

CHAPTER 9

Beyond narrative

The shape of traumatic testimony

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This chapter will explore the limits and possibilities of narratives in which individuals turn to language to communicate the inexpressibility of experiences they have endured. The central dilemma for many survivors of trauma is that they must tell their stories, and yet their stories cannot be told. Traumatic experiences often defy understanding; testimony of those who have survived can be marked by what is not there: coherence, structure, meaning, comprehensibility. The actual emplotment of trauma testimony into conventional narrative configurations — contained in time- transforms them into something which they are not: experiences which are endowed with a particular wholeness, which occurred in the past, and which have now ended. The paper concludes with a discussion of the relationship between language and silence in traumatic testimony.

Abraham Lewin's diary, posthumously published as *Cups of Tears*, documents daily life in the Warsaw Ghetto. In these pages, he reflects on both the impossibility and the necessity of expressing his thoughts and feelings. For instance, he describes the day his wife, along with many others, was taken away to Treblinka: "Eclipse of the sun, universal blackness. My Luba was taken away." He is a committed diarist who, nonetheless, doubts what is to be gained by capturing in words the horror which surrounds him.

But perhaps because the disaster is so great there is nothing to be gained by expressing in words everything that we feel. Only if we were capable of tearing out by the force of our pent-up anguish the greatest of all mountains, a Mount Everest, and with all our hatred and strength hurling it down on the heads of the German murderers of our young and old — this would be the only fitting reaction on our part. Words are beyond us now.

Our hearts are empty and made of stone.

(Cited in Wieviorka, 1994, pp. 24–25).

Commenting on this passage, Annette Wieviorka writes: “The victims are certainly beyond words, and yet, dispossessed of everything, words are all they have left. Words which will be the sole trace of an existence conceived not as that of an individual but as that of a people.” (Wieviorka, 1994, p. 25). This article concerns itself generally with trauma testimony and the narrative challenges it poses, as individuals like Lewin turn to language to communicate the inexpressibility of experiences they have endured. However, it is important to note that each trauma — while sharing some characteristics with other trauma events — is unique, both in terms of the ways in which individuals experience them, but also, critically, as historical events. In using examples from the Holocaust, South Africa, the Naxalbari movement in Bengal, and the 9/11 terrorist attacks in this paper, I wish to highlight certain features of traumatic testimonies, while at the same time respecting the important differences between these ‘limit events.’

Geoffrey Hartman speaks of the injunction felt by many survivors of trauma, sometimes following decades of silence: “Thou shalt tell.” (1996, p. 13). But tell what, and to whom? Who, who was not there, will understand that ultimately the experiences defy understanding? Despite their deep and lingering anguish, many survivors of trauma do feel compelled to tell their stories, not because they believe that in so doing they will experience relief, but rather because not to do so is to betray those who cannot do so. Their words testify to the very existence of a people. In Elie Wiesel’s words: “If someone else could have written my stories, I would not have written them. I have written them in order to testify. My role is the role of the witness. Not to tell, or to tell another story, is... to commit perjury.” (quoted in Felman, 1994, p. 90).

The central dilemma for many survivors of trauma is that they must tell their stories, and yet their stories cannot be told. The experiences which they have endured defy understanding; the very act of rendering them into narrative form lends them a coherence which they do not have. Isak Dinesen is quoted as saying that any burden is bearable if it can be put into a story; but perhaps the psychological reality is more complicated this. For some survivors of trauma, transforming an event which is wholly absent of meaning into a story form might be to lose ‘the force of its affront to understanding’ (Caruth, cited in Edkins, 2003, p. 41).

In this article, I will argue that oftentimes survivors of trauma articulate their experiences in ways in which we who are ‘outside’ are unable to accept, and so we begin a project to redeem the stories which we are told. This reshaping of blank spaces is carried out in a number of ways, which I will crudely outline here. The journey of redemption begins even before the transmission of the story, when we tell ourselves that the process of telling will itself be a healing one — a journey from suffering to recovery. We encourage a traditional emplotment — what happened where, and when, to whom, and what followed after this — and even when this is not offered, we reorganise what we have heard to fit such a mould. We regard those

who tell us their stories as somehow special, often over-identifying with them (and thus appropriating their subject position as our own), while at the same time presenting them as heroes. We are prone to over-interpret both what we are told and what we are not told. And we refuse to accept that we can neither understand nor represent that which has been told to us; that in many ways the experiences themselves are not capable of being understood nor represented.

Healing: Personal pain and social suffering

I have written elsewhere (Andrews, 2007) about the ‘myth of healing’ which researchers often use to soothe our worries about the potentially detrimental effects of the work which we undertake, particularly with vulnerable and/or wounded others. Building upon the cornerstone of western psychology, we argue that it is not only good for scholarly purposes that those who have endured suffering should talk about it. Yes, it is important to document their experiences — for historical and/or scholarly purposes — but it is also good, we persuade ourselves, for them to talk to others (which may or may not include us). This overly simplistic model has come under criticism from a number of different angles, two of which I will address here: (1) this misconstrues the boundaries of the scholarly project; (2) this conflates individual pain and the suffering of the community.

