

Narrating Pain: The Power of Catharsis

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One of the most enduring functions of narrative is catharsis. From the ancient Greeks to the present day, the healing powers of storytelling have been recognized and even revered. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle spoke about the purgative character of representation as a double act of *muthos-mimesis* (plotting-imitating). More specifically, he defined the function of *katharsis* as "purgation of pity and fear". This comes about, he explains, whenever the dramatic imitation of certain actions arouses pity and fear in order to provide an outlet for pity and fear⁴⁶. The recounting of experience through the formal medium of plot, fiction or spectacle, permits us to *repeat the past forward* so to speak. And this very act of creative repetition allows for a certain kind of pleasure or release. In the play of narrative re-creation we are invited to revisit our lives – through the actions and personas of others – so as to live them otherwise. We discover a way to give a future to the past.

There have been multiple interpretations of what exactly Aristotle meant by his pithy formulation of catharsis. So I began by offering a brief account of my own reading. By pity (*eleos*), I think Aristotle was referring to the basic act of empathy evoked by an imaginative portrayal of human action and suffering. As Aristotle was addressing the role of tragic drama, the audience's emotional response to the events unfolding on stage before them would have been central to the aesthetic experience. But left to itself, pathos risked becoming bathos. There was always the danger of a pathology of pity, a sentimental or historicist extreme where the spectator looses his/her wits and becomes blinded by excessive passion. Empathy might veer towards an over-identification with the imaginary characters unless checked by a countervailing movement of distance and detachment.

This second movement, Aristotle called it "fear" (*phobos*). This

⁴⁶ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 111, A, Everyman Library Translation, London, 1963, pp 12f.

contrary gesture challenged the extremity of affect by introducing some sort of estrangement device (as Brecht would later call it). For Aristotle, it was generally the chorus or commentary which cut across the fictional pretence of the drama and interpolated the message of the story. The audience thus found itself thrown back on itself as it were, suddenly removed from the heat of the action, reflecting on the "hidden cause of things". But if this movement of fear were to be taken to its extreme, we would end up as cold voyeurs, mercilessly contemplating the horrors depicted on the stage. That is why Aristotle insisted on a certain balancing of these opposing stances – subjective and objective, attached and detached, proximate and distant. And it was precisely this balancing that resulted in *catharsis* – that singular experience of release, equanimity and calm which issued from the mutual encounter and surpassing of pity by fear and of fear by pity. In short, catharsis invites us: a) beyond a pathology of pity to compassion, and b) beyond a pathology of fear to serenity. It literally purges two of our most basic affects – *pathos* and *eleos* – until they are distilled and sublimated into a healing brew. It might almost be compared to a homeopathic remedy which finds the vaccination or antidote within the disease, turning malady into health.

How, then, is catharsis actually expressed? Often as a power of vicariousness, of being elsewhere (in another time or place), of imagining differently, experiencing the world through the eyes of strangers. It is what Shakespeare meant, I think, when he spoke of the wisdom which comes from exposing ourselves "to feel what wretches feel". Or when he has Hamlet discover his "prophetic soul" after the near fatal journey to England and the exchange in the graveyard, finally declaring that the "readiness is all". It is, no doubt, what Yeats meant when he spoke of "gaiety transfiguring all that dread". Or what Joyce was referring to when he had Stephen Dedalus define aesthetic purgation as the ability to sympathize with suffering while acknowledging the "secret cause"⁶⁹.

⁶⁹ For more on the cathartic role of narrative in Joyce and Irish literature see my *On Stories*, London and New York, Routledge, 2001, part 2 and my 'Epiphanies in Joyce' in Peter Gratton and John Manoussakis (eds.), *Traversing the Imaginary: Richard Kearney and the Postmodern Challenge*, Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 2006. For a more expanded account of the narrative character of catharsis, as both a poetical and ethical power, see my conclusion to *On Stories*, pp. 137f.

Let me try to illustrate this enigmatic mood of catharsis by means of a more detailed anthropological and cultural analysis.

