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The Art of Forgetting: On Memory, Imagination, and Emotion in the Age of Posthumanism

Abstract: This paper aims to explore the implications of the ongoing evolution of science and technology on the human subject's relationship with temporality. How are categories such as imagination, memory, and emotion redefined in this new context? To what extent do recent reconfigurations challenge a set of values long considered essential to our species? These are just a few of the questions we will reflect upon, starting from *Orbital*, Samantha Harvey's 2023 novel. Our reading will focus on the parabolic dimension of this poetic, unsettling, and profound work that manages to outline a radically different perspective on the human individual's relationship with our planet. In this connection, we can identify compelling parallels with two novels published several decades ago in the Eastern European literary space: *Solaris* by Stanisław Lem (1961) and *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* by Chinghiz Aitmatov (1980). All three works essentially go beyond the conventions of science fiction, imagining strange parables of the human condition within non-human contexts.
Keywords: Memory/ Forgetting; Emotion; Posthumanism; Chinghiz Aitmatov; Samantha Harvey, Stanisław Lem.

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Memory, Forgetting and Identity in Post-Anthropocentric Context

Ars oblivionalis is a phrase Umberto Eco brought back into focus some time ago to underscore the limits of human control over the past. In a study devoted to this subject[1], the semiotician argues that, in his view, it is not entirely appropriate to speak of an "art of forgetting", for the simple reason that forgetting is, in essence, an involuntary and passive process. In other words, *ars oblivionalis* is a paradox – a contradiction in terms – since forgetting cannot be actively controlled or induced. Eco maintains that, although we may attempt to ignore or avoid certain memories, the act of truly forgetting is unconscious. On the other hand, it is no longer a secret that the dialectic implied by the memory/forgetting binary is inseparable from the question of identity. In the posthumanist era, as we know, identity no longer presents itself as a natural given defined by immutable criteria – in other words, it is no longer fixed once and for all. Similarly, memory is no longer entirely under the control of the human subject

and its characteristics as a voluntary and active process are relativized.

Under such circumstances, not only personal (individual) memory but even collective memory can be distorted, mediated, rewritten, and so on – ultimately coming to be assimilated to (softer or harder) forms of forgetting. Moreover, this condition cannot be separated from another significant shift that has occurred recently in the post-anthropocentric context, namely something that Rosi Braidotti calls the process of "*dis-identification*"[2], which is largely synonymous with *defamiliarization*. In short, this is said to entail a radical reconfiguration of familiar patterns of thought, perception, and representation, which aims to facilitate the repositioning of the human subject in relation to otherness and, by way of compensation, to open the path to creative alternatives.

Among the (not entirely detrimental) consequences of this shift is the revaluation of categories long considered secondary, such as imagination, corporality, and affect. Far from being negatively connoted, these now come to be regarded as *sui generis* instruments of knowledge – complementary, rather than opposed, to rationality. Among the theorists who have fervently advocated for this re-hierarchization are Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, who state unequivocally in the introduction to their 1999 study on reinterpretations of Spinoza's philosophy: "The body, imagination and affect do not, in themselves, represent limits of reason and knowledge. In fact, they are proper *objects* of reflection through which we come to develop our powers of reason and increase our knowledge"[3].

Under the Sign of Zero Gravity

In this context, *Orbital*, Samantha Harvey's 2023 novel, offers an unusual and strikingly contemporary perspective on the subtle interplay between memory, emotion, and the perception of immediate reality, choosing outer space as the "setting" for its narrative – a backdrop designed to radically shift our view of the human condition. More specifically, the action unfolds aboard the International Space Station, and the characters are six astronauts (four men and two women) from different countries: a Japanese woman, an Englishwoman, an American, two Russian cosmonauts, and an Italian. The narrative is divided into sixteen chapters, each corresponding to a ninety-minute orbit. The astronauts are "disintegrated" from terrestrial (human) temporality and subjected to a distorted perception of time:

> They feel space trying to rid them of the notion of days. It says: what's a day? They insist it's twenty-four hours and ground crews keep telling them so, but it takes their twenty-four hours and throws sixteen days and nights at them in return. They cling to their twenty-four-hour clock because it's all the feeble little time-bound body knows – sleep and bowels and all that is leashed to it. But the mind goes free within the first week. The mind is in a dayless freak zone, surfing earth's hurtling horizon[4].

