

Narrative and ethics

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Études de Lettres : revue de la Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Lausanne**

Band (Jahr): - **(1996)**

Heft 3-4

PDF erstellt am: **30.06.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-870274>

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NARRATIVE AND ETHICS

Dans un débat avec la pensée post-moderne (J.-F. Lyotard, G. Vattimo), qui souligne avec force la dissolution des grands récits fondateurs d'idéologies, l'auteur s'efforce de rappeler, avec Paul Ricœur, le lien de dépendance étroit entre la « compréhension narrative » et la pratique d'une éthique fondée sur la mémoire et la responsabilité. En dépit des événements irréprésentables qui marquent notre histoire, il nous rappelle que la tâche du récit n'est plus de justifier les idéologies en vigueur, mais d'exercer une faculté de juger à la fois prospective et critique.

In an essay written in 1939 called *The Storyteller*, the German philosopher Walter Benjamin anticipated some critical implications of the demise of narrative¹. The threat to storytelling, ushered in by a technological era of impersonal information was, he argued, eroding the transmission of commonly shared experience. This prefigured the end not only of the notion of "community" (*civitas*) but of historical memory itself. A new culture of instantaneous and fragmented sensations would soon replace the inherited wisdom of tradition, dissolving history into a series of isolated presents devoid of past and future.

Some recent pronouncements on our so-called postmodern condition seek to give credence to Benjamin's prognosis. Jean Baudrillard, for instance, claims that we now live in a mediatized culture of depthless simulation which amounts to an abandonment of reference to historical reality (what he terms "irreference"). While Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault and Gianni Vattimo have, in their respective ways, analysed what they see as the dissolution of "Grand Narratives" into fractured discursive practices. Having dispensed with the universal stories of Greek

1. Walter BENJAMIN, "The Storyteller", in *Illuminations*, New York : Schocken Books, 1969.

metaphysics, Judeo-Christian theism or Enlightenment philosophy (which these authors consider perveyors of prejudice), we are alleged to have entered an era of “weak” thinking unencumbered by claims to truth, identity or the good.

In this paper I propose to defend certain specifically ethical characteristics of narrative which, I believe, such postmodern prognostications fail to acknowledge.

I: Narrative — the aristotelian legacy

In an essay entitled “Life in Quest of Narrative” (1989), Paul Ricœur draws a parallel between what he calls “narrative understanding” and “the practical wisdom of moral judgment”. He defines narrative as “the synthesis of the heterogenous”: that is, the capacity to redescribe reality by combining elements dispersed in time and space into some kind of coherent pattern. This practice of productive synthesis Ricœur relates back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, in particular the notions of *muthos* (emplotment) and *mimesis* (representation as “imitation of action”). Ricœur outlines the relation between poetics and ethics thus. While ethics, from the Greeks to the present day, speaks of the relation between virtue and the pursuit of happiness in largely universal terms, it is the task of narrative, in its “poetic” forms, to provide us with specific ways of *imagining* how the moral aspects of human behaviour may be linked with happiness or unhappiness. Narrative, with its double role of *muthos/mimesis*, may thus furnish so many imaginary variations or thought experiments which familiarise us with the causes and consequences of human conduct as it relates to virtue in our culture. If we are Greeks or classically-minded, for instance, and want to learn about courage, we tell the story of Achilles; if we want to learn about fidelity, we tell the story of Penelope; if we want to learn about daring, we tell the story of Prometheus, and so on. Such “exemplary” narrative plots reveal how twists or reversals of action relate forms of excellence with forms of fortune or misfortune.

These “lessons” of narrative constitute the poetic “universals” of which Aristotle speaks in the *Poetics*. They are, of course, of a lower degree than the universals of logic or theoretical thought; but they are, for all that, more suited to ethics in so far as they attend to the singularity of human experience. Ricœur speaks, accordingly, of a characteristically narrative form of understanding, which he relates to Aristotle’s *phronesis* (translated by the Latins

as *prudentia*). The vivid narrative imagining of how we relate to the good, and of the results deriving from it, takes the form of what Ricœur calls “phronetic understanding”².