I

I begin with some anthropological examples of how catharsis is linked to the process of narration – what Aristotle meant by *mimesis-muthos*. The healing character of narrative goes back to the earliest forms of myth. In *Structural Anthropology*, Claude Lévi-Strauss writes of shamanistic invocations of ancient mythic stories to bring about therapeutic effects. In one particularly striking instance, he recounts how a village shaman rehearses a legendary battle between a hapless mortal caught in a cave and fierce monsters prowling on the outside, with a view to healing a woman dying in childbirth due to a blocked birth canal. Having no access to surgical or medical intervention, the shaman only has recourse to the most ancient of therapies – myth. And as he and the other villagers gather round the woman in labor and recite aloud the final battle scene where the prisoner escapes from the cave and defeats the monsters, something magical occurs. The child is actually born⁷⁰.

⁷⁰ Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Effectiveness of Symbols" in *Structural Anthropology*, New York, Penguin, 1963, pp. 186f. He explains: "The sick woman believes in the myth...The tutelary spirits and malevolent spirits, the supernatural monsters and magical animals, are all part of a coherent system on which the native conception of the universe is founded. The sick woman accepts these mythical beings...What she does not accept are the incoherent and arbitrary pains, which are an alien element in her system but which the shaman, calling upon myth, will reintegrate within a whole where everything is meaningful. Once the sick woman understands, however, she does more than resign herself; she gets well. But no such thing happens to our sick when the causes of their diseases have been explained to them in terms of secretions, germs or viruses. We shall perhaps be accused of paradox if we answer that the reason lies in the fact that microbes exist and monsters do not. And yet the relationship between germ and disease is external to the mind of the patient, for it is a cause-and-effect relationship; whereas the relationship between monster and disease is internal to his mind, whether conscious or unconscious. It is a relationship between symbol and thing symbolized, or, to use the terminology of linguists, between sign and meaning. The shaman provides the sick woman with a *language*, by means of which unexpressed, and otherwise inexpressible, psychic states can be immediately expressed. And it is the transition to this verbal expression – at the same time making it possible to undergo in an ordered and intelligible form a real experience that would otherwise be chaotic and inexpressible – which induces the release of the physiological process, that is, the reorganization, in a favorable direction, of the process to which the sick woman is subjected".

Another mythological narrative that Lévi-Strauss explores is that of Oedipus Rex. Here he identifies a transformational logic at work which attempts to resolve at an imaginary level certain fundamental human contradictions that cannot be solved in reality. Lévi-Strauss shows how this myth comprises a series of recurring oppositions revolving round the structural antithesis of *underrating* and *overrating* blood relations. Far from being haphazard events, these oppositions undergo specific patterns of transmutation according to highly organized rules. A primary purpose of this oppositional logic in the narrative is to reconcile: 1) the cultural desire of humans to escape from his autochthonous, earthly origins by overcoming monsters (Kadmos overcomes the dragon, Oedipus overcomes the sphinx), and 2) the awareness of the difficulties imposed by nature on the realization of such a desire (epitomised by Oedipus' physical handicaps: he is swollen-footed and is eventually blind). The logic of the myth, according to Lévi-Strauss, mediates the contradictory relationship between nature and culture. It suggests that even if nature (monsters) can be overcome, human culture continues to feel the pressure of nature (club-foot, blindness, lameness etc). And this narrative mediation in turn responds, symbolically, to the age-old question: where do we come from? The one or the many? Are we born from one (mother nature)? Or from two? (the human culture of parents).

Myths do not necessarily provide a cognitive answer to these irresolvable conundrums so much as a symbolic response at the cathartic level of imaginary plots, characters and representations. What cannot be solved historically, in other words, can be resolved fictionally in terms of a structural balancing of opposites⁷¹.

This equilibrating function is also epitomized, claims Lévi-Strauss, in the mediational role of certain recurring mythic figures and idioms: 1) the *trickster* who mediates between the upper and lower worlds; 2) *ashes* (as in the legendary "Cinderella" syndrome) which mediate between the horizontal earth where ashes lie and the vertical sky into which ashes ascend in flame, 3) *spouts* and *raucous* which mediate between the herbivorous and carnivorous types (as carrion feeders they resemble the former in not killing what they eat and the latter in