The structure of the novel is remarkably ingenious, reflecting the circularity of orbital motion. The chapter titles are repetitive, intentionally monotonous, and the absence of a conventional plot is

compensated by the lyrical tension engendered by the sequences – apparently arranged to mimic the effect of zero gravity – which oscillate between introspection and cosmic-scale observation. The result is a sophisticated construction that systematically undermines its own coherence, relying on an elastic sense of time, which is freed from conventional markers and apt to produce spectacular shifts in perspective. At the same time, each of the six astronauts carries with them flashbacks and bits of memories: the death of Chie's mother, crisis situations in the family of one of the Russian cosmonauts, and Pietro's recollections of an exotic vacation in the Philippines. These memories not only succeed in giving each character a distinct individuality, but they also create a zoom-in effect which casts a revelatory light on fragments of life back on Earth. One might say that memory becomes the connection which allows the astronauts, despite their isolation, to remain human and unique – even as they contemplate, with otherworldly detachment, their own past losses, defeats, illusions, or failures.

Within the confined space of the module, memories succeed in creating distinct inner landscapes, which find their external counterpart in the ingenious perspective games devised by the author through the constant shifting of the frame of reference. In this way, banal or seemingly insignificant realities are cast in a new light – such as in the description of this surreal spectacle: the succession of continents that are said to "run into each other like overgrown gardens"[5].

> The night is over there. Off to the east, where the horizon is blurring. Not here yet but they're tracking closer. The Pacific below, and falling away in a warped curve are the snow-dusted peaks of the Sierra Nevada, and if you look through a zoom lens you'd see, far off, San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego imprinted on a landmass that's imprinted on sea, a coastline drawn in sharp-tipped white, a greyish hue of singed shrubland. The fertile coastal plains of the Baja California. Central America scrawny neck. Then they too warp away [...] Forty minutes have passed since dawn and sidling in now from the east is the shadow of night. It seems not much, just a portside smudge. Blue has turned purple but that's about it. Green has turned purple, white has turned purple, America has turned purple, or what's left of it anyway. No, America has gone. Night has unravelled the earth's blue-green weave. The equator is crossed again from north to south and the moon is dusky and one degree fatter. Suddenly now, as if displeased, the Terminator swipes daylight off the face of the earth and the stars burst up like snowdrops from God knows where. In their sleep the crew feel the abrupt weight of night – someone has turned off that great bulb of a planet[6].

Such descriptions of our planet viewed from space (generating a kind of *overview effect*[7]) alternate with sequences in which the author employs a zoom-in technique to cast a revelatory light on fragments of life on Earth that appear banal or insignificant. A compelling example of this latter approach is found in the chapter titled *Orbit three, descending*, where we witness the

mental reconstruction of a tableau of everyday Japanese life unfolding in the mind of Chie, the Japanese astronaut, as she circles the Earth. It begins with infinitesimal details: sliding paper doors, sun-faded tatami-covered floors, a butterfly perched on the kitchen sink faucet, a spider nestled inside a slipper. Gradually, the reader realizes that this is an account of her parents' final years, reconstructed fragmentarily and selectively, at times accelerated, at times in slow motion, consisting of a stream of memories and nostalgic reveries, projected from the vastness of the cosmos during a pivotal moment in Chie's life: hearing the news of her mother's death. Interestingly, as the human subject sinks deeper into this flux of disparate images – debris of memory, bits of thought and recollection – each detail begins to acquire an overwhelming emotional resonance, one that the distant gaze from outer space only serves to amplify, painfully so.

In Nell's life – the British astronaut, introspective and driven by a thirst for knowledge – the tragic end of the Challenger crew marked a turning point, compelling her to carry forward the daring mission they had begun. Passionate about meteorology and Earth's ecosystems, Nell is deeply alarmed by humanity's harmful impact on the planet, and she displays a sharp sense of responsibility when it comes to environmental protection and the duty owed to future generations. In a conversation with Shaun, she recalls the decisive moment from her childhood when, under the weight of grief and overwhelming fear, she came to the realisation that nothing mattered more to her than continuing what the seven Challenger astronauts had started:

> It wasn't the moonlandings, it was *Challenger*. I realised space is real, space flight is real, a thing real people do, die doing. Real people, like me, could actually do it, and if I died doing it that would be OK, I could die that way. And then it stopped being a dream and became a – a target. A goal. I became obsessively interested in the astronauts who have died. And so I guess that's when it started[8].

