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The oblivion

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The oblivion – element of the cultural identity

The cultural identity is constructed around the elements kept in memory, but the configuration of the identity in time is given by the oblivion, which permanently acts on it. The knowledge of a person is accomplished both through the identification of the memorized elements and the sum and the character of the things which were forgotten. The oblivion is the cultural power conferring shape to the personal and collective identity and it has a double signification: the oblivion like an injury of the memory and the oblivion like the power of life. Along the memory, the oblivion assures the base of the identity's constructing process, the way in which we define ourselves as human beings, reporting permanently to the others, both to those who share common elements with us, and to those who are different.

1. The concept of oblivion

The human mind does not keep all the encountered events and information, many of our experiences vanishing in time. The interfering element is a complex process – the oblivion. In some limits this process is not just natural and normal, but also necessary. Attached to the memory and defined in reference with it, the oblivion is represented, generally, as a negative phenomenon. The positive face of the oblivion emerges by reporting it to the solicitations and the practical scopes specific to the human beings. The gradual and partial oblivion contributes to the balance of the mind system, to the dynamicity and the naturalness of the psychic life. In this way the memory has a selective character, kipping just certain information and details. The human brain gets rid of any information which is not necessary, in this way making place for a new category of information. In the absence of oblivion, learning is impossible. The oblivion is a positive phenomenon only

through its integration and manifestation in certain limits. Surpassing these limits, increasing the power and the influence of the oblivion means its transformation in a negative element destroying any effort of memory. Caught in the repetition loop, like Sisyphus, the memory needs to recommence again and again its efforts.

What is the oblivion? It is the lost of the remembrance, its cancellation; the oblivion is not opposed to the memory, but often it completes it, without shading it. Out of the dynamic and functional relation between memory and oblivion, the last one has an important function in the mind health and the psychic balance.

Two theories of oblivion tried to explain the oblivion process: the passive theory and the active theory. The passive theory identifies the cause of oblivion in the erase of the mnesic traces. Some knowledge deteriorates in time and disappears in the absence of exercises. The active theory increases the importance of the elements left aside by the passive theory, especially the dynamicity of the psychic life. The information is not stocked and kept like in an old archive; the human being has the capacity to use the experience, to unite the knowledge that he has. In the context of the active oblivion the interference theory imposed, explaining the oblivion through the negative effects of the interacting information. First, we consider that some memory marks *are shading off* or are disintegrating, like Alan Baddeley asserted, just like a poster exposed to the sun and the rain, which is gradually fading, until it becomes illegible. The interference theory is increasing the function of the new learnt elements which can lead to the disintegration of the other memory marks or to their passing into the second place. The oblivion is caused by the interferences of the new elements. In this context, two types of interferences can be distinguished: the retroactive type – the first element is weakly detained because of the influence of the second element, and the proactive one – when the previously learnt information has a negative influence, decreasing the memory of the new information. These two types of interferences are connected to some factors: the similarity of the information, the degree of the memorization, the complexity of the information etc. The researches pointed out that the time is not so important in the process of the oblivion, but rather the later interfering events. The more the informational material learnt in time is similar with the initial one, the more the oblivion process is increasing. In the same time, the researches revealed that this theory did not give enough importance to the fundamental processes, like the

excitation and the inhibition, and their manifestation forms. The mechanism which best explained the oblivion is the inhibition, process caused by the diminution of the activity state of the cortical cells. For the best understanding of the oblivion process as perceived in psychology, it is necessary to remind the theory of the justified oblivion, which has its origin in the conceptions of Sigmund Freud. He believed that people forget the information associated with the unpleasant events, those getting into the unconscious through the process of repression or upsetting.

The researches of the German psychologist Herman Ebbinghaus show that the oblivion is quicker after the information is acquired, but it decreases gradually. Excepting the breaking-up of the memory traces, they become stronger as they get older. The memory of some very old events is based on their reactualisation in some different moments in time, on their repetition. The present interferes in the past. This is the reason why we can not remember the events as they happened, but only their reconstruction. The regular reactualisation, as in comemorations and religious festivals, is efficient for keeping the information both in the individual memory, and also in the collective one, for a long time.

In the history of philosophy, the oblivion is sometimes just a second phenomenon, which accompanies the memory and even deters it from its actions. Through the theory of anamnesis, the Greek philosopher Plato has clearly delimited the oblivion problem. The oblivion is just a passing state, the remembrance being anytime possible, as the knowledge of the Mnemon's slave prove. This oblivion does not report to life, but to the things sawed in the time during the trip between the Ideas. It is not exactly oblivion, but only sedimentation, caused by the sensitive part over the information kept by the spirit when it has contemplated the Ideas, a covering of this information. The origin of the oblivion is unknown, its appearance is connected to the vice and it appears before the fall from the celestial world. In Plato we remark the existence of two types of oblivion: a celestial one and an earthly one.

