is in fact impossible, societies may forget, but individuals (should) remember. The fact that many

do not is what is hard to explain, as revealed by the ambiguity of the Lethe metaphor in the case of Italian Fascism: are Italians 'unable' to remember so because of some overarching contextual failure, or do they actively drink from the Lethe themselves, deliberately seeking oblivion?

In juxtaposing classical literature on the ethics of remembering and forgetting and anthropological engagements with forgetting, what I want to draw attention to is that one way to answer the question of how people forget might be to shift focus from what socially imposed practices of forgetting do to inner states to what practices of forgetting as ethical technologies do to perceptions of self. In other words, instead of asking about the presence or absence of particular memories, in certain contexts it might be more productive to ask about what kinds of continuities and discontinuities of self are exhibited by such memories or their absence.

Eco suggests one of the ways in which this process may function, when he describes the possibility of an art of oblivion that would succeed not by dint of effacement but of excess: "I can try to forget [something] by training myself to pronounce [something else] repeatedly, day after day, until I become incapable of remembering which of the two versions is the right one." (1988: 260)

This process resembles Connerton's description of forms of forgetting directed at the formation of new identities, insofar as the forgotten object is not so much destroyed as written over and replaced (2008: 63). It resembles Battaglia's descriptions of Melanesian understandings of 'forgetting's constructive role in the creation of…new memory' (1992: 9). And of course it reinforces Forlenza's point about the Italian case that we are not only the past we can remember but also the past we can forget. It is also, in a sense, the equivalent of Ricoeur's point that remembering and forgetting go hand in hand. In other words, in an important sense Eco's prescription for an art of forgetting is also an art of memory: the

technology of forgetting is the same as the technology of remembering. To forget something, you must remember something else, just as, as we know from Ricoeur and many others, to remember something is to forget something else.

In other words, it is not hard to think of comparable instances in which a process of 'active remembering' produces a form of 'active forgetting', and the line between the two may be blurred, partial, or ambiguous. Indeed, absent special psychological insight or access it may be impossible to know which is more important: the thing remembered or the thing forgotten. In connecting such instances to the notion of an art or ethical technology, my point again is that the self that results from the process of remembering and forgetting may sometimes be just as important if not more so than exactly what it is that is remembered and forgotten. In such situations the relevant questions to ask would be not just what has been forgotten and how, but also what has been remembered in its place; against what wider background does it make sense to forget this, and remember that; and what kinds of continuities and discontinuities of self are effected by such practices? Furthermore, and just as Seneca sought to remember for its own sake (regardless of what in particular it was that he remembered) because he prized continuity of subjectivity, so it may be that there are contexts in which exactly what it is that people forget, or whether or not in fact they really have forgotten it, matters less than the attitude of having forgotten, and the consequent demonstration of certain discontinuities of subjectivity.

Below I examine a number of different attitudes to forgetfulness in an ethnographic context in which memory is a problem partly because the continuity of political subjectivity is a problem. In a town built by a Fascist dictator to celebrate his life in the middle of the most left-wing region of Italy, a place where most families have a deeply complex history of affiliation with both the left and the right, then forgetting – clearly separating yourself from your past - may sometimes be just as important a duty as remembering.

The red and the black

Outsiders often assume there is a very obvious sense in which people in Predappio exhibit discontinuity in their political subjectivity: because of its emblematic status in relation to Fascism, Italians who don't know the town, from both the left and right, often think that all its inhabitants must themselves therefore be Fascist, and any protest to the contrary must be disingenuous. Thus, people in Predappio tell stories of favourable treatment from right-leaning policemen as soon as they show their ID cards and residency, and Frassinetti used to receive a regular postcard, whilst mayor of the town, addressing him as 'Dear Fascist Dickhead' (see Heywood 2024a; 2024c).

In fact Frassineti was only the latest in what was, until 2019, an unbroken line of left-wing and communist mayors of Predappio since the end of the war; the town sits in the historic heartland of the Italian left; and Mussolini himself, along with his father, were well known locally as socialist activists – his father was a town councillor for the Socialist Party, and gave his son the names of famous left-wing heroes. None of these facts however deter many outsiders from assuming that, deep down, anyone from Predappio must share the political colouring of their most famous co-citizen, and this has led many Predappiesi to spend their lives lying about or hiding their place of origin whenever they go abroad.