Roman, one of the two Russian cosmonauts, also revisits moments from his childhood, attempting to catalogue the aspirations, ambitions, and illusions that paved his path toward space. Meanwhile, Shaun – the American astronaut and the only member of the crew with religious convictions – reflects on the meaning of life in outer space, on humanity's place within this vast equation, and most often, on what he perceives as mankind's greedy desire for space, which, in his eyes, amounts to a form of *hubris*. His faith is both tested and affirmed in this new, non-terrestrial yet human context, and the questions he poses bring into relief and amplify the novel's overarching themes: "Why would you do this? Trying to live where you can never thrive? Trying to go where the universe doesn't want you when there's a perfectly good earth just there that does"[9].

A profound meditation on humanity's position in the universe, *Orbital* explores a range of themes that resonate deeply with the challenges of our time – such as isolation, the fragility of life and the planet, spiritual searching, the hubris of knowledge, the temptation of extraterrestrial exploration, the limits of scientific and technological progress, and the danger of

forgetting, born from the dissolution of time in the vastness of space. Regarding the consequences of this last aspect, it is striking that the departure from terrestrial, human temporality becomes the primary source of indeterminacy, generating a form of expressiveness no less powerful than that of poetry. On one hand, we witness the disintegration of conventional temporal markers – days and nights merge into a continuous flow – while on the other, bold visionary scenarios unfold in which the fleeting moment and eternity become indistinguishable from each other, echoing the mystic intensity of the great Romantic poets' visions.

> One day in the next five hundred billion years, while the probes complete one full circuit of the Milky Way, maybe they'll stumble upon intelligent life. In forty thousand years or so, when the two probes sail close enough to a planetary system, maybe just maybe one of these planets will be home to some life form which will spy the probe with whatever it has that passes for eyes, stay its telescope, retrieve the derelict fuel-less old probe with whatever it has that passes for curiosity, lower the stylus (supplied) to the record with whatever it has that passes for digits, and set free the dadada-daa of Beethoven's Fifth […] When they hear on the phonograph a recording of rapid firecracker drills and bursts, will they know that these sounds denote brainwaves? Will they ever infer that over forty thousand years before in a solar system unknown a woman was rigged to EEG and her thoughts recorded? Could they know to work backwards from the abstract sounds and translate them once more in brainwaves and could they know from these brainwaves the kind of thoughts the woman was having? Could they see into a human's mind? Could they know she was a young woman in love? […] All of these thoughts sound like a pulsar. They're a rapid breathless beating percussion. What chance that any such life form will ever discover it, this golden disc, much less have any way of playing it, much less decode what the brainwaves mean? An infinitesimaly small chance. Not a chance. But all the same the disc and its recordings will wonder, trapped for eternity, around the Milky Way. In five billion years when the earth is long dead, it'll be a love song that outlives spent suns. The sound signature of a love-flooded brain, passing through the Oort Cloud, through solar systems, past hurtling meteorites, into the gravitational pull of stars that don't exist yet[10].

Designed to relativise the human perspective, cosmic space evokes contradictory emotions and experiences. Indeed, the crew members oscillate constantly between heart-wrenching nostalgia – yearning for the simplest, most natural gestures, for basic emotions and familiar objects from home – and a resigned acceptance of the prospect of annihilation, of the dissolution of all traces into an indifferent cosmos. This tension gives rise to revelatory scenarios, such as the previously quoted one, in which, billions of years into the future, a hypothetical intelligence encounters the indecipherable remnants of a long-extinct humanity. What emerges is a profound

sense of the fragility of the human condition, coupled with a resigned acceptance of the somber possibility of vanishing without leaving any decipherable trace in the universe. In this dystopian vision, the only consolation available to the individual and to humankind lies in mastering the "art of forgetting" – a melancholic prelude to the erasure of traces and the dispersal of echoes.