so far as they eat meat); 4) *totems* which mediate between divine and animal orders; and 5) *sacred garments* which mediate between the order of nature (they are made of organic materials such as linen, cotton, flax etc) and the order of culture (they are woven and stitched into patterns). But this function of crossing is no gratuitous feat. The kind of logic in mythical mediation is, for Lévi-Strauss, just as rigorous as that of modern science or mathematics! And what is more, it offers a certain "timeless" wisdom of equanimity in so far as it taps into an unconscious reservoir of synchronic structures that never change from one historical period, culture or community to the next. This logic of ageless myth – directly available through "cold societies" that do not alter over time, and only indirectly through "hot societies" like our own that do change constantly – Lévi-Strauss calls "the savage mind" (*la pensée sauvage*). Myths are "machines for the suppression of time" because they furnish a specific sense of cathartic appeasement which calms our deep anxiety about our temporal origins and endings. They offer a *structural* response to the existential questions: "where do we come from?" and "where are we going?"

II

Many modern psychologists have followed Lévi-Strauss' claim that the cathartic function of myth is by no means confined to "primitive" societies but continues to operate in the human psyche today. Examining the depth structures of mythic stories both Maria Louise Von Franz and Bruno Bettelheim make the point that folkloric tales can serve to heal deep psychic wounds by allowing trauma victims or other disturbed persons to find some expression for inhibited feelings⁷². Myths enable us to experience certain otherwise inexperienced experiences – that is, events that were too painful to be properly registered at the time but which can, *après coup*, be allowed into expression indirectly, fictionally, 'as if they were happening. Thus good and evil mothers – foster mothers and fairy godmothers – in famous folk tales allow for the symbolic articulation of children's deeply ambivalent attitudes towards their own mothers (good because loving, nourishing, present/bad because other, separate, absent). And

⁷¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth" in *Structural Anthropology*, New York, Penguin, 1963, pp. 206-244.

⁷² See Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, New York, Vintage, 1975.

the same goes for surrogate fathers (as benign protector or malign castrator).

Freud had, of course, already alluded to this in his account of the *fort/da* scenario. He recounts how one day he witnessed his grandchild struggle with the painful absence of its mother. The infant managed to overcome its acute anxiety at the departure of its mother by playing a game of symbolic naming – *there/here* – as it cast a spool of string from its cot and then pulled it back again. In so doing, it was, Freud observed, fictionally imitating the otherwise intolerable comings and goings of the mother. Freud recognised this primal scene of symbolic play as the shortest story ever told – one which brought about a basic sense of catharsis which appeased the child. What remained inexplicable at the level of reality (the absence of the mother) was resolved, at least momentarily, in the playacting with the spool and words of make-belief. Imagining that the game of words was imitating the game of life, the child performed its first therapeutic feat of “let’s pretend!”

But happy endings are not the only answer. Unhappy endings could also bring a kind of relief. Since young children (and adults too) have always had difficulty accounting for the existence of pain, terror or darkness in the world, it was often the most violent plot conclusions to bedtime stories which enabled the children to sleep soundly. One thinks of the wicked witch in Snow White having her eyes plucked out by crows, or the ugly sisters in Cinderella dancing themselves to death as they clambered over a cliff in molten-hot shoes! In fact, the theory was that if children didn’t hear such stories they were more likely to wake with terrible nightmares in the middle of the night. If the structured recitation of timeless narratives didn’t do the trick, the dream-work of the unconscious would have to make up for it – at the cost of a restless, interrupted sleep. Once again we find symbolic solutions to lived problems.

But if children used stories to cope with the loss of parents, parents have also been known to tell stories to cope with the loss of children. Here we might cite the research of Lisa Schnell based on the trauma theory of Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience*. In a piece called “Learning How to Tell: Narratives of Child Loss”, Schnell uses the model of post-traumatic stress disorder to argue that narratives, as elaborate versions of dream-work, serve to “master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the

cause of the traumatic neuroses”⁷³. In short, the argument goes, when we find ourselves unable to deal with the traumatizing shock (*Schreck*) of a certain accident involving inadmissible pain – such as child loss –, we actually prevent ourselves from experiencing it at the time and so need to retrieve the unexperienced experience after the event (*nachtraglich*) via narratives which represent the traumatic event in a vicarious fashion. We thereby permit a certain genuine mourning anguish that can be worked-through and appropriated. The narrative work of displacement and condensation, of emplotment and schematism, of estrangement and synthesis, enables us to come in touch with the reality of the suffering which could not be faced head-on or at first-hand. Thus stories may, paradoxically, come to the rescue of truth.