South African oral historian Sean Field has argued that ‘oral historians should not cast themselves as ‘healers’ ... Oral history will neither heal nor cure but offers subtle support to interviewees’ efforts to recompose their sense of self and regenerate agency” (Field, 2006, p.31). There has been much discussion of the potential healing effects of giving testimony to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (see, for instance, the account of Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, one of the commissioners of the TRC, in Van de Merwe & Gobodo-Madikizela, 2007); however, many of the witnesses who did come before the commission did not have this experience, and some even underwent a retraumatisation. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the majority of people agreed to give testimony in order to unburden themselves. While this may have been a motivation for some, there were other concrete and practical reasons to testify, including the perceived possibility of reparations for loss, acquiring new information about the fate of absent loved ones, and contributing to the larger project of rebuilding the broken nation. Even those who were retraumatised by giving testimony did not necessarily regret their decision to participate, as their contribution may have achieved other ends, at the same time that it caused them anguish.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was not established as a mechanism for providing individual therapy, nor could it perform that function in any

systematic way. While some of the rhetoric surrounding the commission implied that personal suffering was likely to decrease as a result of providing testimony, indeed this was not part of its mandate. Rather, the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, which established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, refers to the desired goal of the 'restoration of human and civil dignity' (cited in Field, 2006, p. 32). Critically, the restoration of civil dignity and the promise of personal healing are different, and possibly at times conflicting, pursuits. Politically, the TRC was established as a forum for reconciling the factions of a radically divided country. This was its function. The healing, if there was to be any, was for the country, not for the individual. But this distinction was not always clear. Thus, while the TRC banner which was in full view for much of the time stated: "The TRC: Healing the Nation" Desmond Tutu voiced a slightly different message at the first victim hearing:

We pray that all those people who have been injured in either body or spirit may receive healing through the work of this commission... We are charged to unearth the truth about our dark past. To lay the ghosts of that past, so that they will not return to haunt us and that we will hereby contribute to the healing of a traumatized and wounded people. For all of us in South Africa are a wounded people. (cited in Field, 2006, p. 32).

The country needs to be healed, and it requires the participation of its people in order to 'unearth the truth' in order to 'lay the ghosts of the past.' In Tutu's statement, there is an assumed compatibility between the dual goals of realising individual and communal healing.

However, in her work on the Naxalbari movement in Bengal, Srila Roy has argued that personal pain, when articulated in public testimony, is transformed into 'social suffering'; the individual becomes emblematic of individuals of a kind, and the particularities of their story — the aspects which make it *their* story — are lost.

In the transformation of personal pain into social suffering, the witness is transposed from one that embodies personal trauma to a metaphor of collective violence and suffering.....personal pain can be silenced in the transformation into collective suffering. ..the very structure of testimony, as a genre, conditions the public articulation of pain in ways that seriously compromise a representation of the individual subject in pain. ... the act of testimony gives voice to the silence of pain in the public domain, it forecloses the possibility of listening to and of acknowledging personal pain.... Testimony is, in the final instance, a speech act that draws its meaning from a collective, plural 'us' rather than the 'I' who is in pain. (Roy, 2006, p. 10)

Roy's argument, and one which seems to be upheld by many in South Africa, is that testifying in public about private pain might ultimately lead to a silencing of

the individual sufferer, even at the same time that it might serve to further other, desirable ends, such as establishing a common ground of truth for the rebuilding of shattered communities.

Jean Améry is one of several well-known writers who survived the Holocaust,¹ only to take his own life years later. Before his death, he recorded feeling little comfort from the years which separated him from Auschwitz, Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen, where he had been an inmate: “No remembering has become a mere memory... Nothing has healed... Where is it decreed that enlightenment must be free of emotion” (cited in Hartman, 1996, p. 137). Time does not heal all wounds; indeed, on the contrary, as Lawrence Langer warns “we must learn to suspect the effect as well as the intent of bracing pieties like ‘redeeming’ and ‘salvation’ when they are used to shape our understanding of the ordeal of former victims of Nazi oppression” (Langer, 1991, p. 2). While time and narrative are always intricately bound to one another — and if, what and how trauma is narrated will be influenced in part by the distance of time from the event — time alone neither creates nor erases the narrative impulse of trauma survivors.

Life and narrative

Jerome Bruner argues that narrative is the only means we have for describing ‘lived time’. “[A]rt imitates life... life imitates art. Narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative” (1987, pp. 12–13). Narratives structure our experience, and they are the means by which we organize our memories. It has become commonplace to say that we are the stories we tell, indeed the stories we live. Our stories are our identity, and without them, we lose our compass.