To this view any attitude of forgetfulness towards Fascism may be dismissed as dissembling, an attempt to mask genuine historical loyalties beneath a veneer of pretence. Unsurprisingly, things are much more complex than this in reality. Predappio is no more politically homogenous than any other town of comparable size in the region, and in fact its long history of voting for the left reflects an extended historical tradition of anticlerical,

peasant, and socialist activism in the region. And local attitudes towards discontinuous political loyalties and subjectivities reflect an equally longstanding and complex set of circumstances, in which forgetting has a nuanced role to play.

The roots of Predappiesi concerns with the problem of the continuity of political allegiance and conviction are to be found in the roots of Mussolini and Fascism themselves. "Historic turncoat number one in Predappio was Benito Mussolini, the Duce of Fascism, son of Alessandro Mussolini, anarchist socialist, and blacksmith of Dovia [as Predappio was then known]", notes one of the only histories of Predappio, written by three amateur historians and local residents (Capacci et al 2014: 212). Mussolini and his family were well-known in the village – as it was then – when they lived there: his mother was the local schoolteacher, and his father was the blacksmith, as well as a councillor for the Socialist Party, until his arrest and imprisonment for participation in a riot after the loss of an election. Many in the village would have followed Mussolini's early political career in the same party as his father, first at the local level, when he ran unsuccessfully for the post of secretary to the village council after finishing school in 1901, and then much more successfully at the regional, and later national levels, as he rose to prominence as a firebrand speaker and the editor of *Avanti!*, the national organ of the socialist party. No doubt many would also have followed his expulsion from the party in 1914 over his decision to support and lobby for Italian intervention in the First World War.

Questions were very quickly raised in Italian socialist circles as to the motivation behind this *volte face* on the part of Mussolini, who had previously toed the party line on neutrality, and one question in particular was asked often: "*chi paga?* (Who is the paymaster?)". R. J. B. Bosworth describes evidence that Mussolini was paid both personally and in the form of funding for the new newspaper he would go on to set up by the Italian and

French governments, who hoped his change of position on the war would draw in support for it from other Northern leftists (2002: 350-353).

Whether or not such suspicions occurred to any of his fellow citizens in Predappio, the disparity between the socialism of Mussolini's youth in the village and the Fascism he espoused by the time he returned home for his first visit as Prime Minister shortly after ascending to that position in 1922 will certainly have been obvious to his erstwhile compatriots. For at least two years by that point Fascist squads had been terrorizing the North of Italy – including the environs of Predappio – beating, kidnapping, and killing political opponents and destroying and burning any homes or buildings suspected of harbouring socialists or communists. The disparity clearly did not escape Mussolini himself either: in an early instance of an active attempt to forget political disloyalty, he had several of his former socialist comrades from the village rounded up and imprisoned for the duration of his visit so that their presence wouldn't prompt the recollection of any inconvenient memories.

The occasion of his 1922 visit home was the inauguration of a project that formed, in some sense, a large-scale version of Eco's forgetting by remembering. This essentially involved the construction of an entirely new town in the place of the village in which socialist Mussolini grew up, a town built around the myth of Mussolini's biography but one in which his early politics had no place (Heywood 2021; 2024a). A number of local political friends-turned-opponents were sent into internal exile, and thousands of migrants were bussed in to take their place in the sparkling apartment buildings of the new settlement. Mussolini's father was mythologised to some extent as part of this project thanks to his status as a man of the people and humble blacksmith, but his fervent anarchist-socialism was of course never mentioned, and he largely took second place to Mussolini's mother, the teacher after whose saint the nursery school in Predappio is still named.

In Mussolini's case, in other words, we meet what is very obviously a situation in which a clear set of continuities between past and present are established: Mussolini's proletarian origins, his mother's career caring for and teaching children, and, as I have described elsewhere (Heywood 2021), Predappio's status as an 'ordinary' Italian town, were all heavily emphasised in regime propaganda and the wider 'cult of the Duce' (Serenelli 2013) as clearly contributing to a hagiographic narrative in which Mussolini emerges from his humble roots to become the saviour of the nation. By contrast, factors that were seen to fit this narrative less well, most obviously his father's and his own socialism, were performatively forgotten. I say performatively because had such things truly been forgotten there would obviously have been no need to arrest Mussolini's erstwhile compatriots on the occasion of his visit.