Memory, Hubris and Forgetting in Stanisław Lem's *Solaris*

Although published during a period when posthumanist concepts were not yet widely circulated, Stanisław Lem's *Solaris* engages with a set of concerns strikingly similar to those explored in Samantha Harvey's novel. The action unfolds in an unspecified future on a distant planet that, for decades, had captivated researchers across various disciplines due to the inexplicable phenomena occurring there. Entirely covered by the waters of a strange ocean, the planet *Solaris* had remained an indecipherable enigma since its discovery, precisely because of this aquatic expanse – an entity capable of replicating matter. Initially, it was believed that its defining feature lay in its ability to generate massive solid structures, which vanished as suddenly as they appeared, defying any scientific explanation. Gradually, researchers discerned a pattern in the generation of these structures – when they reappeared, they replicated earlier forms with slight variations – leading to the hypothesis that the ocean might be a form of intelligent life.

To facilitate the study of these phenomena, a space station was launched into orbit around *Solaris*, serving as a forward base for numerous scientific expeditions dispatched from Earth. Despite these efforts and the vast scientific literature accumulated over time, the phenomena on *Solaris* remained fundamentally inexplicable. Interest in the orbital station began to wane, even as the increasingly elaborate anomalies produced by the planetary ocean continued unabated. Eventually, the command center on Earth decided to send one final researcher – psychologist Kris Kelvin – to the nearly deserted station, where only three seasoned scientists remained: Snaut, Sartorius, and Gibarian. Kelvin's mission was essentially to assess the crew's capacity to continue their research, thereby enabling the making of an informed decision regarding the station's future.

Lem's novel opens with Kris Kelvin's arrival at the station on Solaris, where a disconcerting disorder reigns. The researchers themselves appear mentally unsettled – Snaut is visibly frightened by Kelvin's presence, while the other two scientists are nowhere to be found. As the narrative progresses, Kelvin gradually discovers that all of them have fallen victim to the strange occurrences triggered by the intelligent matter on Solaris. Eventually, he too begins to experience a series of such inexplicable phenomena.

Like *Orbital*, *Solaris* invites reflection on the implications of the memory/forgetting dialectic in relation to otherness – of a "natural" character in *Orbital*, and of an artificial-cosmic one in *Solaris*. In both cases, memory and forgetting are far from being mere psychological mechanisms; they are magnified and repurposed as filters through which the human engages with radical otherness – be it technological, cosmic and/or ontological. From a

posthumanist perspective, these novels explore the limits of human existence at the point where memory ceases to guarantee identity, and where forgetting no longer functions as a negative category. Instead, forgetting becomes a different kind of memory – a fragmented, fantastical, and selective memory – in other words, one adapted to a new existential context.

In Stanisław Lem's novel, the most enigmatic "character" – a true emblem of unsettling cosmic otherness – is the planetary Ocean, capable of penetrating the subconscious memory of humans and projecting "F-bodies", a kind of simulacra: repositories of traumatic memories, materialized as uncanny duplicates. In other words, the individual's memory is a haunted landscape, invaded by specters – a colonized space, a medium for the experiments of this non-human intelligence. Human beings cease to be the centre of understanding, becoming de-territorialized subjects, subject to the whims of an entity that does not communicate in anthropomorphic terms.

The fact that the solarian Ocean learned to identify and replicate with diabolical precision the most persistent traces in the human brain can also be interpreted as a response to the hubris committed by humans: in their desperate attempt to establish contact with this atypical life form and to decipher its mysteries, they resorted to extreme (and morally questionable) methods, including bombarding the planetary Ocean with high-energy X-rays. Despite these efforts, the only outcome achieved by the intrepid researchers was a jumble of contradictory theories – useful for expanding the archives of "Solaristics," but ultimately irrelevant in terms of contributing to a genuine understanding of the superior intelligence that governs the planet.