There is considerable debate amongst narrative scholars regarding to what extent narrative is an inherent quality of human experience. Is life, as Roland Barthes famously contends, just ‘scrambled messages’ (communications brouillees) (cited in Carr, 1986, p. 14)? Or rather, does life itself, in the words of Paul Ricoeur ‘demand narrative’ (1991, p. 29)? Ricoeur argues that there is a *‘pre-narrative quality*

1. Included in this group are such renowned figures as the Romanian-French poet Paul Celan, the Polish writer Tadeusz Borowski, and the Italian writer and chemist Primo Levi (though whether or not Levi’s death was accidental is still debated). When Levi heard of Améry’s suicide in 1978, he commented that the latter’s last book on the death camps should be seen as “as the bitterest of suicide notes” (Gambetta, 1999). When Levi’s close friend, Ferdinando Camon, heard the news of Levi’s own death (in 1987), he commented “This suicide must be backdated to 1945. It did not happen then because Primo wanted (and had to) write. Now, having completed his work (*The Drowned and the Saved* was the end of the cycle) he could kill himself. And he did” (Gambetta, 1999).

of human experience, and it is because of this that we can speak of life as ‘a story in its nascent form...an *activity and a passion in search of a narrative*’ (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 29; italics in the original). But even while narratives might in some sense be inherent to the structure of life — in that life is ‘in search of narrative’ — they are not and cannot be synonymous with life. And hence the questions persist: By structuring our experiences into traditional narrative form, do we lend to them a coherence and unity which raw life does not contain? Are narratives ultimately products of our own creativity, our human way of lending order to a world which is characterized by chaos and disorder? Ricoeur’s response to these pressing issues can be summarized in his characterization of narrative as a ‘synthesis of the heterogeneous’ (1984, p. 64), whereby concordance and discordance — which lie at the heart of narrative and its twin sister time — exist in a dynamic tension with each other. The emplotment of events and incidents into a narrative “‘grasps together’ and integrates into one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. x). Thus Ricoeur describes the ‘discordant concordance of narrative and the concordant discordance of time’ (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 32).

When we tell our stories, there is a certain pressure to deliver them within an Aristotelian conventional narrative configuration — one in which concordance looms large, where there is a sense of the connection between events, where the conclusion is “congruent with the episodes brought together by the story” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 67). According to Brockmeier (2008) these stories are “narratives told according to the conventions of linearity, continuity, closure, and omniscience... [and] are often taken as the quasi-natural condition of narrative” (Brockmeier, 2008, p. 28). Typically, these are stories with beginnings, middles, and endings. As historian William Cronon writes:

What distinguishes stories from other forms of discourses is that they describe an action that begins, continues over a well-defined period of time, and finally draws to a definite close, with consequences that become meaningful because of their placement within the narrative. Completed action gives a story its unity, and allows us to evaluate and judge an act by its results. (1992, p. 1367)

It is precisely this conventional configuration, this ‘natural condition of narrative’ which eludes so many survivors of trauma when they attempt to give an account of that which they have endured. There is a pressure to provide a certain kind of narrative, the story of their lived experience, and this emplotment ‘transforms a succession of events into one meaningful whole’ (1984, p. 67). But this transformation is a product of human creation. As Ricoeur describes it: “I see in the plots we invent the privileged means by which we re-configure our confused, unformed, and at the limit mute temporal experience” (1984, p. xi). The very reconfiguration of events into a plot “imposes ‘the sense of an ending’ on the indefinite succession

of incidents” (1984, p.67). Kermode argues that “In ‘making sense’ of the world we... feel a need to experience that concordance of beginning, middle and end which is the essence of our explanatory fictions...” (Kermode, 1968, pp.35–36). But such fictions “degenerate” into “myths” whenever we actually believe them or ascribe their narrative properties to the real “whenever they are not consciously held to be fictive” (p. 39). How we construct the stories of our lives not only assists us in making sense of our lives, but is itself a reflection of our framework for making sense of the world and our place within it. But what happens when no sense can be made?

Beginnings of narratives demarcate the point from which all subsequent action must follow. But if beginnings are important, endings are even more so. In the words of Aristotle, “the end is everywhere the chief thing” (cited in Cronon, 1992, p.1367). The ending of a story is its most crucial component, because it is only here that we can appreciate where all the preceding events have been leading. As Paul Ricoeur comments, the story’s conclusion is “the pole of attraction of the entire development.” (cited in McQuillan, 2000, p.259), and elsewhere, “the point of view from which the story can be perceived as forming a whole” (1984, p.67). Only when we can emplot our experiences (which Ricoeur describes as “an act of the productive imagination” (1984, p.76), can we decipher meaning in the events of our lives.

But in order to narrate our experiences, “we force our stories on a world that doesn’t fit them” (Cronon, 1992, p. 1367). As Jackson observes:

The idea that any human life moves serially and progressively from a determinate beginning, via a middle passage, towards an ethically or aesthetically satisfying conclusion, is as artificial as the idea of a river running straightforwardly to the sea. Lives and rivers periodically flood and run dry; rapids alternate with calm stretches, shallows with depths; and there are places where eddies, counter-currents, undertows, cross-currents, backwaters and dark reaches make navigation unpredictable (Jackson, 2002, p.22).

Life is characterized by an infinite unfolding of time. There is no beginning, middle or end, just a state of forever continuing. We organize our life and our past into structured events precisely because that contains them for us, renders them more manageable. We cannot keep a ‘forever continuing’ entity in our heads; it surpasses even the great potential of our imagination, and is something which we can only dip into once in a while, when we afford ourselves the opportunity to contemplate the structure of life. But on a daily basis, we do not do this; we cannot do this, the task is simply too enormous. And so experience is broken down into constituent parts. From this partitioning, we gain the ability to make sense of what we are living. But we lose something as well. Although our life can be recounted

as a story, there are aspects of our human experience which cannot be contained within the boundaries of a conventional narrative structure. This is particularly so in trauma testimony.