This example of the phenomenon I describe may seem almost too easy for us to recognise, as the narrative of self at issue is that of a dictator, and his medium is nation-state propaganda. Mussolini is obviously far from the only example of a political leader who has sought to suppress some aspects of his own biography in the service of producing a coherent hagiographic narrative.

It is, though, worth remembering that for people in Predappio, Mussolini was both more and less than this: more in the sense that he was a concrete person, united by ties of kinship and affinity with many locals, and familiar from his youth; less in the sense that for precisely that reason the performative forgetting his propaganda demanded was unlikely to succeed. Of course people noticed the temporary (or sometimes permanent) disappearance of Mussolini's old friends, and locals tell a number of stories in which Predappiesi clearly feel entitled to make their memory of Mussolini's political past slyly clear: in one, a godson of Mussolini is baptized by the Duce himself, when he was a socialist, with the anticlerical name of "Rebel". After the Lateran Pact between Fascist Italy and the Catholic Church,

Mussolini tells the child's father he must change his son's name, and the father replies coldly that since, after all, Mussolini gave him the first name, he had better be the one to change it (Capacci et al 2014: 214). In another, on a visit to the town Mussolini stops a local character he recognizes from his days in the socialist party to ask him what he thinks of the political situation, and the man replies (in local dialect), that he has never liked the white poplar leaf ("*La fója de farfaraz*") and turns pointedly away from him (ibid: 203).

The *farfaraz*, or pioppo bianco in Italian, is a type of poplar tree famous for the contrast between the striking white underside of its leaves and their dark green upper side. Poplars are noted for their mobility in the wind, which can cause their leaves to flip rapidly back and forth even in a slight breeze, and for this reason the white poplar's leaf is locally symbolic of a *voltagabbana*, or turncoat, someone who switches political colours for convenience.

La fója de farfaraz is also the title of the local history book from which I have just quoted, and it is filled with other, similar stories. In fact, the reason it refers to Mussolini as 'historic turncoat number one' is because he is but the first of a large number of turncoats who fill its pages and from whom the book takes its name.

One favourite such story – that I have recounted elsewhere (Heywood 2024a; 2024c) – is of Angelo Ciaranfi, the last democratically elected mayor of Predappio in 1920, before the advent of Fascism forced his resignation in 1922. After a few years under the regime, however, Ciaranfi underwent a conversion, and joined the Italian Fascist Party. In order to make the strength of his new convictions clear, he even re-wrote his will to include a codicil requiring him to be buried in a Fascist blackshirt.

Later still, 'after the disaster and the tragedy of war, and the failures of Fascism', runs the story in *La fója de farfaraz*,

> Ciaranfi, good old Ciaranfi, realized he'd made a serious mistake, and turned on his feet politically again, joining the Italian Communist Party. After the liberation of Predappio, he served in the administration of the first post-war democratic mayor, Giuseppe Ferlini. But those tumultuous years had no doubt radically transformed Ciaranfi's existence, like those of many other Italians, and it's probably for this reason that he forgot to rewrite his will. So, when he died in June 1948, and his testament obliged him to be buried in a blackshirt, there was much consternation and embarrassment amongst his comrades, who were expecting to send him off draped in the red flag with the 'Internationale' playing. In the end, and not without argument, it was decided that his body would lie in an open casket, and obligatory blackshirt, for a brief private ceremony with the family, before being buried with casket closed in a civil ceremony, complete with the PCI band and the red flag (Capacci et al 2014: 219; all translations my own).

In Ciaranfi's case, as in Mussolini's, we have a very clear case of remembering and forgetting that are both equally cultivated. The case literalises Eco's idea of inducing forgetfulness through synonymy as Ciaranfi is buried with full communist honours and trappings, with the approval of the local party apparatus, in an obvious attempt to memorialise a consistent political subject, loyal to the cause of the left, and to paper over the black shirt within the coffin.

Yet there is nothing in the story itself – or in the humour with which people relate it – to tell us which we should understand as primary: the funeral's memorialisation of Ciaranfi's left-wing politics, or its papering over of his right-wing politics. Indeed, we may even suspect that Ciaranfi himself forgot the inconvenient will with the blackshirt codicil precisely

because his transformation really was genuine. Had it not been for the will, Ciaranfi's Fascist service may very well have been forgotten, as has that of many others.