Ricœur summarizes the Aristotelian model of narrative ethics under the following three categories, drawn from both the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric*: 1) *persuasion* (the narrative pact struck between narrator and reader always carries some evaluative charge — relative to the relation between desire and happiness — since the account of the world given by a narrator is never ethically neutral); 2) *vision* (narrative enables us to imaginatively explore and *see* essential connections between our actions and their ends *qua* good and evil); and 3) *initiative* (to see our existence in terms of such extended possibilities of vision is to better identify our goals and motives, and thereby inaugurate new beginnings).

Martha Nussbaum is another contemporary philosopher who defies the postmodern prognosis by staking a claim for the relationship between a poetics of narrative and an ethics of judgment. In the preface to *Love’s Knowledge* (1990), Nussbaum argues that the emotions and evaluations evoked by narrative forms can lead to special kinds of ethical attention³. What is peculiar to the ethical quality of narrative understanding, especially in literary works, is that it gives priority to the perception of particular people and situations over abstract rules. (In that sense, Nussbaum’s appeal to narrative, like Ricœur’s and MacIntyre’s before her, demonstrates a preference for Aristotle over Kant). Literary narratives, Nussbaum goes on to suggest, can complement and humanize the abstract theoretical systems of a pure morality of rules.

The narrative approach argues for an ethical understanding that involves affective as well as intellectual characteristics, affording primary consideration to specific experiential contexts rather than to generalizable norms. The narrative approach, in short, consi-

2. Paul RICŒUR, “Life in Quest of Narrative”, in *Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. D. Wood, London: Routledge, 1991. For a developed critical analysis of Ricœur’s theory of narrative, see “The Narrative Imagination: Between Poetics and Ethics (Ricœur)” in my *Poetics of Modernity*, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1995, p. 92-108.

3. Martha NUSSBAUM, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

ders ethics in terms of human desire rather than exclusively in terms of rules. It favours teleology over deontology and seeks to extend our understanding of ethical philosophy beyond formalist categories to include the “exemplary” persuasiveness of literary and oral stories.

Nussbaum’s own chosen examples from literature are Henry James, Charles Dickens and Proust. And her subsequent exposition of a narrative ethics operates on the following premise: narrative plot, style and character are not purely neutral but shape the mind of the reader; and it is the business of the alert mind to discriminate between these different shapes. One of Nussbaum’s primary concerns is, accordingly, to adumbrate an ethics of narrative persuasion by exploring how stories transform (or deform) the desires and imaginations of readers.

Proust’s claim, invoked by Nussbaum, is that fiction fosters genuine altruism. How? By enabling us to come to know one another without being overwhelmed by the “vertiginous kalidoscope” of envy and possessiveness. Novels invite us to relate without jealousy. Dickens, for his part, showed how the “fresh imagination of particularity” exemplified by fiction, is an essential moral faculty. While Stendhal saw fiction as a way of exposing the hidden mechanisms of mimetic desire as pathological will to power. Literary narratives, these authors assumed, enable us to transcend the voluntary imagination (to quote Proust again) with “involuntary memory”, opening ourselves to the complexity and irreducibility of what is other than ourselves. Nussbaum even goes so far as to affirm that “reading novels is a practice of falling in love”⁴. She writes: “Allowing oneself to be in some sense passive and malleable, open to new and sometimes mysterious influences, is a part of the transaction (in reading literature) and part of its value... And it is in part because novels prepare the reader for love that they make the valuable contribution they do to society and to moral development”⁵. By inviting the reader to appreciate fully the multilayered nuances of human experiences, novels may actually serve as a “school for the moral sentiments, distancing us from blinding personal passions and cultivating those that are more conducive to community”⁶.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 238.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 238.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 240.

Once again, Aristotle returns as a central reference. Indeed, Nussbaum states that it is her commitment to develop an ethics along broadly Aristotelian lines which compels her to explore the emotional structures of fictional narratives⁷. Her arguments may be summed up as follows: novels conduct an investigation into the good life 1) by exploring the non commensurability of valuable things, 2) by provoking concern for particular context-sensitive judgments, and 3) by alerting us to the emotions as source of insight into living as human⁸. Nussbaum is even prepared to extrapolate, somewhat tendentiously, certain connections between politics and literature. For example, that “social democracy and the art of the novel are allies”, since their “focus is the human being, seen as both needy and resourceful”⁹.