Ricoeur devotes a significant amount of attention to considering the narrative potential of 'untold stories'. He comments:

We tell stories because in the last analysis human lives need and merit being narrated. This remark takes on its full force when we refer to the necessity to save the history of the defeated and the lost. The whole history of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative. (Ricoeur, 1984, p.75)

And yet to narrate suffering can prove impossible for some. Chris Colvin has argued that "Stories framed as stories of 'trauma' are always already implicated in some way in a specific perspective on psychological suffering and recovery" (Colvin, 2003, p. 155). The very set-up of the TRC in which witnesses gave their testimony imposed on their narrative a premature closure (an 'ending'), which, however hoped for, was not for them a reality. Colvin provides the example of Mbuyiselo Coquorha, who endured torture and multiple forms of deprivation under apartheid. A crucial component of Coquorha's testimony was his insistence that the effects of this treatment were ongoing, into the present time. "This is what they have done to me, and I still cannot eat. I am still sick. What will happen to me? I ask you, what will become of me?" he asks the commissioners. As Colvin comments:

... the historical moment is not, for him, a new one in any tangible way. He still suffers physically and psychologically from his torture. He still lives in poverty and fears for his life. He still has not been able to recover from a past (and a present) that keeps him too thin, too medicated, too hungry, and too vulnerable. Storytelling here is not redemptive exercise (Colvin, 2003, pp. 163–164).

Some of those who gave testimony before the TRC participated in other, non-official, community-based storytelling ventures. Here, the focus was not on the therapeutic effects of telling trauma. Rather "crafting the history of the struggle means writing a history about a struggle that is not over. Time has passed but the suffering and the struggling continues" (Colvin, 2003, p. 165). The benefit which is derived from such communal storytelling is one of bonding. As people listen to the stories of others, they can recognise some elements of their own experience. They know that if and when they come to tell their story, others will, in turn, recognise themselves. This mirroring between self and other functions as connective tissue between traumatized individuals and their community.

Narratives and traumatic testimony

Traumatic testimony is marked by what is not there: coherence, structure, meaning, comprehensibility. Edkins has articulated the bind of the trauma survivor for whom “it is both impossible to speak, and impossible not to speak” (p. 41). Their stories can only be told in narrative form, and as argued earlier in this paper, that very form lends the testimony a framework of meaning which, critically, it lacks. Edkins and others have argued that the very conception of time — which lies at the heart of narrative construction — is different in the articulation of trauma. Edkins distinguishes between ‘trauma time’ and ‘linear time’ — the latter variously referred to as narrative time² — which, she says has “beginnings, middles, and ends.” Linear time is central to the workings of the nation state, and even though many of us assume that it is ‘real’

it is a notion that exists because we all work, in and through our everyday practices, to bring it into being... the production and reproduction of linear time take place by people assuming that such a form of times does exist, and specifically that it exists as an empty, homogenous medium in which events take place. (Edkins, 2003, pp. xiv–xv)

But not only does trauma time not conform to this construction, but when it is forced to do so, something crucial is lost — or, stated differently, something fundamentally extrinsic is added. One of the most important implications of this re-scripting of traumatic memory into linear time is that memory is depoliticised (Edkins, 2003, p. 52). The actual emplotment of trauma narratives transforms them into something which they are not: experiences which are contained in time, indeed which happened in the past and are now finished (as indicated by their ‘endings’). Edkins cites the work of Allan Young, who has worked on post-traumatic stress disorder: “The traumatic experience/memory is in a sense timeless. It is not transformed into a story, place in time, with a beginning, a middle and an end (which is characteristic for narrative memory). If it can be told at all, it is still a re-experience” (cited in Edkins, 2003, p. 40). Trauma narratives exist in the forever present; in order to capture the heart of experience, individuals must risk another journey back to moment of rupture. Hartman describes this as taking a ‘descent to the dead.’ In trauma testimony, witnesses often explicitly speak “for the dead or in their name. This has its dangers: to go down... may be easy, but to come up again... that is the hard task” (Hartman, 1996, p. 139).

2. Edkins use of the term ‘narrative time’ is very different from Ricoeur’s theory on the relation between time and narrative, to which the latter dedicated three volumes. The important point here, however, is that trauma time is characterised by being imprisoned in a forever present.

Dominick LaCapra speaks of 'double inscription of time' which characterises trauma testimony:

one is both back there and here at the same time, and one is able to distinguish between (not dichotomize) the two. In other words, one remembers — perhaps to some extent still compulsively reliving or being possessed by — what happened then without losing a sense of existing and acting now. (LaCapra, 2001, p.90)

It is perhaps this temporal schizophrenia — both being locked in the past and yet knowing that that time is not this time — which makes trauma testimony so difficult to articulate, and why the imposition of a traditional narrative structure compromises the attempt to speak the unspeakable.