The twin tales of Mussolini and Ciaranfi, from the beginning and the end of the Fascist period, are both examples of the uses of memory and forgetting in the crafting of a narrative of self. In Mussolini's case the performative nature of the forgetting is made obvious by his arrest of his former socialist comrades. But in Ciaranfi's case there is no such clarity about whether the point of the narrative of self is to forget or to remember.

Both stories are also evidence of the fact that the kinds of narratives of selfhood produced by the cultivation of memory and forgetfulness belong not only to their subjects, even when those subjects possess the machinery of nation-state propaganda. The 'cult of the Duce' may have succeeded in many ways in erasing Mussolini's socialism from the Italian public sphere, but it could not erase it from the memories of those who knew him as 'turncoat number one'. In Ciaranfi's case one can imagine that those officiating at his Communist Party funeral may well have felt it worthwhile to collude in his forgetting of his Fascism, perhaps for the benefit of the post-war town settlement; it is Ciaranfi's own failure to be consistent in remembering and forgetting that causes his discontinuous self to spill out beyond his narrative.

'Forgettingscapes'

The Fascist and post-Fascist period in Predappio was rife with discontinuous political subjects, white poplar leaves, in local parlance. This was no doubt the case in many places in Italy, but it was particularly true in Predappio, whose whole existence throbs with political contradiction: located in the heart of Italy's 'red belt', but built by its Fascist dictator (a man whose own political contradictions were intimately known to its inhabitants), subsequently

governed by a nearly unbroken series of communist and post-communist mayors, and all the while a pilgrimage site for Italy's neofascists. In the face of such contradictions then sometimes what you forget is just as important as what you remember in its place.

Contemporary attitudes to what to remember and what to forget about Predappio's past in many ways exhibit a similar degree of cultivation. This is particularly evident in relation to spaces of memory (and forgetting – see Diemberger 2016; Harrison 2004). For example, the Rocca delle Caminate is a mediaeval castle that sits atop one of the hills surrounding the town. It was already a thousand years old when it was gifted to Mussolini for use as a summer residence by local authorities in 1923. It played host to a number of famous domestic and foreign visiting dignitaries over the years of the dictatorship, as well having a spotlight installed in its highest tower that would project the *fasces* onto the night sky when Mussolini was in residence; the spotlight was so powerful it could be seen sixty kilometers away on the coast (Heywood 2024a; Heywood 2024b).

During the war its history darkens, as it becomes a barracks and a prison in which local partisans were held. Some locals claim the first meeting of the government of the Republic of Salò took place there in 1943, but what is certainly not in doubt is that a number of prisoners were tortured and murdered over the subsequent two years, including one famous local hero called Antonio Carini.

The only acknowledgement of this history today is a small plaque, almost hidden behind several outbuildings, and hard to come upon except by accident, which notes the place as the site of the deaths of 'noble spirits who courageously resisted brutal torture and gave their lives for a free Italy'. This plaque was only first erected in 2009 – in other words, before this there was no marker at all.

Today the Rocca has been restored in an expensive remodeling project that has left almost no trace of its Fascist past. Designed to host companies from the burgeoning tech

sector of Emilia Romagna, at my last visit only one had taken up residence in the palatial structure. Nevertheless, the interior is now a mass of offices, conference suites, reception rooms, and meeting halls, all decorated in the bland style of a modern aesthetic that sits uneasily in the much older walls of the building. Some of the walls and ceilings have had renaissance frescoes and mosaics restored, but none of the many *fasces* Mussolini had added to the décor remain.

On one visit to the Rocca I travelled there with Giorgio Frassineti, the then mayor of Predappio, and two visiting BBC journalists, who had come to cover the increasing international furore over the museum project. Giorgio wanted to display the Rocca as an example of how Predappio could make successful use of its difficult past, but his praise of the costly remodeling rang somewhat hollow in the empty offices. After viewing the inside, we strolled through the castle's extensive grounds, moving past the old barracks and prison without comment, and out into a small forest. Giorgio began describing memories of how he used to play in the ruins of the castle as a boy, before its restoration. Like the 'restoration' itself, which rendered the Rocca an odd concatenation of old (renaissance mosaics) and new (aluminium and leather furniture), made strange partly by the notable absence of anything from the period in between, Giorgio's cheerful stories of boyhood games were a strikingly particular way of narrating the past of the place, feet away from the hidden plaque honouring Carini.