II: Narrative — the kantian legacy

The Aristotelian tradition is not the only one, however, to provide a basis for a narrative ethics. The Kantian legacy — and particularly that of the Third Critique — also has a significant contribution to make here (*pace* MacIntyre and other anti-Enlightenment Aristotelians). I will explore this contribution under the heading of “empathic” or “representative” imagining, a faculty which Kant identifies with aesthetic reflective judgment.

All that has been said above presupposes, I would argue, that novels have the capacity to *implicate* readers. It is only if and when we readers become imaginative participants in the fictional adventures of the characters that we come to explore a common world (what Benjamin meant by “tradition”). So that what occurs in the fiction is not some odd solipsistic event but an essential possibility for human life as such. Without this minimal sense of fellow-feeling or empathy with the characters featured in a narrative, there is little sense of shared humanity¹⁰.

The assumption here is that narratives are a basic agency of ethical *empathy*. They cross boundaries and help us, in King

7. *Ibid.*, p. 390.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 390.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 391.

10. As John Banville’s homicidal character, Freddie, puts it in his novel, *The Book of Evidence*: “Yes, that failure of imagination is my real crime, the one that made the others possible... I could kill her because for me she was not alive”.

Lear's phrase, "to feel what wretches feel". In other words, they address readers as human beings rather than merely as members of this or that class, sect, faction or clique. The power of novels to translate not just across languages but across minds, is due to the fact that they empower readers to identify with the characteristic moments of human finitude, that is, with forms of existence where it is natural to concern oneself with the concrete events that affect particular people. Narratives, in brief, enable each one of us to relate to the other as another self and to oneself as another.

"Narrative translatability", understood in this broad sense, is another word for what Kant, in the *Critique of Judgment*, called "representative thinking". Contrary to the structuralist thesis of Roland Barthes that "in narrative no one speaks"¹¹, neo-Kantians like Hannah Arendt hold to the conviction that narrative is a fundamentally communicative — because imaginative — act. Narrative, it would seem, invariably implies someone saying something to someone about something. There is an author, a reader and a reference (real or imaginary). Narrative is not language talking to itself. It defies the formalist notion of *langue* as a "prison house of language".

Arendt is arguably the first continental thinker to recognise the possibility of combining Aristotle with Kant as a basis for narrative ethics. Following the Kantian analysis of the Third Critique, Arendt construes narrative as amplifying the circle of selfhood into an "enlarged mentality" capable of imagining oneself in the place of the other. Here Arendt sees an intimate connection between the *sensus communis* associated with Kant's aesthetic reflective judgment and ethical judgment proper. "The power of judgment rests on a potential agreement with others", she writes, "and the thinking process which is active in judging something is not, like the thought process of pure reasoning, a dialogue between me and myself, but finds itself always and primarily, even if I am quite alone in making up my mind, in an anticipated communication with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement. From this potential agreement judgment derives its specific validity... It needs the special presence of others "in whose place" it must think, whose perspectives it must take into

11. Roland BARTHES, "A Structural Analysis of Narratives", in *Image, Music, Text*, London: Fontana, 1977.

consideration, and without whom it never has the opportunity to operate at all”¹².

This narrative mode of “representative thinking” — where I relate myself to others — may be seen as an emancipation from the narcissistic enclosure of the ego. But it by no means necessitates an elimination of self-identity as such (without which no valid concept of ethical responsibility would be sustainable). As a form of empathic or analogical imagination — opening us to the foreign and unfamiliar worlds of others — narrative can transfigure the ego into a representative subject. Or to borrow Ricœur’s felicitous formula, the self-same self (*moi*) is transfigured into a self-for-another (*soi*). Through the narrative use of a free variation of fictional selves, the self flows from itself towards others, before eventually returning to itself enlarged and enhanced. The implications of such representative imagining for ethical judgment are crucial for Arendt: “The more people’s standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would think and feel if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking”¹³. In stories, as Joyce puts it in *Finnegans Wake*, the “self is othered”.