> Whatever one thinks about the classic scholars of solaristics, no one can deny them greatness, often genius. The best mathematicians and physicists, the leading figures in biophysics, information theory, and electrophysiology, for decades were drawn to the silent giant of Solaris. All at once, from one year to the next the army of researchers was, as it were, deprived of its generals. There remained a gray, nameless mass of patient fact gatherers, compilers, creators of experiments that were occasionally designed with originality; but there were no more mass expeditions on a global scale, or bold unifying theories. Solaristics seemed to be falling apart, and as a kind of accompaniment or parallel to its descent there was a flurry of hypotheses, barely distinguishable from one another by second-order details, revolving around the degeneration, retardation, involution of the seas of Solaris. From time to time more daring and intriguing conceptualizations emerged, but they all seemed to pass judgment on the ocean, which came to be seen as the final stage of a development which long ago, thousands of years back, had had its period of supreme organization and now, having survived only physically, was disintegrating into a multitude of unnecessary, nonsensical agonal formations[11].

The main story line, centered on Kris Kelvin, introduces a radically different approach to knowledge: true understanding

requires not only discipline, persistence, and intellectual rigour, but also emotional engagement, empathy, and – most importantly – the ability to perceive how fragile is the boundary between subject and object, between the Self and the Other. In contrast to the fossilized memory stored in scientific archives, the novel foregrounds living memory, even when painful, embodied in Harey – Kelvin's youthful lover, whose death he feels responsible for. The planet Solaris compels the psychologist to confront both the alien Other (such as the unsettling strangeness of the plasmic ocean) and something deeply personal, manifesting in a form that is at once ambiguous, foreign, and intimately familiar. Incidentally, the most renowned of the three film adaptations of Lem's novel[12] - Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972) – emphasizes precisely this ambiguity, allowing for multiple plausible interpretations. The philosophical implications of this remarkable adaptation have recently been explored by Nicolae Sfetcu in a series of studies, where the author rightly observes that

> Tarkovsky shifts the central focus of the novel by reducing attention on Solaris itself and concentrating instead on Harey's development. A key philosophical question emerges: can Harey be considered human? Her character can be examined through the lens of Cartesian dualism. Descartes' reductionist view of animal suffering and the concept of the animal-machine stand in contrast to Harey's evolutionary experience in *Solaris*. Should she be regarded merely as an amorphous extraterrestrial structure, or should her behaviour be taken into account? Her emotional development and suffering, her epistemological journey toward self-knowledge, and especially her intense relationship with Kelvin serve to turn the film into an autonomous and deeply philosophical work[13].

At the same time, Tarkovsky's adaptation brings into sharper focus the themes of attachment, guilt, atonement, and suffering – elements that lead, if not to a radical shift in the overall meaning of Lem's narrative, then at least to a more pronounced emphasis on the importance of human values and ideals, among which love and genuine emotion play a crucial role. The sequences which are rich in cultural allusions (especially references to the great humanist tradition, from *The Divine Comedy to Crime and Punishment a*nd *Don Quixote*) become all the more revealing and significant as they are placed in stark contrast with both the heterotopic space of the orbital station and the dizzying, threatening immensity of the plasmic ocean.

Against this backdrop, there is an intensification of the tension between human values – threatened with extinction – and the dehumanization of those obsessed with the conquest of outer space. From this perspective, it becomes increasingly clear that the stakes of the adaptation (and to a large extent, of the novel itself) are (also) moral in nature. It is as if cosmic space were holding up a mirror to humanity, in which people were invited to contemplate not only their psychological and epistemological limits, but also the unsuspected strength that resides, paradoxically, in their very vulnerability and fragility. Without fear of straying too far, we may give credence to the view that if there is any hidden meaning for humanity, it should be sought "in the attempt to conquer Solaris, not in Solaris itself"[14].

Chinghiz Aitmatov's Prophetic Insight

An implicit moralism, at least as skeptical as that of Stanisław Lem, also emerges from Chinghiz Aitmatov's 1980 novel *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*. A haunting parable about the erasure of memory and the loss of identity under an oppressive regime, this book remains strikingly relevant even today, confirming the insight of Alexandru Mușina who, nearly three decades ago, drew attention to the enduring readability of Aitmatov's novel.

> Nothing in it is superfluous, nothing feels outdated. On the contrary – meanings that might have eluded even the most attentive reader a few years ago now rise to the surface, propelled by the dramatic upheavals of contemporary history. […] Any great literary work somehow transcends socio-political constraints; it establishes itself as a kind of *reference system*, valid beyond trends and time. Moreover, great works signal problems that, at a given moment, almost no one perceives[15].