As in the cases described in the previous section, the forgetting at work here does not happen in isolation from remembering, and it would be a mistake to imagine that the large sums of money devoted to the Rocca's restoration were spent simply in an attempt to erase aspects of an uncomfortable heritage. The Rocca's dark history is certainly not highlighted by its 'restoration', nor by Giorgio's memories of post-war happiness, but neither is it completely erased, nor indeed could it be given its local and national infamy; but the Rocca's

renaissance past and Giorgio's childhood games offer easy alternative memories, in Eco's terms, ones which establish a certain history and continuity to Predappio's existence whilst sidestepping the wider national narrative in which Predappio is inextricably connected to only one aspect of its history, that related to its most famous son.

A great many other spaces of memory (and forgetting) in Predappio exhibit similar qualities of having certain histories cultivated in them and other cultivated out of them, as I describe at length elsewhere (Heywood 2024a). A comparable example is the cemetery in Predappio, which is about a kilometre away from the town itself, built during the reconstruction of Predappio under the dictatorship. A large walled structure, one enters through one of three imposing arches to the vista of a tree-lined pathway leading to the Romanesque crypt that houses the remains of the Mussolini family. The whole cemetery, in other words, like Predappio itself, is built around memories of Mussolini, but it is also filled with the kin of almost everyone currently living in the town, no matter what they felt or feel about Fascism.

This is made painfully obvious during the days of the neofascist anniversary marches, which always take place on a Sunday, a day on which many locals may choose to visit and tend the graves of their relatives. To reach the tombs of their loved ones elderly locals step around blackshirted marchers who are giving the roman salute, and I have written elsewhere of the marked quality of the way in which the visitors are studiously ignored (Heywood 2023). My point here is about the ways in which memories of their own kin and relatives in the cemetery can serve to overwrite or at least compete with the memories of Mussolini that neofascist visitors like the one who wrote the epigraph to this paper are so keen to keep alive.

In a brilliant discussion of the complexities of unearthing Republican civil war dead in Spain who were secretly buried in regular church cemeteries, sometimes in the interstices between normal tombs, Layla Renshaw shows how Francoist executioners sought – for a

long time successfully – to disguise the dead bodies that were evidence of their crimes by hiding them amidst other dead bodies (Renshaw n.d.; see also Ferrandiz 2022). Republican dead were forgotten not by being cast into oblivion, but precisely by being housed in a place of memory, the memory of others.

There is a sense in which locals in Predappio seek – against the odds – to effect the same sort of operation on Mussolini. In their insistent memorialization of their own loved ones, even in the face of Predappio's neofascist tourists, they treat the cemetery like any other, a repository of all the dead instead of a monument to only one of them. "They're just visiting a dead person, like I am," says Valentina, a nonagenarian with a plethora of relatives buried in the cemetery. She dislikes the visitors, precisely for the memories of the war they conjure up in her, a war in which she endured hardship and starvation, and that left her with injuries that persist today. Like Eco though – and like anyone who has tried – she knows she cannot simply will herself to forget unpleasant memories. Instead, she tries to remember those she prefers and takes comfort in small successes: "the other day I got out some old pictures and I was looking at the photo of the school football team from before the war, the one my brother played for, and so did Bruno [Mussolini's son]. Of course I knew which one my brother was but then I realized I couldn't remember which one was Bruno – lucky me!, I thought. I wish I could forget them all."

What the case of the cemetery makes particularly clear is that to see attitudes to Predappio's Fascist past as 'merely' forgetful, whether successfully so or in bad faith, is to see only half of the story. It is to miss the extent to which such attitudes are not only about avoiding a past that is 'difficult' or 'uncomfortable', but also about remembering other things in its place – about constructing a self that is not only discontinuous in some ways, as all selves are, but also continuous in others. Such operations of remembering and forgetting are necessary aspects of cultivating a narrative with which one can live more or less happily in

Predappio because of the wider local context within which they occur, one in which injunctions to remember Fascism come most explicitly from the thousands of far-right visitors Predappio receives every year.