The temptation to reshape trauma testimony into a conventional narrative configuration means that we instil in them a wholeness which they do not contain. Hayden White has written about the 'desire for narrative foreclosure'. We urgently want and need our narratives to make sense, to be characterised by a logical sequencing, and towards this end, we instil in them a wholeness which is not theirs. We want, White writes, real events to 'display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary' (White, 1987, p. 24).

Evidence for this argument can be found in the transcripts of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Boc and Mpolweni-Zantsi (2006) have written thoughtfully about the process by which the words of those who gave testimony before the TRC became transformed into the transcripts that now appear on the TRC website.

First, a brief word on the role of interpreters in the TRC proceedings. Prior to 1994, there were two official languages in South Africa, English and Afrikaans. However, in the country's new constitution, eleven languages were officially recognised. Contained within the mandate of the TRC was the stipulation that when at all possible, witnesses should be able to speak in their native tongue. Although there had never been a professional class of interpreters prior to 1994 — there was perceived to be no need for such skills as all were assumed to speak either English or Afrikaans — in 1994 all of that changed rather dramatically. Not only were interpreters needed, but immediately, and for very intensive work. In the end, twenty-three people were trained for ten working days, and it was this group of men and women who performed the simultaneous translation for 57,008 hours of non-English language testimony into English.

Some of the most memorable images which were flashed around the world of the proceedings of the TRC were those of interpreters crying as they performed their duties.³ It was they who had the impossible job of translating that which

3. For a discussion on the instantaneous accessibility of images of trauma across the globe, see Susan Sontag's book, *Regarding the pain of others*. She opens with the statement that "for along time some people believed that if the horror could be made vivid enough, most people

could not be communicated. In Edkins' words "What we can say no longer makes sense, what we want to say, we can't. There are no words for it. That is the dilemma survivors face" (p. 8). Testifiers struggle to put their experiences into words, and interpreters struggle with putting these often ruptured and chaotic expressions into another language. As Huston (1999) writes "There are some things which cannot be translated" (cited in Apfelbaum, 2001, p. 27). The result was that often the original testimony was cleaned up, and in some cases information was added. A close comparison of the recordings of the hearings with the official transcripts of these hearings shows that sometimes the original testimony differs significantly from its subsequent representation.

An example is where Mrs. Mhlawuli describes the burial of her husband, whose hand had been chopped off. He was buried without this, and in her testimony — translated from the Xhosa into English — she says "We buried him without his right wrist — right arm or whatever — hand actually. We don't know what they did with the hand." This appeared in the official transcripts as "They chopped off his right hand, just below the wrist. I don't know what they did with that hand." (cited in Boc & Mpolweni-Zantsi, 2006, pp. 107–108). While the testimony has been 'cleaned up', it has erased some of the most vital information that was contained in the original. Not only does the actual testimony reflect more accurately the emotional rupture experienced by the narrator, but critically, the revised version omits the information that Mrs. Mhlawuli's husband was buried without his hand. This information is culturally significant, as for a Xhosa person to be buried without all of their body parts means they cannot rest in peace (Boc & Mpolweni-Zantsi, 2006, p. 108).

There are other examples where the 'incoherence' of an original statement is cleaned up, thereby no longer communicating the utter rupture experienced by the speaker. In Mrs. Calata's testimony (cited in Boc & Mpolweni-Zantsi, 2006, p. 105), for instance, in which she recounts a story where her children see a picture in the newspaper of their father's friend's burned out car, the English translation of the Xhosa reads: "If Mathew's car is burnt what happened to them [her husband and his friend]? Hey! No! I became anxious and the situation changed immediately." The official published version of the transcript, however, omits her exclamation of 'Hey! No!' At this point in the hearings, Mrs. Calata becomes so distressed

would finally take in the outrageousness, the insanity of war" (Sontag, 2003, p. 14). Her book is an exploration into why this has not happened. While pictures and sounds of war might pour into our living rooms daily, the reality does not pierce the skin. Her book concludes with the haunting comment: "We... don't understand. We don't get it. We truly can't imagine what it was like. We can't imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is; and how normal it becomes. Can't understand, can't imagine" (Sontag, 2003, pp. 125–126).

that Archbishop Tutu decides to adjourn the meeting. However, the deep level of anguish, as represented by her self-interruptions and exclamations, are not in evidence in the official transcript. Yet, these very utterances are an important component of the testimony, as they contribute to our understanding of how the horrific events being described impacted on the person who is left behind, struggling to create a narrative.

Language and the ‘confusion of tongues’

Paul Ricoeur describes narrative as a “semantic innovation” which opens us to “the kingdom of the ‘as if’” (Ricoeur, 1984, p.64). While narrative might indeed enhance our ability to imagine other possibilities, to envision the ‘as if’, it may be deficient as a tool for capturing the experience of lived human trauma. Elie Wiesel describes his feelings of trying to write about the Holocaust: “words seem too inconspicuous, worn out, inadequate, anaemic, I wanted them burning. Where can one find a novel language, a primal language” (cited in Apfelbaum, 2001, p.26). Lawrence Langer makes a similar point: “The universe of dying that was Auschwitz yearns for a language purified from the taint of normality” (Langer, 1995, p.93).