Even a rushed reading allows us to discern that we are dealing with a genuine masterpiece: a subtle and profound work that impresses both through the breadth and complexity of its themes and through its inimitable style, which is marked by a captivating naturalness and simplicity. The plot of the novel unfolds, as in Joyce's *Ulysses*, over the course of a single day – not in a major city, but in Boranly-Burannyi, a modest railway stop, lost in the vastness of the Asian steppe of the former USSR. Yet, just as with Dublin in Joyce's novel, it is still a symbolic centre of the world, even if on the surface it bears all the traits of the bleakest periphery. That we are dealing with a privileged land, endowed with a special symbolic charge, is revealed by the author through the repeated, incantatory use of phrases that become the leitmotif of the book:

> Trains in these parts went from East to West and from West to East.
> On either side of the railway lines there lay the great wide spaces of the desert – Sary-Ozeki, the Middle lands of the yellow steppes.
> In these parts any distance was measured in relation to the railway, as if from the Greenwich eridian …
> And the trains went from East to West, and from West to East... [16]

As the title itself suggests, the action unfolds over the course of a single day, but one longer than a century. During this time, the protagonist, Yedigei Burannyi, stirred by the profound impact of losing Kazangap, his lifelong friend, relives his entire life up to that point, while also recalling ancient local legends. All the conditions are thus fulfilled to enable us to state, as Alexandru Mușina has done, that we are dealing with an initiatory novel: not only does the existence of a "sacred" place and a privileged moment facilitate the establishment of symbolic correspondences between narrative planes – between events in the present and others nearly lost in the mists of time – but all levels of meaning are, at their core, structured by a mythic pattern that lends coherence and substance to the whole. This centres on the legend of the mankurt, which is not alien to the

dialectic of memory and forgetting. Quite the opposite. As one would expect from the bleakest of dystopian scenarios, we are presented with a method that is both precise and effective in erasing memory – tantamount to a sadistic art or technique of deliberately inducing oblivion.

Here is the story in brief: once, in Sary-Ozek, the cursed tribe of the Juan-Juan swept through the land. They were savage, cruel, and disturbingly inventive when it came to warfare. But what made them truly terrifying was how they treated their prisoners. They stripped them of their memory – literally. The victim's head was shaved clean and covered with a *shiri*, a kind of cap made from the tough neck skin of a freshly slaughtered camel. As the skin dried, it shrank and clamped down on the skull like a vise. Most didn't survive the ordeal. But those who did faced something worse: total memory loss. They became "mankurts". A mankurt was the perfect slave – he only aked for scraps of food and little clothing, obeyed every command without question, and never once thought of escape or rebellion. The mankurt is a chilling metaphor for the erasure of memory and identity under totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe. In the end, "mankurtization" isn't just a political tool – it's a deeply inhuman impulse that transcends ideology, era, or system.

Aitmatov's insight here is nothing short of prophetic. This is also illustrated by the science fiction episode woven into the fabric of the novel. On the way to the Ana-Beiit cemetery, where Kazangap was to be buried with full honours, the funeral procession led by Yedigei Burannyi is stopped by military guards protecting a newly built extension of a cosmodrome that had seemingly sprung up out of nowhere in the vastness of the steppe. From this cosmodrome, rockets were being launched as part of the "Demiurg" program, and here the narrative switches fully to science fiction. The "Paritet" mission, part of the same program, is a joint Russian-American space exploration effort, whose cosmonauts experience a third-kind encounter with the peaceful and hyper-civilized inhabitants of the forested planet Liman.

Surprisingly, the reaction from the leaders of the "Demiurg" program – both Russian and American – is one of outright rejection. Rather than embracing this extraordinary opportunity for humanity to make contact with an alien civilisation, they forbid the cosmonauts – who had left the orbital station without prior approval and joined the extraterrestrials – from returning to Earth. The research program is suspended, and replaced by the newly-launched operation "Obruch" ("The Ring"): Earth is surrounded by a network of automated satellites, designed to destroy any incoming spacecraft from beyond. The science fiction dimension blends seamlessly with the novel's realist and mythic layers, all contributing to the creation of a polyphonic work – a parable of human survival under non-human, if not outright inhuman, conditions.

