Francis O’Gorman’s
*Forgetfulness: Making the Modern Culture of Amnesia* (2017)

Review

NICK L AVERY

At the start of *Forgetfulness: Making the Modern Culture of Amnesia*, Francis O’Gorman makes the point that “[m]odern memory science advises its audiences that much of what we remember is […] predicated on forgetting. We think we are remembering but actually we are selecting” (2). Furthermore, “recollections change. […] ‘memory’ is not static but dynamic” (3). O’Gorman cites one proponent of such modern memory science, Charles Fernyhough, whose *Pieces of Light: How the New Science of Memory Illuminates the Stories We Tell about Our Pasts* (2012) carries in its title a shorthand for an emerging orthodoxy. Memory is, according to Fernyhough, a “great storyteller” (21). This metaphor recurs in other such popular scientific texts, and in the various cultural commentaries which mine them as sources of scientific authority. Any description of memory, or claim about the mind in general, is at least partly metaphorical. We are still not in a position to make claims about the physical structure of the mind. Fernyhough explains that he has adopted the metaphor of memory as a storyteller, or story, as an alternative to existing descriptions of memory in terms
of “physical things”, which are “guaranteed to mislead” (6). O’Gorman’s book implicitly makes the case that the storyteller metaphor is just as misleading.

The storyteller metaphor depicts an individual whose conscious experience is determined almost entirely by the needs of the present. O’Gorman argues that “[t]he present, in its so-called ‘wholeness’ is in essence and in principle inconclusive […] by its very nature it demands continuation, it moves into the future, and the more actively and consciously it moves into the future the more tangible and indispensable its inconclusiveness becomes” (30). His argument in this book is that ‘when the present becomes the center of human orientation in time and in the world, time and world lose their completedness as a whole as well as in each of their parts.’ (30). O’Gorman’s approach to this problem shows both the effectiveness and weakness of the storyteller metaphor. In attempting to demonstrate the existence of a modern culture of forgetting, he must survey the whole of the complexity of contemporary life in relation to a simple conceit. After two chapters in which he considers the relation between culture and forgetting in Ancient Greece and Rome and at the beginning of European modernity in terms of the relation between time, place, and narrative, O’Gorman races through an interlinked series of contemporary debates, touching on globalized capitalism, digital technology, Alzheimer’s, stroke narratives, autism, postmodernism, identity politics, assessment criteria in the modern university, migration, nature writing, ‘British’ identity, multiculturalism, Brexit. These are familiar topics, yet O’Gorman’s skill in shifting between them, juxtaposing them with older ideas and texts and offering contentious arguments makes his survey worthwhile. The book justifies the claim that all of them are indicative of a contemporary trend that can be summed up under the concept of a culture of amnesia, but another strength lies in the book’s simultaneous avowal of their complexity.

O’Gorman’s own proposed metaphor for contemporary memory is the joke. The joke is oriented towards the future, awaiting a conclusion which will make sense of what has come before. In disregarding the significance of the past in favour of a future that never arrives, ‘[c]ontemporary habits of mind are, in these terms, a gag without a last line, a gag without a gag’ (85). This is how Forgetfulness itself should be read. Its title and brevity promise an easy summary of a whole culture. The fact that the book skips from subject to subject and argument to argument without ever delivering its punchline makes the point that this is not the correct approach.
Francis O’Gorman’s *Forgetfulness: Making the Modern Culture of Amnesia* was published by Bloomsbury in 2017.