It might also be worth noting here that Kant’s analysis of the productive, temporalising and schematising role of transcendental imagination, as outlined in the 1781 edition of the First Critique, has been invoked by Ricœur and others as ultimate basis of the narrative functions of identity, synthesis and innovation (though Kant himself does not actually use the term “narrative”). It is, after all, the capacity of transcendental imagination to schematise time — past, present, future — and to synthesise the manifold, which enables the self to have a sense of its own perduring identity and to open itself, in turn, to an horizon of possibilities beyond itself. These two conditions of self-identity and self-transcendence are, I suggest, essential preconditions for a narrative ethics.

To summarize my remarks thus far, I would say that narrative, understood from both an Aristotelian and Kantian perspective, can serve an indispensable function of ethical *responsibility*. By recounting the story of one’s life in response to the other’s question — who are you? — the narrative self constitutes itself as a

12. Hannah ARENDT, “Crisis of Culture”, in *Between Past and Future*, Middlesex: Penguin, 1977, p. 220-21.

13. *Ibid.*

perduring identity over time, capable of sustaining commitments and pledges, that is, of keeping one's promises to the the other.

III: Narrative and intersubjectivity

I will now try to tease out some of the more salient implications of this position.

Narrative identity is both subjective and intersubjective. It is subjective in the sense that the answer to the question "who is the author or agent" is, as mentioned above, to tell the story of one's own life. For it is the ongoing identity of a person, presupposed by the designation of a proper name, which epitomises the narrative conviction that it is the same subject who endures through its diverse acts and commitments between birth and death. The story told tells about the action of the "who"; and the identity of this "who" is a narrative one.

Narrative identity is intersubjective, however, in so far as narrative involves someone saying something to someone. No one tells stories to oneself except in the form of a fictional alter-ego. Thus if the narrative subject furnishes itself with the cohesion of a life (*Zusammenhang des Lebens*) by synthesising its past, present and future selves, it does this, at least implicitly, in an intersubjective context — that is in the light of new and old stories it tells about itself and others. The reader can only become the reader and writer of his own life, to quote Proust, by simultaneously becoming a reader and writer of other's lives. Narrative identity is invariably intersubjective because it is a text woven of stories heard and told.

This narrative model of intersubjective identity has been developed by a number of contemporary thinkers from Ricœur and MacIntyre to Taylor, Nussbaum and Benhabib. And what all agree on, despite their differences, is that the Cartesian view of the disembodied cogito, no less than the metaphysical illusion of a substance-like self, ignores the essentially narrative process of *socialisation*. The self acquires its identity in large part by receiving other's narratives and renarrating itself in turn to others. Self-identity involves one projecting a narrative onto a world of which one is both a creative agent and a receptive actor¹⁴.

14. Daniel ADAMS, *The Stories we Live by: Personal Myth and the Making of the Self*, New York: William Morrow and co., 1995.

The narrative model of identity thus revives the age-old virtue of self-knowledge, not as some self-regarding ego but as an examined life freed from narcissism and solipsism through a recognition of our dialogical interdependence vis-a-vis others. The subject of narrative self-knowledge may then be solicited, from an ethical point of view, as a “responsible” self, educated by the cathartic effects of historical or fictional stories conveyed by intersubjective culture. Self-constancy becomes a property of a subject instructed by the figures of a culture it has critically and creatively applied to itself¹⁵. The storied self knows that self is not enough. Narrative reminds one that one is always, at best, oneself-as-another (*soi-même comme un autre*).

This recognition of the intersubjective character of narrative extends beyond purely novelistic narratives to non-literary ones. Two such examples discussed by Ricœur in his *Conclusions to Time and Narrative* (Vol. 3) are psychotherapy (the “talking cure”) and communal identity (e.g. the story of Biblical Israel)¹⁶.

Psychoanalysis or psychotherapy involves an intersubjective process whereby a self (the analysand) comes to know itself better by narrating itself to another (the analyst) more truthfully than it had narrated itself heretofore. Here once again, I answer the question “who are you?” by telling my story. Through the so-called “talking cure”, the analysand commits himself to “working through” (*durcharbeiten*) the fragments of existence until they constitute some kind of narrative configuration. The scattered bits and pieces of suppressed or unintelligible experience are shaped by a narrative telling which enables the self to acknowledge a certain self-constancy in and through change. In principle, therefore, psychotherapy might be said to show how the story of a life comes to be composed through a series of rectifications applied to preceding narratives (which we tell about ourselves or others tell about us). This is what Ricœur calls the recovery of an ethically responsible self-identity by reconnecting past to present and fu-

15. Paul RICŒUR, *Oneself as Another*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

16. Paul RICŒUR, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988. See also Peter KEMP, “Toward a Narrative Ethics”, in *The Narrative Path: The Later Works of Paul Ricœur*, ed. P. Kemp, D. Rasmussen, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989.

ture. Without a minimum of narrative self-constancy over time (which some acquire through therapy), we could not properly speak of the *same* subject being answerable to other subjects.