But how are trauma survivors to find such a language? Of course the task is impossible. If one is to speak, if one is to offer witness of the things one has known and seen, then one must resort to language, all the while accepting that there cannot but be a chasm between ‘that world’ and ‘this.’ Langer (1991) terms this ‘a confusion of tongues’, which marks “the clash between the assumptions and vocabulary of the present world of the survivor and interviewer and the word-breaking realities of the concentration camp survivors” (Hartman, 1996, p.140).

Language is inextricably linked to social structure and power; what words mean, how they are used, the blank spaces which exist between and beyond words, all of these issues emerge as key considerations in the current discussion. As Edkins writes: “... the language we speak is part of the social order, and when the order falls apart around our ears, so does the language” (Edkins, 2003, p. 8).

And yet — and this is important — it is not sufficient to state, as many have, that the horrors of the Holocaust (or other ‘limit events’) are simply too terrible for words, and therefore must be left unsaid, and thus unheard. For ultimately, even if language is insufficient for the task, it is, if not all we have, then at least one of the most effective tools we have for communicating that which must not be forgotten. Too often we have heard the phrase that those who survive trauma are left speechless; they do not wish to talk about what they have endured, and this remains forever within them as a black hole of suffering. While this may be true for some (and

one must avoid retreating into generalisations about ‘all survivors of trauma’), for many others this is simply not the case. Many survivors of trauma emerge from these experiences wanting to talk about what they very often describe as ‘unsayable’ or ‘unimaginable’. Despite the content of what they say, what is crucial is that they do say it — that is, if there is someone in place to hear it. As Edkins comments, the terms ‘unsayable’ and ‘unimaginable’ have often served as an excuse for neither imaging it nor speaking about it” (Edkins, 2003, p.2). This is not a sufficient moral response. The claim that those who survived the concentration camps were unwilling or unable to talk about their suffering must be evaluated in light of fact that immediately following the war there was a flurry of testimony which was published by those who had been to hell and were crawling their way back. However, people did not want to read them. As Wieviorka comments:

Publishers are not philanthropists; they want their books to sell. A successful book often leads to the publication of other books the same theme. It is the absence of this market of buyers and readers — indicating the indifference of public opinion once the initial shock had passed — which partly explains why the stream of testimonies came to an end. (Wieviorka, 1994, pp. 26–27)

We in the safe outside world told ourselves that the victims of the camps could not speak. But many of those who survived tried to speak; when they found they were not listened to, they stopped speaking.

One of the most thoughtful treatments of the paradox of language in the context of trauma testimony has been that of Giorgio Agamben. Following Foucault, he asks “What happens in the living individual when he occupies the ‘vacant place’ of the subject... How can a subject give an account of its own ruin?” (1999, p. 142). And yet give an account, the survivor must, all the while recognising that anything that will be said, indeed that can be said, will be an empty container for that which has happened. The significance of such testimony lies not in what is said, but simply that something is said. The fact that the testimony exists, this is what is critical. He writes “The subject of enunciation... maintains itself not in a content of meaning but in an event of language” (Agamben, 1999, p. 142). Testimony, he tells us, is that which lies

... between the inside and the outside of language, between the sayable and the unsayable in every language — that is, between a potentiality of speech and its existence, between a possibility and an impossibility of speech. (Agamben, 1999, p. 145)

The distinction Agamben makes between the content of meaning and the event of language is a crucial one. The content of meaning of much trauma testimony is, in fact, that there is a void; those who give witness to trauma, and we who are their audience, are, in Maurice Blanchot’s words, “guardians of an absent meaning”

(cited in Hartman, 1994, p. 5). But the event of language, the fact of the testimony itself, is what is vital, not so much because of the historical information that such testimony conveys (though this is important too) but more because of the depths of darkness that it begins to make visible to those who were not there, “the psychological and emotional milieu of the struggle for survival, not only then but also now” (Hartman, 1996, p. 142).

Agamben describes the paradox confronting those who survive, those who can and must give witness:

to bear witness is to place oneself in one’s own language in the position of those who have lost it, to establish oneself in a living language as if it were dead, or in a dead language as if it were living — in any case, outside both the archive and the corpus of what has already been said. (Agamben, 1999, p. 161)

Limit events pose a challenge to narrative, because they lie beyond language, and possibly beyond representation. Just as these events demand a new language, so too they demand a new method of representation; and yet, we have not proven ourselves equal to the task, despite the fact that more than half a century has passed since the end of Second World War. What might this new representation look like? And might new forms of narrative be a useful tool in this most challenging pursuit? These are questions which scholars of trauma testimony have been grappling with, and to which there are no definitive answers. In the words of Saul Friedlander, notwithstanding a fifty years’ accumulation of factual knowledge, “We have faced surplus meaning or blankness, with little interpretive or representational advance” (cited in Hartman, 1996, p. 10). The challenge for future scholars remains.