In the Latin language the corresponding word for the process of oblivion is *oblivisci*, verb which has a passive form and an active meaning. These forms best define the intermediate position of the oblivion, between the activity and the passivity, the oblivion as a result of the absence of the information updating, and the oblivion as an active erasure of it. Making a detailed analysis of the oblivion, Harald Weinrich remarks its metaphors, which recall of the empty and abandoned zones.

These are characterized by the sand dispersed by the wind that covers the things fallen into oblivion. A forgotten object or event can be *buried* and then covered by *the oblivion grass*. Another metaphor is that of the „precipice” of the memory, where things fall into oblivion. We remark a connection between the oblivion and the sleep. This connection, the wish to sleep when we want to escape, to forget an absurd and an oppressive world, is known in psychology as a sign of the depressive state. By contrast, the impossibility to forget is equivalent to the sleeplessness. Another metaphor was constructed around the writing instruments, the best known image from Plato and Aristotle being the waxen slates used for writing or taking notes. Erasing their content is equivalent to the oblivion. The things themselves are printed in our souls in a mixture of waxen, a gift from Mnemosyne. The more important and prevalent image of the oblivion appears in the Greek mythology. Lethe is a feminine goddess, born in the family of The Night (Nyx, Nox), Discordia (Eris, Discordia) being her mother. Before all other meanings, Lethe is a name for a river in Inferno which offers oblivion for the souls of the dead. Its water represents the oblivion, so the oblivion is connected to a liquid; we remark the symbol of a liquefying reality which is lost, as we can see in Salvador Dali’s paintings. The flowing clocks he painted represent the intervention of oblivion, the abolition, the destruction, the transformation of the reality, the fusion of this under the power of the oblivion.

In the Greek mythology the river of the oblivion is situated near the Elysian Fields, offering to the people the oblivion of the previous life. The privation of this source of oblivion is connected to the eternal pain. Analyzing the effects of the oblivion, Harald Weinrich remarked the most powerful drug of the oblivion, the love, which appears along the attempts of the Greek hero Ulysses. The love brings the oblivion of the world, of the reality, the self oblivion, therefore the oblivion of the past and the assumption of a new identity, never believed to be possible. Through love the person reconstructs itself, offering to the loved one an image of self which often does not correspond to the reality, as that the person in love perceives twisted things. The love is most of the time equivalent to the self reconstruction, but also to the reconstruction of the other.

An art of the oblivion (*ars obliviones*) was added to an art of the memory (*ars memoriae*), a technique of oblivion to a technique of memorization. The systematic oblivion, as an art of oblivion, is used by

René Descartes in the context of his philosophical method, the systematic oblivion of the things we learn; the doubt is followed by the renunciation of the learnt information, and every renunciation involves a graduated oblivion. The French philosopher emphasizes the necessity of an oblivion strategy, a volunteer, methodic oblivion of the information we learnt in our life.

A different approach of the oblivion belongs to the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. The capacity to forget, the aptitude to feel in a non-historical way, is the necessary condition for any happiness, because all the actions require the oblivion, this becoming the active force of life. The oblivion is opposed to the excess of historicism, to the historical obduracy and for this reason it allows us to orientate toward the future. The modern people, harshly criticized by Nietzsche, are incapable to forget.

An approach which completes the ideas presented here is that stated by the psychology, especially by Sigmund Freud. The oblivion was studied as a symptom in the context of “the missing acts” (loss, slips of the memory), the psychic manifestations based on the oblivion. “The missing acts” are extremely rare phenomena and they happen when a person pronounces or writes something else than he/she wants (*the slip of the memory*), when he/she reads another word than the word which is written (*false lecture*) or when he/she hears something else than what he/she is told. Beside these, other phenomena based on *the momentary oblivion* and *the cases of lost*, named amnesias, are considered. Sigmund Freud connects the oblivion to the feelings which we have about a forgotten person, thing or event. The reason on which the oblivion is based can be the displeasure, the disgust, the pain caused, and this determines the upsetting. The oblivion of the unpleasant elements is considered as a source of psychic diseases, because the hung-up elements are not erased, eliminated, but they continue to exercise pressures on the psychic. These elements can be called “wrongly forgotten” both because they represent an unsuccessful oblivion, which does not offer the expected results – the silence and the psychic balance – and because their erasure from the memory might be an improper measure. The hung-up elements, therefore forgotten in the conscious plan, must be primarily remembered and then forgotten. If in the primarily stage we talk about a wrong oblivion, in this case the oblivion is a good decision, the oblivion as cure. In psychology the art of the oblivion is based on the art of the memory, which becomes an accessory of the first. Both Nietzsche and

Freud have underlined in their works the importance of the oblivion for the health of the people and culture.