This is also true for the subject in the plural. A community, for example, comes to know itself in the stories it tells about itself. Hence the importance of the perpetual corrections and clarifications which new historians bring to their predecessors' accounts. To paraphrase Ricœur's account of the classic case of biblical Israel: it is precisely in the narrating of its foundational stories that the historical community bearing its name came to be formed. In a curious narrative circle, Israel draws its own self-image from the reinterpretation of those texts it has itself created. And that is no doubt why it is, after all, the "culture of the Book" *par excellence*.

For communal identity, therefore, no less than for personal identity, stories proceed from stories. And it is this very process of intersubjective recounting and listening that underlies the basic ethical principle of *answerability*. One cannot be faithful to one's word, unless one has a minimal grasp — through some form of narrative — of *who* one is.

But narrative responsibility requires more than constancy (promise-keeping); it also requires flexibility. A fundamental fluidity and openness pertains to narrative identity once we are prepared to recognize that it is always something made and remade. Societies which admit that they constitute themselves through an on-going process of narrative are unlikely to degenerate into self-righteousness, fundamentalism or racism: that is, to take themselves *literally*. The proclivity of a nation towards exclusivist nationalism or xenophobia should, in principle, be resisted by the in-built imaginative tendency of its narratives to freely vary worlds foreign to itself. Fundamentalism only arises when a society conceals the fact that it is founded on narrative. Just as unreconstructed nationalism emerges when a nation reifies into a self-regarding essence. (As Adorno reminds us, "all reification is forgetting"). By contrast, it is the capacity of narrative imagination to constantly transcend the status quo of any given society towards possible alternatives, that sustains a sense of ethical empathy with, and attentiveness to, others. Thus, to return to the example of biblical Israel, we may say that it is the Jewish community's ability to reimagine itself through its own narratives which provides it with both the perduring identity of an historical

people *and* the ethical resource to imagine the narratives of others (e.g. the Palestinians) who oppose them¹⁷.

IV: Critical considerations

But is all this not a little too sanguine? Are we not assuming that narrative is invariably on the side of the angels? An agency of healing and emancipation rather than of deceit and closure? Why, one might legitimately ask, should not the narrative emplotment of events serve to impose a fake unity on the irreducible diversity of things? Why should stories not provoke hatred as much as harmony? Addiction to ideology as much as attentiveness to singularity? Why should the narrative “concordance of discordance” (to use Ricœur’s formula) not be the fabrication of lies, self-deceptions, consoling happy endings which deny the refractory and ineluctable brokenness of human experience?

It is crucial to acknowledge here that narrative identity, be it personal or communal, is never innocent. Every story is told from a certain point of view, presupposes certain interests and anticipates certain ends. No narrative is presuppositionless. And that is why Habermas and the critical theorists are quite correct to insist on the application of a critique of ideology to both individual and collective narratives. A hermeneutic of affirmation always needs to be accompanied by a hermeneutic of suspicion. In this respect, it seems that certain advocates of a narrative ethics — e.g. MacIntyre and Nussbaum — tend to underestimate the *abusive* potential of narrative. The narrative self can only be ethically responsible, I believe, if it subjects its own self-constancy to self-questioning. Narrative identity, in other words, must never forget its origins in narrativity. For such forgetfulness breeds uncritical naïvety.