A posthumanist ecological reading of Chinghiz Aitmatov's novel is equally plausible, especially given how the mythic dimension often expresses itself through a special, totemic bond between human and animal. The most striking example of this bond is Yedigei's relationship with his camel, the mighty Burannyi Karanar. The latter, far from being regarded as his master's "slave" represents rather Yedigei's

animal-double and milk brother, since the former soldier had been healed in his youth by drinking together with the baby camel the milk of Kazangap's camel, Belegolovaya. Belegovaya in her turn was a descendant of Akmaya, the white camel of Naiman-Ana, the woman who had died trying to save her son changed into "mankurt" by the cruel tribe of the Juan-Juan.

Through these two camels (Belegovaya and Burannyi Karanar), both Kazangap and Yedigei are directly linked to the mythical plan, which represents the keystone of the entire novel. In addition to these totemic camels, a host of other animal characters appear in Aimatov's novel: a mysterious fox that Yedigei wants to kill with a stone but changes his mind, struck by the idea that the soul of his dead friend could have taken refuge in this zoomorphic disguise; a goldfish endowed with magical powers and an eagle which witnesses from above at Kazangap's funeral. It goes without saying that this special bond between human and non-human characters is not alien to the writer's attempt of highlighting the profound connection between nature, tradition and myth, as a network of antidodes against "mankurtization", an aspect that is crucial for defining Aimatov's vision of the world (and of its ancient, hidden meanings that are about to fall apart).

Instead of Conclusion: Beyond Human – Testing Boundaries

As we can clearly see, in all three novels discussed, the dialectic of memory and forgetting is used to test the boundaries of that which we call "human" – each from a complementary perspective and with an emphasis on different aspects (the epiphany of Earth as a melancholic prelude to extinction in *Orbital*; spectre-generating trauma in *Solaris*; the struggle against "mankurtization" and a plea for the preservation of living memory in *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*).

Moreover, all these writings propose a kind of ethics of traces: if we cannot grasp everything, if everything is ultimately destined to vanish and be forgotten, then what do we choose to preserve – if only for a while? What is it that leaves a mark that resists erasure, inside or outside of us? In other words, it is not difficult to notice that all these novels go beyond the conventions of science fiction, inviting the reader to reflect on the interplay between memory and fotgetting, inner and outer space, humanity's place in the universe and, above all, on the limits and risks of technological and scientific advancements.

On the other hand, it doesn't take much insight to notice that all these three novels comprise geopolitical undertones, alluding to the competition between the great powers in the matter of "colonizing" outer space. *Orbital* subtly touches upon (soft) geopolitical tensions between nations involved in space programs, while *Solaris* and *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years,* both published during the Cold War, implicitly warn on the risks entailed by human hubris, national pride and personal ambition in the ongoing spatial "Odyssey". Moreover, all these writings are, in their essence, multilayered parables that foreground philosophical, spiritual and existential themes, such as humans' relationship with God, nature and Earth, the meaning of life and the disorienting effects of space programs and political rulers on the perception of time(s).

Perhaps to a greater extent than the other two novels, Samantha Harvey's lyrical and introspective prose leaves open the question of whether our universe is a result of chance or design, reflecting the ongoing debate between science and religion. Especially the typhoon sequence serves as a reminder of the power of nature (God) and of the fragility of human civilization, emphasizing the need for humility and gratitude. In this perspective, even though the "art" of forgetting remains a contradiction in terms, it is no longer understood solely as a negative category (one responsible for erasing traces and dismantling the coordinates of identity). Instead, it becomes a condition for lucidly embracing our own vulnerability and finitude, for accepting the inevitable failure of our multidirectional and anarchic memory to maintain, on its own, a real connection between the individual, the others, and the self.

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Notes

1. Umberto Eco, "An Ars Oblivionalis? Forget it!", in *PMLA*, vol. 103, no.3, may 1988, p. 254-261, https://doi.org/10.2307/462374, accessed 29.09.2025.

2. Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Malden, Polity Press, 2013, p.88: "The post-anthropocentric shift away from the hierarchical relations that had privileged Man' requires a form of estrangement and a radical repositioning on the part of the subject. The best method to accomplish this is through

a strategy of defamiliarization or critical distance from the dominant vision of the subject. Disidentification involves the loss of familiar habits of thought and representation in order to pave the way for creative alternatives".