Schnells accounts for the phenomenon of “creative compensation” by suggesting that the narrative repetition of events can release us from the obsessional repression of trauma (enabling repetition undoing disabling repetition, as it were). Of course in instances of child-loss we find a limit for such a compensation or catharsis theory; but Schnell insists that even here the very attempt – however doomed to failure – to put the loss into some kind of story itself somehow contributes to the slow healing process. In some cases of unbearable trauma the narrative mourner becomes like Penelope with her tapestry: “as long as she was still working at it, no-one could say that Odysseus would never come home...”. Sometimes, Schnell suggests, “the closest we get to answering the saddest questions life asks us, is to respond in the most beautiful language we can muster”⁷⁴.

Here again we see how, at a therapeutic level of personal loss, stories can become cathartic ways of revisiting blocked emotions of “pity and fear”, a pity too deep and a fear too huge to be dealt with at the time. Indeed, the seemingly unspeakable traumas of death, terror and pain – that come together in experiences of child-loss – are a true test for the narrative powers and limits of catharsis.

⁷³ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, cited by Lisa Schnell in “Learning How to Tell: Narratives of Child Loss” (Unpublished paper).

⁷⁴ Lisa Schnell, *op. cit.* See also further examples of therapeutic power of mythological sagas and fairy stories from Beowulf to Tolkien in my *On Stories*, London and New York, Routledge, 2002, pp. 159-161.

As ancient myth evolved historically it split into two different kinds of narrative: historical and fictional. The former (history) claimed to tell things "as" they actually happened (*historia rerum gestarum*) whereas the latter (fiction) took poetic licence to tell things "as if" they actually happened. Interestingly, the same term could be used for both in several languages – e.g. *histoire* in French, *Geschichte* in German – but the truth claims were essentially divergent in each case. It is arguable that the function of catharsis is available in both narrative genres. And while Aristotle seems to have emphasized the cathartic role of poetic-dramatic *muthos* – which he argued disclosed the "essence" of events rather than just chronicling particular "facts" like the historian – it may well be that the ancient Athenians who frequented the theatre responded to the tragic spectacle before them as both fantastical and (at least in part) historical. Verisimilitude and the credible "imitation of an action" were indispensable ingredients for a successful classical drama. Indeed, even today it is probable that people receive a certain "cathartic" release from deep trauma in having their histories (personal or communal) recounted and acknowledged. Just think of the important therapeutic role played by Truth and Justice Tribunals, War Crime Court cases and War or Genocide Memorials – not to mention the daily therapies available to individual patients in psychoanalytic, counseling or confessional sessions where the cathartic powers of the "talking cure" address the pain of countless sufferers who recount their "case histories"⁷⁵.

I will return to the question of historical remembering below. But first let me say a few words about the cathartic function of fictional narratives.

In my own Irish tradition, storytelling has always enjoyed a significant healing role. One of the earliest works written in Ireland was the *Book of Invasions*, an account of the various migrations, occupations and plantations which made up the history of the Irish

⁷⁵ See Derrida's subtle and trenchant critique of a certain psycho-therapeutic facility of mourning and catharsis in his *Complémentaire and Forgiveness*, London and New York, Routledge, 2001, p. 50f. "I believe it necessary," he writes here, "to distinguish between forgiveness and this process of reconciliation, this restitution of a health or a 'normality', as necessary and desirable as it would appear through amnesia; the work of mourning" etc. A finalized forgiveness is not forgiveness; it is only a political strategy or a psycho-therapeutic economy" (p. 50).

people. It comprised an imaginative mix of fantasy and chronicle and clearly sought to offer a response to the age-old question of identity: "who are we?" As the adage goes: if someone asks you who you are, you tell your story⁷⁶. And even if someone else doesn't ask you, you will invariably ask yourself. For stories have always been ways in which people explain themselves to themselves and to others. The great sagas and folktales of Gaelic Ireland served this purpose, right down to the establishment of the modern Irish nation. Indeed, it is no accident that one of the very first Irishman to ever speak in English literature – Captain McMorris in Shakespeare's *Henry V* – asks the question: "What is my nation?" In fact it has been said that to be Irish is to be someone who asks the question of what it means to be Irish!