In short, when it comes to ethical consideration, it is advisable to submit the paradoxical function of narrative to the critique of

17. While it may well be true that this ethical responsibility is not always observed, it is significant that Jewish intellectuals such as Arendt and Buber were adamant in insisting on the moral rights of a bi-national state in Palestine — in other words, on a shared community based upon the mixing and exchanging of narrative memories and aspirations. Jerusalem-Palestine: a single holy city made up of two different but complementary narratives. To the degree that they pursue such a vision, both Jewish and Islamic communities could be said to remain faithful to their respective ethical narratives (foundational with regard to their religions) of always welcoming the stranger, the other-than-self.

the “three masters of suspicion”: 1) Nietzsche’s exposure of narrative as masked will-to-power; 2) Marx’s as purveyor of false-consciousness; and 3) Freud’s as illusory compensation for a lost or repressed object. In this penultimate part of my paper, I will assess some of the arguments for and against the ethical function of narrativity.

There is no doubt that storytelling often proves a breeding-ground of distortions and illusions. This has become a conspicuously controversial theme in recent discussions in psychotherapy, for instance, where, following Freud’s famous Dora case or the more current debates over incest abuse memories, the manipulative uses of narrative as “cover-up” have been dramatically foregrounded¹⁸. This is even more explicit with collective narratives where power interests are rarely absent from the scene. In “Permission to Narrate” and again in *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said demonstrates how political narrative frequently operates as a dissimulation and inculcation of power. But as Said correctly adds, one of the most effective ways to deal with such ideological representations is by means of what he calls “counter-narratives”¹⁹. These counter-narratives are themselves forms of narrative — albeit satirical, parodic, reversed. The counter-narratives can thus serve an ethical-critical purpose as *alternative* stories to the official story, as truncated or subversive narratives that brush history against the grain and put the dominant power in question. One finds many examples of this in post-colonial or so-called “minority” writers — Black women authors like Alice Walker or Toni Morrison, Jewish writers like Kafka or Primo Levi, African writers like Achebe or Ben Jalous. Or, indeed, Irish writers like Joyce or Beckett. In all of these authors, one finds a determination to dismantle received tradition by way of reconstructing narrative forms²⁰.

The narrative paradox accrues even more dramatic consequence when we move from fictional narratives to narratives of

18. See in particular the discussions of narrative cover-up in *In Dora’s Case: Freud-Hysteria-Feminism*, ed. C. Bernheimer, C. Kahane, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.

19. Edward SAID, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York: Knopf, 1993, and “Permission to Narrate”, in *London Review of Books*, February 29, 1984.

20. Beckett is an interesting case in point here as he fully recognized the power of narrative to both repress and express truth. Unlike Henry James or Proust who celebrate the emancipatory value of narrative form, Beckett appreciates the deceptive potential of narrative. The narrators and vice-narrators of

historical events. An obvious example here is the Holocaust narrative. Primo Levi, as one writer who survived the horrors of Auschwitz acknowledged that his impulse to narrate was driven by an ethical imperative: to make others remember what happened so that it would never happen again. Or as he himself put it: “The need to recount to others, to make others participate, acquired in us (survivors) before and after our liberation the vehemence of an immediate impulse... and it was in response to such a need that I wrote my books”²¹.

A similar, though somewhat more vexed, consideration surrounds the representation of the Holocaust by Spielberg in *Schindler's List*. In an essay entitled *Holocauste, la représentation impossible* (1994), Claude Lanzmann denounced this effort to narrativize the real events of Auschwitz. To represent these events in the form of a quasi-fictional drama is, he argued, a betrayal of their fundamentally irrepresentable nature. At least from a moral point of view. In his own film documentary on the subject, *Shoah*, Lanzmann had sought to obviate all use of standard narrative conventions — so that the story of the Holocaust might be told, paradoxically, without being told. Jean-François Lyotard describes the dilemma as follows: “To represent “Auschwitz” in images, in words, is a way of forgetting it. I’m not just thinking