Conclusion

In a manner parallel to the ways in which High, Kelly, and Mair note that anthropologists and others are wont to assume that knowledge is always good and ignorance is always bad (High, Kelly & Mair 2012), here I have argued that we sometimes make similar assumptions about remembering and forgetting. Remembering, we may assume, must be ethical because of the duty it fulfils to those things and people remembered, and/or because of the beneficial effects it has on the self. Likewise we may assume that – like ignorance in respect of knowledge – forgetting is simply the absence or failure of memory, and perhaps even that it induces a fragmentation rather than coherence of subjecthood (as in the figure of the amnesiac in popular imaginaries).

Understanding forgetting as a technology of the self yields a potential answer to the problem of how to forget that goes beyond forgetting as failure or imposition. That is, if the staple that 'remembering one thing is forgetting another' is correct, the technologies of remembrance with which a number of ethical traditions are replete are *necessarily also* technologies of forgetting – and vice versa. We forget things by insistently remembering other things in their place, as Eco argues.

My argument has been that it is simplistic to frame forgetting as always a simple moral defect or passive process, one to be countered by active technologies of remembering. Insofar as they are necessarily selective such technologies are themselves also instruments of

forgetting, and sometimes, as here, they may be employed as such, useful for what they paper over as much as for what they bring back to mind. In other words, not only may forgetting be an active process, as Nietzsche and others have argued, but it may be the very same sort of process as active remembering.

Seeing this mutual imbrication of technologies of memory and forgetting in the pursuit of narratives of subjectivity reveals a set of alternative questions to those that ask simply about what has been forgotten and how successfully. It makes clear that in some cases – particularly perhaps those that sit against a background of conflict and difficult heritage – it is the crafted narrative that remembering and forgetting aim to create that is more important than what has been remembered or forgotten.

We have seen a number of different forms this can take throughout this paper. Mussolini's 'forgetful' political discontinuity is most obviously self-serving and performative, as evidenced by the arrest of his former socialist colleagues. In Ciaranfi's case, on the other hand, we have a much clearer example of the point made here: like the Sabarl funerary practices Battaglia describes (1992), Ciaranfi's communist burial aims at forgetting parts of his self in order to remember others. The parts remembered are continuous only in the absence of the parts forgotten. But it is impossible to say which process is primary. And contemporary attitudes to the past in Predappio are equally ambiguous: to narrate them as merely forgetful of what seems most striking to outsiders about the town is to ignore the fact that they involve memory too.

These issues tie into broader debates on memory in Italy, as Forlenza's work, among others, makes clear. As he describes, there were many reasons why forgetting, as 'a blessed act of oblivion', in Churchill's words, might have seemed attractive in post-war Italy (2018:173). What I have sought to make clear here is that such forgetting need not only work

through silence and absence: rather, successful forgetting (of one thing) is often manifested precisely in the presence of memory (of something else).

We can see comparable instances of this in other ethnographic cases: in some of the literature on post-soviet memory, for example. Bruce Grant points to the ways in which many of the expensive new monuments built by the state in Moscow in the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union generated an aesthetic of childlike innocence by depicting figures from fairy tales and folk stories, thus gesturing to what he calls 'a return to an age of simpler pasts and new beginnings' (2001: 335). Part of his point in doing so is to indicate that forgetting takes remembering – forgetting the Soviet Union means remembering (anew) a pre-communist national narrative. But of course, as in the examples described here, the point and interest of such practices is not only the 'negative' work of forgetting and erasing, which is in any case likely to be unsuccessful; the point is also what positive story emerges, and the place in it for various historical elements.

Framing conflicts over memory – such as those to be found in Italy around Fascism – as simple choices between remembering and forgetting is thus unlikely to be helpful or explanatory. As suggested by the note in the visitor's book at Mussolini's tomb that begins this paper, neofascists are just as likely as anyone else to think that 'remembering freely' is ethical, and that forgetfulness is a sin. Indeed, in a context in which memory ('nostalgia') is actively demanded in the service of neofascist politics, then forgetting may be a – complex and ambiguous – way of evading such demands, just as Passerini described 'popular and archaic cultural forms' as a 'complex and contradictory' means of eluding political control under Fascism: it is as much a mistake to deduce the presence of consent from the absence of memory as it was under Fascism to deduce it from the absence of political opposition (1987: 65). Understanding technologies of memorialization – both public and, as I have tried to

show here, individual – as necessarily also technologies of forgetting allows us to ask what is at stake in these twin processes, and what happens when they become blurred.

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