Modern Irish literature can be fruitfully read as an endless multiplicity of responses to the question of meaning and identity. For given the split character of the Irish psyche – straddling north and south, catholic and protestant, Anglo and Celt, Unionist and Nationalist, tribalist and universalist – it is not surprising that the literatures of Ireland, in both languages, have witnessed countless attempts to balance these contrary and often contradictory pressures. The purpose of much of this writing can be seen, I believe, as poetic catharsis. What is broken and betrayed in empirical history can be transmuted into the *poiesis-muthos-mimesis* of literary imagination. As the Irish playwright Brian Friel remarked, Irish literature is opulent with tomorrows, penned in the operative mood, its words serving as weapons of the dispossessed. The suffering of historical defeat, failure, exile and disinheritance is narratively transformed into a cathartic act of fiction. Or as the Irish Nobel laureate, Seamus Heaney, puts it: "two buckets are easier carried than one, I grew up in between".

But well before Heaney and Friel, one could cite the examples of Sheridan, Wilde, Shaw, Synge and Joyce, all writers who turned the tragedy of double belonging (in Joyce's case to the point of near psychosis according to Carl Jung) into the marvel of reinvention. And that is what it surely was in most cases: recreation, reinterpretation and reinvention. For, as Joyce noted, "It's a brave man that would

⁷⁶ See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984-1988.

invent something that never happened". Indeed, in *Ulysses*, Joyce managed to translate the tragic pain of his national and personal history into one of the greatest works of modernist fiction. He expressed this in the telling metaphor of the surrogate father and son – Bloom and Stephen – seeking to be reconciled through the word. "There can be no reconciliation if there has not been a sundering", as Joyce observes⁷⁷. And the sunderings recorded in this narrative trajectory are legion – between *pater et filius*, Greek and Jew, English and Irish, cuckold and bawd, sacred and mundane, spirit and flesh, art and life, tradition and modernity, and so on.

We might mention here, in passing, how this theme of atoning the split between father and son recurs throughout various works of Irish literature, including the great drama written by Joyce's contemporary, John Millington Synge, entitled *Playboy of the Western World*. This tells of an estranged son who becomes a hero in the end of all by inventing a story of parricide only to be finally reconciled with his father! The son, Christy Mahon, sums up the moral of the story thus: "I was made a man by the power of a lie". This and the other literary narratives cited above express a recurring narrative phenomenon: we write in order to "fill the hole inside us"⁷⁸.

What is true of Irish literature is, I suspect, true of all national and world literatures albeit inflected in each case with distinct cultural contexts, contents, moods, characters and tones.

IV

In the remainder of this paper I want to look at how the cathartic function applies to the most controversial limit-cases of trauma, namely, narratives of genocide. Here one encounters the cogent objection that catharsis is really out of place, since it seeks to appease or resolve in some way the irredeemable horror of evil. My argument will be that even if cathartic narrative seems utterly inadequate here, it is important to go on telling the story and seeking some sort of purgative release, however minimal or provisional. Otherwise, melancholy wins out over mourning, paralysis over pathos, and

oblivion over remembrance. The stakes are not insignificant. This is, I admit, a highly vexed issue and I explore the following examples of genocide stories by way of a "free variation" of attempts to try to make sense of the senseless.

In Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* we find the protagonist, Helen Costello, offer this arresting account of the indispensable importance of narrative imagination for ethical sensibility. "The particular horror of the camps", she writes, "the horror that convinces us that what went on there was a crime against humanity, is not that despite a humanity shared with their victims, the killers treated them like lice. That is too abstract. The horror is that the killers refused to think themselves into the place of their victims, as did everyone else. They said, 'It is *they* in those cattle-cars rattling past'. They did not say, 'How would it be if it were I in that cattle-car?'... They said, 'It must be the dead who are being burnt today, making the air stink and falling in ash on my cabbages'. They did not say, 'How would it be if I were burning?' In other words, concludes Costello, they closed their hearts. The heart is the seat of a faculty, *sympathy*, that allows us to share at times the being of another... There are people who have the capacity to imagine themselves as someone else, there are people who have no such capacity, and there are people who have the capacity but choose not to exercise it. There is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination"⁷⁹.