The problem of the writing activity and the diary as method of memorizing and oblivion is approached by Jacques Le Rider in his books *The Viennese diaries*. The double value of the written word refers to remembrance and oblivion. Through any form of writing activity (personal diary, notes), we get rid of the experiences and feelings causing restlessness to ourselves. To write a diary means to keep a certain distance from the experienced things, these going from the subjectivity plan into the objectivity one, on the piece of paper. The desire to forget may be invoked even directly, as Immanuel Kant wrote, referring to his ex-servant Lampe and the desire of forgetting his name.

In a certain way, the modernity leaves aside the problem of the art of the oblivion, being preoccupied by the interdiction of the oblivion and by the dangers that the oblivion submits us to. As Arthur Schopenhauer underlined, every important lived event must be found in the mind of the subject, and even the interruption of the remembrances is a very clear sign of a psychic problem; the oblivion is the creative force of life, which assures the liberation from the mistakes and the prejudices of the past.

2. The oblivion forms

The criteria used to distinguish the different types of oblivion were established by examining the degree of the oblivion's installation, the nature of the things affected by the oblivion, the place and the context of the oblivion, as well as the identity projections or the oblivion figures, as Marc Augé named them. Concomitantly, the distinction between the individual oblivion, the oblivion which affects the person as an independent entity and the collective oblivion, which affects the collective conscience, was underlined.

At the level of the human psychic, three forms of oblivion are distinguished, each of them based on other criterion. Starting from *the extension of the oblivion* – the degree in which the oblivion affects the information, we consider the first form of the oblivion as *the total oblivion*, defined like the erasure, the total loss of the memorized information. This process involves the impossibility to recall the forgotten information. The criticism of this type of oblivion is based on the fact that we rarely found it in normal cases; the total oblivion is more specific

to the pathologic. Like the memory, the oblivion is integrated in normality if we accept there is no one able to keep in memory absolutely all the events, all the information or to forget absolutely everything, too. For this reason this form of the oblivion is recognized just in a fragmentary way, like the possibility to forget everything connected to a special aspect of the reality: event, person, temporally fragment.

The second form of the oblivion refers to the accuracy and the fidelity of the description of the accumulated information. We must compare the description with the initial information and in this way we obtain the degree in which the oblivion interfered in the process of the recognition and the reproduction of the learnt information. The oblivion is the cause for the partial recognition, even the false recognition; this is the reason why we name it „*the oblivion as disturbance*”.

The reminiscence is the name of the third form of the oblivion, based on a *temporally criterion*. This form of oblivion is a momentary one; it takes place just for a period of time, it is followed by the remembrance and there are certain factors acting upon it, as the interest accorded to the forgotten information, the conditions of the information receptivity, the motivation of the subject, the repetition of the knowledge. Every case in which these forms of the oblivion interfere, we forget different elements: the details which become insignificant as the time pass by, the irrelevant information, but also the painful one, which causes anxiety, the information which is not used etc.

The selectivity of the information, specific to the memory, but also to the oblivion, imposes the distinction between *the negative oblivion* and *the functional oblivion*. The negative oblivion, defined as the absence of the remembrance, is caused by different aspects of the memorization and the recollection: the insufficient fixation of the information, the impossibility to remember and recognize our memories. The functional oblivion is based on the information sorting, the selective character being caused by personal motifs. Both types of oblivion are connected to the upsetting, which has the function of protecting us from our unconscious desires, thoughts and especially from the unpleasant remembrances. In order to keep a positive image of ourselves and our identity, it is necessary “to forget” the events and thoughts which are contrary to the personal and social rules. Not only the things we remember are important to our identity, but also the things we chose to forget, both showing who we are. The theory of the motivated oblivion refers to the existence of the oblivion caused by the unpleasant

remembrances, which are sent to the unconscious plan. The upsetting can be analyzed alongside the selection of the information; in this way we detach it from the pathologic and we accept the importance of the upsetting in the process of preserving the remembrances, which confer value and meaning to life and to the personal and collective identity.

The upsetting can also manifest itself at the level of the collective identity and memory when a whole generation or community who had some experiences, reject the reality, deny the past events, accept “the abduction of the eye” to second events, because of the incapacity to look in the face the reality and because of the incapacity to integrate and assimilate the reality in their identity. In this context it is more adequate to distinguish between *the individual, personal oblivion* and *the collective oblivion*. The function of the collective oblivion is recognized even in the formation of a people, the creation of a nation.