Language and ‘the threshold of silence’

Before one can ask how to represent the Holocaust (and other limit events) one must first confront the question of whether it is possible to do so — *at all*. Some of the greatest minds of the late 20th century dedicated themselves to this most difficult question — but ultimately, they did so through words. George Steiner’s work on language and silence provides a thoughtful example of this. He acutely describes the dilemma that confronts the writer in a world forever scared by genocide:

To a writer who feels that the condition of language is in question, that the world may be losing something of its humane genius, two essential courses are available: he may seek to render his own idiom representative of general crisis, to convey through it the precariousness and vulnerability of the communicative act; or he may choose the suicidal rhetoric of silence. (Steiner, 1967, p. 69)

Many writers resorted to language, all the while struggling with its paucity, its ultimate inability to carry the weight of the historical moment. The playwright Arthur Adamov, exponent of the Theatre of the Absurd, wrote, just before the outbreak of the Second World War: ‘Le mots, ces gardiens du sens ne sont pas immortels, invulnérable... Comme les hommes, les mots souffrent... Certain peuvent survivre, d’autres sont incurables.’ [‘Words, guardians of meaning, are not immortal, invulnerable. Like men, words suffer. Some can survive, others are incurable.’] And then, with the war, he elaborated on this: “Worn, threadbare, filed down, words have become the carcass of words, phantom words; everyone drearily chews and regurgitates the sound of them between their jaws” (cited in Steiner, 1967, p. 71).

Jens Brockmeier challenges the view that language is the ‘form and medium that represents or transforms experiences into clear and intelligible statements or propositions which are communicable and can be reflected upon’ (Brockmeier, 2002, p. 92). Rather, he argues, “language is itself a reality, a reality that at times can be murky, messy, and even ineffable... [language] outlines — and thus embraces — both the sayable and the unsayable” (Brockmeier, 2002, pp. 92–93). It is not the choice between language or silence, but rather the relationship between the two that has provoked many writers on this subject. Parain comments that ‘language is the threshold of silence’, while Lefebvre describes language as ‘at once inside language, and on its near and far sides’ (cited in Steiner, 1967, p. 72). Silence always and only exists in relation to that which surrounds it. It is the blank spaces between words, and as such it helps to frame not only the meaning of what is said but that which can be said, a refuge for both the unsaid and the unsayable. As historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot writes:

Not all silences are equal and they cannot be addressed in the same manner; any historical narrative [is] a bundle of silences, the result of a unique process, and the operation required to deconstruct these silences will vary accordingly (cited in Passerini, 2003, p. 249).

Having considered the importance of silence, and its force as a way of marking meaning, let us now return to Agamben’s argument, discussed earlier, in which he emphasises that what matters is not what is said, but rather that something is said. If this is the case, Agamben asks, then “To what does such a language bear witness?” His response is powerful:

What cannot be stated, what cannot be archived is the language in which the author succeeds in bearing witness to his incapacity to speak... Just as in the starry sky that we see at night, the stars shine surrounded by a total darkness that, according to cosmologists, is nothing other than the testimony of a time in which the stars did not shine, so the speech of the witness bears witness to a time in which human beings did not yet speak; and so the testimony of human

beings attests to a time in which they were not yet human. (Agamben, 1999, pp. 161–162)

Traumatic testimony bears witness to a total darkness. Although it often is incomprehensible and incoherent, its significance is that it functions to mark the void.

Dominick LaCapra (1996, 1998), amongst others, has written about the crisis of representation posed by the Shoah, a crisis which pertains to the problem of historical understanding. How can such limit events be represented at all? Hartman argues that “there are no limits to representation, only limits to conceptualization, to the intelligibility of the Shoah” (Hartman, 1996, p. 28). The limits are not what can be represented, so much as what can be thought. Simply “we do not believe that what we are made to feel and see is part of reality” (p. 28), and with this, then, there follows a most indicting corollary: “... the problem of limits ... is not so much the finiteness of intellect as the finiteness of human empathy that comes into view” (Hartman, 1996, p. 129). Hartman describes a representational rupture which ‘involves story as well as history: the story of hell, of its representations. Before Auschwitz we were children in our imagination of evil; after Auschwitz we are no longer children’. Citing Des Pres, he describes “a new shape of knowing which invades the mind”, concluding that “we have changed as knowers” (Hartman 1996, p. 130).

Erika Apfelbaum speaks of the ‘profound dilemma’ which confronts those who are presented with stories of trauma. We respond with a ‘stubborn deafness’ for to do otherwise is to put ourselves, and the moral universe in which we operate, at risk. Apfelbaum elaborates on ‘the threatening implications of listening’:

It requires a willingness to follow the teller into a world of radical otherness and to accept the frightening implications it carries for our personal lives and society as a whole. The only way to truly hear is to acknowledge the unbridgeable gap between the two worlds, and to assimilate the impact of this unbridgeable difference. Understanding is irrelevant (the reality always exceeds what the narrative is able to represent and convey). What is important is the willingness to become part of the transmission. (Apfelbaum, 2001, p. 31)