Coetzee's basic message here seems to be this: if we possess narrative compassion we cannot kill. If we do not, we cannot love. The loving is in the healing, the *catharsis*, the balancing of deep empathy with wise acknowledgement of "the hidden cause". In this instance, we might say that the narrative catharsis, performed and

⁷⁷ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, New York Penguin edition, 1972, p. 195. See my development of this theme in "Epiphanies of Joyce and Proust" in *Traversing the Imaginary: Richard Kearney and the Postmodern Challenge*, edited John Manoussakis and Peter Gratton, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2006.

⁷⁸ For a fuller development of these themes see my *On Stories*, pp.17-31.

⁷⁹ J.M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999. For a more detailed discussion of this and other related examples see the section entitled 'Release (Catharsis) in my *On Stories*, pp. 137-142. Coetzee's point is that the empathic imagination extends not just to humans being treated brutally like animals but to animals being treated brutally as less than animals! When one thinks of poems like Ted Hughes' "The Jaguar" or Rilke's poem on the caged leopard (not to mention popular stories like *Jungle Book*), one realizes how effectively the empathic powers of imagination can traverse divisions between species. For a further analysis of the crucial ethical role of empathic imagination see the concluding section entitled "Narrative Imagination – The Ethical Challenge" to my *Poetics of Imagining*, New York, Fordham University Press, pp. 241-258.

prescribed by the narrator, offers a singular mix of compassion and awe, whereby we experience the suffering of other beings – strangers, aliens, scapegoats, victims – as though we were them. And it is precisely this double response of difference (*as if*) and identity (*as*) that provokes a reversal of our habitual attitude, with all its built-in protection devices and denial mechanisms. One experiences oneself as another and the other as oneself. One begins to apprehend otherwise un-unapprehendable suffering.

V

Another especially impressive instance of the cathartic narrator is Helen Bamber. The main reason for this, we are told in her biography by Mark Belton, is that she was an exceptionally “good listener”. Here is an attentive witness par excellence. Bamber was not only a founding member of Amnesty International, she was also one of the first therapists to enter the concentration camps after the war. Bamber’s goal was to encourage the survivors to somehow convert their trauma into stories and thereby find some release from their mute and immutable paralysis. Here she encountered “impossible stories” which *had to be told*.

Bamber describes this narrative paradox – telling the untellable – well in her account of counseling victims after her arrival in Belsen in the immediate wake of the liberation. “(I) would be sitting there in one of those chilly rooms, on a rough blanket on a bed, and the person I was talking to would suddenly begin to tell me what they had seen, or try to tell what it was like... Above all else there was the need to tell you everything, over and over and over”⁸⁰. Eventually Bamber realized that what was most important in all this was to “listen and receive this”, as if it were part of you and that the act of taking and showing that you were available was itself playing some useful role. A sort of mourning beneath and beyond tears: “it wasn’t so much grief as a pouring out of some ghastly vomit like a kind of horror”⁸¹. The purgative idiom here is not accidental. What Bamber’s accounts of these basic first hand testimonies makes evident is that Holocaust stories – like all stories of deep trauma, fear and pain – are to be understood less as tales of heroic triumph over adversity, than as

⁸⁰ Helen Bamber, *The Good Listener*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998. Cited in *On Stories*, pp. 139-140.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

truncated, wounded quasi-narratives that call out to be heard, impossible stories that the victims and survivors nonetheless *have to tell*. Indeed Primo Levi, arguably the most famous narrator-survivor of them all, compared this narrative impulse to tell and retell the story as something as basic as an alimentary need. For without such conversion from aphasia to testimony, from silent wounds to narrated words (however stammered or inarticulate), the survivors could not survive their own survival. They could not lift themselves from their bunks and walk out the gates of the death camps. They could not pass from death back into life.