In his book *Les formes de l'oubli* Marc Augé emphasizes the necessity of the oblivion both for the person and for the society. Beginning with the memory of the past, the waiting for the future and the attention in the present, considered the devices for thinking the time in most of the African myths, but also reminding us of Saint Augustine's considerations about the time, Marc Augé identifies three figures or forms of oblivion. Each form of oblivion acts in a time component, seen as an axis which embraces the past, the present and the future, and each form is capable to underline the significances of the time and to offer a personal interpretation of time. The oblivion touches one moment in time or another, embracing that particular information which, if forgotten, allows the establishment of a continuity of the personal identity.

The first figure of the oblivion is named *the return* and it establishes a connection to the distant past, trying to retrieve it. In this case, the oblivion acts on the present and the near past, making an abeyance of the present because of the desire to stop the influence of the present on the mind and the opening toward the past. *The abeyance* is the name of the second figure of the oblivion. It includes the past, but also the future, which is identified as the return of the past; in this way the progress as formation does not exist. This oblivion wants to recapture the present, to emphasize the present by temporary cutting it from the past and the future. The present has a personal nature and it becomes a separated entity due to the oblivion of the past and the future. The final figure of the oblivion emphasizes the oblivion of the past in order to

value the future. It is named *the beginning* because of its radical character and in order to prevent any possible confusion between this and the repetition. The oblivion of the past opens the perspective of the future when everything is possible. The analysis of the individual life can show the presence of the three figures of oblivion and the fact that we meet them both at the individual level and at the collective one.

Used as criterion for analyzing the oblivion, the space in which the oblivion acts allows us to recognize *the public oblivion* and *the private oblivion*. The first is visible in the amnesty and in the legal prescriptions. The public oblivion is met in the Christianity forgiveness, the forgiveness in a community, so it can be named collective forgiveness.

Every form of oblivion represents a possible direction for an analysis of the oblivion function in the process of cultural identity formation and for revealing the complexity of the oblivion as the active power of the cultural identity. We present in the following table the main forms of oblivion.

Criterion	Forms	Observations
<i>The extension of the oblivion</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>the total oblivion</i> - „<i>the oblivion as disturbance</i>” - <i>the reminiscence</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the intervention of the temporal criterion
<i>The selectivity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>the negative oblivion</i> - <i>the functional oblivion</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - defined as the absence of the remembrance - based on the selective character
<i>The subject of the oblivion</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>the individual oblivion</i> - <i>the collective oblivion</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the figures of the oblivion: <i>the return, the abeyance, the beginning</i> - the danger of its manipulation
<i>The space where the oblivion operates</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>the private oblivion</i> - <i>the public oblivion</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the bond between this and the forgiveness

3. The oblivion diseases

The oblivion is an important element which assures the health of the personal mind and society, the oblivion of the past events is the base of the existential equilibrium. Friedrich Nietzsche established that the happiness can not be found in the absence of the oblivion and he offered an extreme example: a man who can not forget anything and who is condemned to see just change, a permanent one. This person suffers by one of the oblivion's diseases. Why do we name it disease? We name disease any presence or absence of the oblivion which causes the psychic lacks of balance, and which puts into danger the health of the person or collectivity. Before we start the analysis of the oblivion diseases, we must remember the connection between the oblivion and the pathologic.

First we distinguish *the impossibility to forget*, the general impossibility which includes all the details and the *impossibility to forget some events*, the impossibility which stays at the base of *the obsession*. This is a disorder of the will, which includes the fixed ideas, the images or the ideas which return again and again in the conscious. Pathologically, the obsession is a mental trouble which is characterized by the presence of the fixed idea which is imposed to the conscious and determines an anxiety sensation. The base of the obsession is the impossibility to forget some elements which periodically return in mind and monopoly all the attention of the subject. Although in the history of culture we may find in some works the presence of obsessive ideas and problems solved due to these obsessive ideas, we must remember that at the unconscious level these obsessions can provoke serious problems. The oblivion has an important role in the elimination and the liberation from some ideas and experiences which became obsessive.