3. Moira Gaetens, Genevieve Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza Past and Present,* London and New York, Routledge, 1999, p. 4.

4. Samantha Harvey, *Orbital,* Vintage. Penguin Random House UK, London, 2024, p. 13.

5. *Ibidem*, p. 124.

6. *Ibidem*, p. 124-125.

7. Regarding "the overview effect" and its impact on humans we can mention Martin Puchner's *Introduction* to *The Written World: The Power of Stories to Shape People, History, Civilization,* where the author recalls a moment of overwhelming emotional intensity from the dramatic *Apollo 8* mission: more than 200,000 miles from Earth, astronauts connected with their audience of five hundread million start reading the first versets of *Genesis.* See also Frank White, *The Overview Effect. Space Exploration and Human Evolution* (1987), a seminal book on the "Earthrise" effect, pondering on individual's inner cognitive shift in awarness that can radiate by seeing the Earth from outer space.

8. Samantha Harvey, *op.cit.*, p. 46-47.

9. *Ibidem*, p. 49.

10. *Ibidem*, p. 87-88.

11. Stanisław Lem, *Solaris*, trasl. from Polish by Bill Johnston, Copyright © Barbara and Tomasz Lem, 2011 p.174, available at https://pdfcoffee.com/stanislaw-lem-trans-bill-johnston-solaris-pdf-free.html, last accessed on October 20th, 2025.

12. The first film adaptation of Lem's novel was a two-part 1968 Soviet television play in black-and-white, directed by Boris Nirenburg and Lidiya Ishimbayeva; the second one was co-written and directed by Andrei Tarkovsky and stars Donatas Banionis (as Kris Kelvin) and Natalya Bondarchuk (Harey). This version won the *Grand Prix Spécial du Jury* at the 1972 Cannes Film Festival and was nominated for *Palme d'Or;* the third film adaptation of *Solaris* is that directed by Steven Soderbergh, and starring George Cloony and Natascha McElhone. Soderbergh stated that his adaptation aimed to remain closer in spirit to Lem's original work. Regarding Tarkovsky's 1972 film adaptation, Lem had serious objections, as he confessed to Stanisław Bereś: "I have fundamental reservations to this adaptation. First of all, I would have liked to see the planet Solaris which the director unfortunately denied me as the film was to be a cinematically subdued work. And secondly – as I told Tarkovsky during one of our quarrels – he didn't make Solaris at all, he made *Crime and Punishment*. What we get in the film is only how this abominable Kelvin has driven poor Harey to suicide and then he has pangs of conscience which are amplified by her appearance; a strange and incomprehensible appearance […] Tarkovsky reminds me of a sergeant from the time of Turgenev – he is very pleasant and extremely prepossessing and at the same time visionary and elusive. One cannot 'catch' him anywhere because he is always at a slightly different place already. This is simply the type of person he is. When I understood that I stopped bothering. This director cannot be reshaped anymore, and first of all one cannot convince him of anything as he is going to recast everything in his 'own way' no matter what. The whole sphere of cognitive and epistemological considerations was extremely important in my book and it was tightly coupled to the solaristic literature and to the essence of solaristics as such. Unfortunately, the film has been robbed of those qualities rather thoroughly" (Stanisław Bereś, *Rozmowy ze Stanisławem Lemem*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Cracow 1987, *apud.* https://english.lem.pl/arround-lem/adaptations/solarisq-tarkovsky/176-lem-about-the-tarkovskys-adaptation, accessed 29.09.2025)

13. Nicolae Sfetcu, „Solaris, Andrei Tarkovsky – Filosofia", Set Things (26 may 2019), https://www.telework.ro/ro/solaris-andrei-tarkovsky-filosofia/ Accessed 25.09.2025 [our transl.].

14. *Ibidem.*

15. Alexandru Mușina, „A treisprezecea zodie" ["The Thirteenth Zodiac Sign"], afterword to Chinghiz Aitmatov, *O zi mai lungă decât veacul* [*The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*], transl. in Romanian by Ion Covaci and Denisa Fejes, Univers, Bucharest, 1996, p. 325. [Our transl.]

16. Chinghiz Aitmatov, *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*, translated by John French*;* foreword by Katerina Clark, Indiana University Press, 1983, p. 28. p. 226 etc.