One especially vivid account of narrative testimony in Belsen says this with terrible poignancy. Bamber describes a play in Yiddish which was performed for remaining survivors by other survivors. It re-enacted a typical family at table and was received in total attention by the audience. She writes: “The family portrayed would be obviously an orthodox family ; and then the Nazis would come in. And they would drag or kill the mother ; and the power of the scene turned around the abuse of the mother, and the break-up of the family. The depiction of the Nazis was realistic and violent. The sense of disaster about to happen could be felt in that hall. Nothing explicit about the aftermath was shown, as I remember it. I have never seen anything so effective, despite the crudity of the stage and the performance. It was raw and so close to the experience of the audience. There was never any applause. Each time was like a purging”⁸². Aristotle would have called this purgation by pity and fear, *katharsis*. And of course the key to the deep power of release from the nightmare which this basic *muthos-mimesis* allowed is the fact that it balanced the act of identification with a theatrical representation. So that the pain, which could not be lived directly, could be re-lived by being re-presented “as if” it were happening again, but this time from a certain distance (the “estrangement” being provided, however minimally, by the theatrical form and plot). The survivors were thus permitted to re-experience their own previously un-experienced experience – un-experienced because too unbearable to be registered or processed in the original immediacy of the trauma.

Thus stories become cathartic to the extent that they combine empathic imagination with a certain acknowledgment of the cause and

⁸² *Ibid.*

context of the suffering, thereby offering a wider lens to review one's own insufferable pain. The degree of detachment afforded by the narrative representation may be small indeed, but without it one would be smothered by trauma to the point of numbness. Without some mediation through *mimesis-mythos*, one risks succumbing to the sheer overwhelmingness of horror. Indeed, in this regard it is telling that several camp survivors have recounted how they finally achieved some relief from the trauma when they recognized themselves, from a certain formal distance, in characters portrayed in narrative accounts of the holocaust, often well after the events took place. One could cite here the important debates on the role of mourning in such works as *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993), *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann, 1985) or *Life is Beautiful* (Roberto Benigni, 1997), not to mention the literary accounts of authors like Wiesel, Hillelsum, Amos or Levi⁸³. These various narrative testimonies – cinematic, theatrical, literary, documentary – invite subsequent generations to recall, in however flawed or fractured a manner, the unspeakable events of the holocaust “as if” they were experiencing them for themselves. And even though such narrative representations inevitably fail to do full justice to the singularity of the horror, they allow, nonetheless and in spite of all the odds, many people to remember what actually happened so that, in Primo Levi's words, it may never happen again.

Speaking of her work as both a counselor in the camps and, later in Amnesty International, as a therapist for survivors of torture in Latin America, Bamber points to the need for cathartic witness which implies something more profound than mere cognitive information of the facts (though that is crucial too). Narrating stories of horror and injustice, she insists, is a way of never giving up on the dead. “We must *acknowledge* the truth as well as having knowledge of it”⁸⁴. This double duty of testimonial admission (through narrative) and cognition (through scientific evidence and explanation) seeks to honor our debt to the dead, to commemorate the forgotten, to foster the forfeited of history.

⁸³ See the sections, “Testifying to History: The Case of Schindler” and “The Paradox of Testimony” in *On Stories*, pp. 41-77, and the chapter “The Immemorial: A Task of Narrative” in my *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, London and New York, Routledge, 2003. See also Saul Friedlander (ed), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*, Harvard University Press, 1992

⁸⁴ See Helen Bamber, *op.cit.*, pp. 228 et seq.

My final example of narrating horror concerns the Armenian genocide. This case of cathartic testimony concerns a documentary film made by a survivor of this “officially” unacknowledged massacre. One evening in the summer of 1915, a young Armenian mother hid her baby in a mulberry bush in the mountain village of Kharpert in Eastern Turkey. The child, who survived the slaughter of the village population by Turkish troops, was J. Michael Hagopian, who eighty years later completed a major documentary called *Voices from the Lake* (2000). The killing of over 1.5 million Armenians has been called the “silent genocide” since it has always been denied by the Turkish government. Hagopian spent years researching the film, traveling widely to glean first-hand testimonies and stitch together the awful events which unfolded in that year. One of the most important pieces of evidence was a series of photographs taken by an American diplomat posted to Turkey at the time, which he buried on his departure from the country for fear they would be confiscated by the Turk authorities. Many years later he returned and retrieved the photos, faded and gnawed at the edges, but providing proof nonetheless of claims that over 10,000 bodies were deposited in the lake just west of Kharpert. This reclaiming of buried “imitations of an action” served as confirmation of Hagopian's story of genocide, verifying the dictum, “you can kill a people but you cannot silence their voices”⁸⁵. In allowing these suppressed voices to speak at last after more than eighty years of silence, Hagopian permits a certain working-through of memory, a powerful act of mourning if by no means a miracle cure.