Brockmeier’s work with twenty-six written personal narratives provided by eyewitnesses of the attacks on the World Trade Center — collected as part of “The 9/11 National Memory Survey on the Terrorist Attacks” — deals with the problem of how people talk about elusive experiences. These accounts, Brockmeier summarizes, speak to “the experience of the limits... not only... of language but also the limits of experience itself” (Brockmeier, 2008, p. 29). Echoing the work of Hartman, LaCapra, and others who have written on the crisis of representation (in relation to the Holocaust), Brockmeier’s work on the Twin Towers testimony provides evidence for the claim that at the core of traumatic experience is “its failure to be represented in any common forms or modes or representation” (Brockmeier,

2008, p. 29). Brockmeier then describes work with “antirealist, experimental, and formally innovative types of narrative” which he characterizes as “non-Aristotelian forms of broken narrative [which] do not claim to represent the original trauma” (Brockmeier, 2008, p. 29). While these non-traditional narrative forms might hold more promise for “communicating with others about events that demand witness but defy narrative expression” (Apfelbaum, 2001, p. 20) Brockmeier concludes by describing traumatic experience as

...a break not just with a particular form of representation but with the very possibility of representation at all... The traumatic gap between language and experience does not just reflect a rupture with the way the world is depicted but with the existential basics of human meaning making. (Brockmeier, 2008, pp. 33–34)

The search for heroic meanings

This poses a key challenge for those who listen to traumatic testimony. Because we believe in the power of stories, and because we are creatures who are forever engaged in creating and deciphering meaning in our world, we cannot accept what we are told time and time again: There is no meaning in these stories. There are no heroes. There are no lessons. All of this suffering did not resolve itself in a better world. And yet if we cannot accept this — and there is much evidence that we do not — then we have not even learned the very first lesson about listening to trauma. For ourselves, we want these painful narratives to signify something, and we recreate those who offer their testimony in another image, one which effectively makes further telling more difficult. Those who emerge from the ruins cannot be who we want them to be, who we need them to be. We persist in our efforts nonetheless, as too much is at stake.

Lawrence Langer tells the story of Magda F, who survived the Holocaust though her husband, parents, brother, three sisters and all their children did not. Another brother and sister had emigrated to the United States in the 1920s, where she joined them at the end of the war. They wanted to hear from her what had happened, and yet she found herself painfully unable to communicate anything which they could understand. ‘nobody, but nobody fully understands us. You can’t. No [matter] how much sympathy you give me when I’m talking here.’ She says that she hopes they will never be able to understand “because to understand, you have to go through with it, and I hope nobody in the world comes to this again, [so] that they *should* understand us. ... nobody, nobody, nobody...” (cited in Langer, 1991, p. xiv). Here her testimony breaks off. Magda’s efforts to communicate what she has seen are persistent, even while she believes that these attempts will always be thwarted by the limitations to imagine that of which we have no experience.

Geoffrey Hartman writes poignantly about our inability to listen to the void

... we who were not there always look for something the survivors cannot offer us. ... it is our search for meaning which is disclosed, as if we had to be comforted for what they suffered If we learn anything here it is about life when the search for meaning had to be suspended: we are made to focus on what it was like to exist under conditions in which moral choice was systematically disabled by the persecutors and heroism was rarely possible. (Hartman, 1994, pp. 133–134)

As the founder of the Fortunuff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University, Hartman knows of what he speaks. Having overseen the collection of over 4000 testimonies of Holocaust survivors, Hartman warns against the 'search for heroic meanings' in which interviewers over-identify with the witness. This inclination is, he says, 'far from innocent' as it effectively eradicates the message of the narratives, at the same time that it strips witnesses of their agency. Rather than experiencing any kind of empowerment from giving testimony, witnesses are instead confined by we their listeners to perpetual victimhood. Removing the weight of the heroic genre, space is created for a different kind of narrative, one which documents the pain of speaking the unspeakable.

...the strength required to face a past like that radiates visibly off the screen and becomes a vital fact...breaking the silence is, for those who endured so dehumanizing an assault, an affirmative step, in part because of their very willingness to use ordinary words whose adequacy and inadequacy must both be respected. (Hartman 1996, pp. 142–143, 145)

Concluding comments

In this article, I have explored some difficulties associated with telling and listening to traumatic testimony. My own entry into this discussion is as one who is interested in political narratives, how the very stories which individuals tell about their own lives function as a point for viewing the wider social context. Personal narratives have the potential to act as a bridge between private and public worlds. In the case of trauma testimony, this is perhaps the most one can hope for. There may be no promise that telling leads to healing, but very act of speech — no matter how garbled or seemingly nonsensical — can begin the process of reconnecting one to the world of the living. Hannah Arendt has written that

A life without speech and without action... is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men. With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our

original physical appearance.... [The impulse to do this] springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative. (Arendt 1958, pp. 176–177)

Traumatic testimonies might not provide listeners with a beginning, middle, and end, but they have the potential to assist individuals to “move beyond the self into what Buber calls the essential-we relationship, so opening oneself up to the stories of others and thereby seeing that one is not alone in one’s pain” (Jackson, 2006, p. 59). And here lies the potential gift of narrative: the knowledge that we are not alone. As Lacan reminds us ‘What I seek in speech is the response of the Other... There is no speech without a reply, even if it is only met with silence’ (Lacan, 1995, p. 40, 86).

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