The impossibility to forget any event and detail has consequences which surpass the normality. The accumulation of all the information and different details, leads to the overstressing of the mind, the transformation of this in a prison of the spirit and time, and to the impossibility to form any concepts. In the story *Funes or the memory* the writer Jorge Luis Borges develops the idea that the processes of the mind impose the oblivion of the differences and the possibility or the capacity to generalize and to abstract. After an accident, the character created by Borges – Funes – has an extraordinary memory, overstressed by the details. He remembers any detail and his memory, as he said, is “a mass

of garbage”. The existence in the absence of the oblivion means to get stuck in the sterile universe of the details, universe in which the creation is impossible. This sterility is showed and analyzed on the cultural level by Friedrich Nietzsche, who criticized the excess of history. The life needs oblivion because it is impossible to live in its absence, without the liberation from the elements of the past, which shorten the creative capacity of the people. In this way, the excess of history is equivalent to the impossibility to forget and to establish the equilibrium between the memory and the oblivion. The capacity to act is based on the oblivion and through the oblivion the danger for any person to become a simple storage of the past is eliminated.

In the context of the relation between the oblivion and the history, remembering the consequences of the oblivion for the social life, we must accept the tendency of the political forces toward *history manipulation*, the use of the oblivion as a weapon in the hands of the social-political interests. This category of phenomena is integrated in the field of the oblivion diseases because the consequences of all the influences which disturb the equilibrium between memory and oblivion are cultural or identity diseases. The social field is familiar with the oblivion diseases both at the individual and the collective level, caused by the application of some strategies of the oblivion which are strongly connected with the identity ones. The effect of the self manipulation of the oblivion, which does not need outside actors, is the narration of the self identity and life, but this identity is constructed through the oblivion of some events or things and through the lost of the attention regarding the important elements which were forgotten. In this case we speak about the selective character of the oblivion, but also about the possibility to manipulate the oblivion in a social context. The manipulation of the oblivion can be seen as a voluntary oblivion, as established in a study presented by Valérie Haas as a result of a research in Vichy, France. The oblivion of the time when the French government was leading from Vichy, the denial of the natives to talk about that period, their silence, is seen as an oblivion which has a “soothing function”.

The exterior manipulation is made by the actors of the political stage, who construct in this way the necessary context for their domination, modifying the past after their desires. The present and its actors decide the selectivity of the oblivion and they follow their proper necessities.

We may also present *the non-oblivion*, as the impossibility to forget and especially to forgive. The connection between the oblivion and the forgiveness is very complex and it includes some morality problems. We present here just the necessity of the oblivion staying at the base of the forgiveness; this necessity is also found in Christianity, where the oblivion and the forgiveness are sustaining each other. At the social level, the collective forgiveness is based on the manipulated oblivion; the juridical form which expresses the forgiveness is the free pardon, the amnesty. These are decided by the political and the social interests and they have as a starting point a “false oblivion”, named so because the desire to forget and the forms in which the oblivion is manifested are activated by the needs of the present. In the same time there is the danger of an *excess of oblivion*, caused by the systematic application of the oblivion on the elements which define our identity and by assuming the foreign elements, which seem to correspond better to the present needs. This form of manifestation is named crisis of identity, individual or collective. The oblivion as the abandon of the elements of the past and its consequences, elements which compose otherwise the identity of a person, a people or an ethnical community, means the manipulation of the self identity in order to construct a new one, more adequate to the necessities of the present.

As stated before, alongside the oblivion as the impossibility to forget any event, there is a type of oblivion referring to just some elements, an impossibility to forget seen at the people who suffered traumatic experiences. We name the cure of this oblivion disease *the curer oblivion*. The human mind is centered on the shocking events; the attention is caught just by the traumatic episodes, which take colossal proportions in the detriment of other remembrances. The curer oblivion does not necessarily require erasing those remembrances, but especially moving the accent on the other information and constructing the identity on the valuable elements, not on the problematic ones. The incapacity to forget maintains the mind and the soul in an eternal pain, the pain of the bad thing happened.

The problem of the oblivion started to be of interest once the memory was not in the centre of the human education and the oblivion was not seen as a second effect of the memory anymore. The abandon of the educational concept as an art of the memory, especially a memorization one, opened the field of a new dynamic perspective of the human mind, in which the oblivion keeps a valuable function, assuring

both the health of the human beings and of the culture. In this way the oblivion is recognized as very important in the process of construction of our cultural identity.

The context in which we analyze the oblivion must be a cultural one, the one which offers us the important references about the process of the identity elaboration, the way of defining our identity and reporting us to the Other, seen both as the Different and as the Same. The elaboration of the identity has as starting point the different elements, but also the existent resemblances, the memory, but also the oblivion. The identity reclaims us to impose the proper coordinates which distinguish the person, the people, but also to recognize the common elements. The oblivion imposes itself both to the different things – we are just like the other people who share with us the collective memory and identity – but also to the identical things – we are unique and we construct our identity through the opposition with the other, often forgetting what connects us as people, ethnical community, humanity.

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