This is crucial to our understanding of catharsis. It is a matter of retrieving painful truths – through the “gap” of narrative *mimesis* (the “as” of history or the “as if” of fiction) – rather than some alchemical potion. Catharsis is not magic. It is a labor of recognition but no guaranteed remedy⁸⁶. Moreover, the act of testimony, I repeat, involves both an affective empathy with the victims and a cognitive knowledge of the events which actually occurred (in this case provided by the forensic and empirical evidence of photos which enable us to count the bodies and see the casualties). We need story to

⁸⁵ *The Montreal Gazette*, April 22, 2000, p. 10.

⁸⁶ See *On Stories*, p. 187, note 15.

be struck by the horror and history to know the "hidden cause" which occasioned it. In Hagopian's layered narrative, catharsis conjoins both *pathos* and *phronesis*, both feeling and finding out.

The *gap* of narration, mentioned above, can refer to the "as" of historical narrative or to the "as if" of fictional narrative. Indeed in the three genocide testimonies – Coetzee, Bamber and Hagopian – we have just been examining, it usually involves some combination of both. In witnessing to past pain, narratives imitate the life of suffering-and-action in such a way as to refigure events absent, unbearable and otherwise forgotten. Narrative catharsis, I have been arguing, is a way of making absent things present in a unique balancing of compassion and dispassion, of identification and contemplation, of particular emotion and universal understanding. It is a task which, if finely and delicately achieved, may proffer some measure of healing.

VII : *Epilogue*

Narrative is not, of course, always on the side of the angels. History-making and story-telling can just as easily result in propaganda and distortion as in healing and release. For every truthful testimony to horror there are those who engage in denial. The "official history" of Turkish negationism of the Armenian genocide and the revisionist controversies in France (Faurisson), Germany (Nolde) and Britain (Irving) regarding the holocaust, are timely reminders of the manipulative and mendacious potentials of narrativity. Not every narrative version of the past tells it "as it actually happened" ; and the inevitable temporal discrepancy between past and present usually allows for a certain conflict of interpretations. This notwithstanding, I would still claim that cathartic narratives serve the truth. Indeed I would go further in suggesting that narratives can only be genuinely remedial to the extent that they are "true", or at least as true as is humanly possible given the epistemological limits involved in every finite representation of past events. Testimonial narratives might be said to be cathartic, therefore, to the degree that they are: 1) true to the "essence" of these events (*poiesis-mimesis*) ; and 2) true to the singular details of the empirical facts themselves (*anagnore-sis-mimesis*). There must be both affect and acknowledgment.

What obtains for collective history also obtains for individual case histories. For every enabling narrative in therapy you can find a

disabling one. For every Little Hans healed there is a Dora maimed or misunderstood. Alongside the therapeutic cures for victims of child abuse we find controversies surrounding false memory syndrome (especially concerning long-term recovered memory)⁸⁷. And, here again, I would argue that what we need to constantly ask is: whose story is it anyway ? Who is telling the story ? To whom is it told ? About what is it told ? In what manner ? And for what reason ? For, to juggle with Shakespeare, no story is either good or bad but thinking makes it so. And by thinking here I understand the critical faculty of attentive ethical reason which must always accompany the moving force of poetical imagination. Without the former, our responses are blind. Without the latter they are fleshless. Cathartic narratives are those which combine both. Catharsis is the chiasmus where poetics and ethics meet. And where pain finds – sometimes – some release.

⁸⁷ For a detailed critical discussion of Freud's famous "Dora Case" and the controversies surrounding recent court cases about long-term recovered memory, see *On Stories*, pp. 31-46.