Beckett’s Trilogy, for example — Moran, Malone, Molloy — provide us with powerful examples of stories which challenge the narrative structures of love, guilt, hope and fear: structures that society and religion have imposed upon us. Thus it is through anti-narrative strategies of “decomposition” — by “breaking down the lines of communication” — that Beckett seeks to expose the lies of official narrative: what he calls the old tales of “habit” which close us off from the shock of real experience. So, in answer to Henry James’ belief that the writer’s conduct is exemplary for us all, or to Proust’s claim that fiction is the only fully lived life, Beckett is well aware of the utterly unethical attitudes of not only his own “vice-narrators” but also of such celebrated novelists as Céline, Drieu la Rochelle or Wyndham Lewis. But to be aware of the corruptive power of narratives, or narrators, as Beckett is, does not mean abandoning narrative altogether. After all, Beckett’s most persuasive arguments against the routinising and dulling tendencies of storytelling are themselves conveyed by stories. Beckett’s own works are still stories, albeit ones which undo stories; they are narratives which subvert narratives, or as we say in Ireland, hairs of the dog that bit you. Even when narrative imagination is narrating the death of narrative imagination it is still *narrating*. Even when it can’t go on, like the narrative voice of the final novel of the Trilogy, it goes on. (See M. Nussbaum’s discussion of this subject in “Narrative Emotions: Beckett’s Genealogy of Love”, in *Love’s Knowledge*).

21. Primo LEVI, *Si c’est un Homme*, Paris: Julliard, 1987.

here of B movies and soap opera series and pulp novels or testimonies. I'm also thinking of those (narrative) representations which can and could best make us not forget by virtue of their exactness or severity. Even such efforts represent what should remain unrepresentable in order not to be forgotten precisely as forgotten. Claude Lanzmann's film, *Shoah*, is perhaps a singular exception. Not only because he resists the use of representation in images and music, but also because he hardly offers a single testimony where the unrepresentable character of the extermination is not indicated, even momentarily, by an alteration of voice, a tightening of throat, a tear, a sob, the disparition of a witness out of frame, an upset in the tone of the narrative, some uncontrolled gesture. We thus know that the witnesses are surely lying, or "playing a role" or hiding something, however impassive they may appear"²².

In this manner, Lanzmann attempts to recount what cannot be recounted, to demonstrate the impossibility of reproducing the event of the Holocaust in some kind of linear narrative. This is why Lanzmann shows no images of dead bodies or SS Kommandants. Why he declines to imitate what he considers inimitable in terms of dramatic reproduction or newsreal. He refuses, in short, to let us *see* the dead victims; for that, Lanzmann believes, would be to reduce them to "objects" of genocide. What we do see, instead, are the contorted faces of certain contemporary survivors — figures who bear witness to the impossibility of representing in images that which they witnessed at first hand.

But here again, one must point out that it is only by allowing survivors to tell how untellable the event was that we can be reminded that we have forgotten the unimaginableness of the Holocaust in the first place, and that we should never permit ourselves to forget this forgetfulness. It is, ironically, by means of a narrative *via negativa* that Lanzmann uses stories to betray what these stories cannot adequately capture, to evoke what they cannot portray — indirectly, obliquely, by default. Even though no one can tell the story of Auschwitz, we have, Lanzmann believes, an ethical duty to keep on trying.

In such cases, remembrance assumes an ethical character of testimony quite different, obviously, from the triumphalist commemoration of history's Great and Powerful. Unlike the Grand

22. Jean-Francois LYOTARD, *Heidegger et les «Juifs»*, Paris : Galilée, 1988.

Narratives which legitimate ideologies of domination and conquest, here we touch on the need for narratives that move in the opposite direction — towards a felt reliving of past suffering, towards a remembering of the stories of victims rather than victors. And here, it seems to me, Lanzmann misses the mark somewhat. Often it is not enough to merely evoke horror by indirection or allusion. That may be appropriate for intellectual elites watching *Shoah* in art-house cinemas or Channel 4 Specials. But it may well be the case that those who most need to be reminded of the Holocaust are people who need to *feel* and *experience* that suffering and horror *as if* they were actually there. This requirement of direct-impact (rather than elite) narrative is better answered by Spielberg than by Lanzmann. “Fiction gives eyes to the horrified narrator”, as Ricœur puts it, “Eyes to see and to weep. The present state of literature on the Holocaust provides ample proof of this... one counts the cadavers or one tells the story of the victims”²³.

To sum up : certain injustices appeal to narrative imagination to plead their case lest they slip irrevocably into oblivion. Ethical experiences of good and evil, as Nussbaum says, need to be felt upon the pulse of shared emotions. Or as Ricœur says, commenting on narratives of the Holocaust, the horrible must *strike* the audience as horrible. It must provoke us to *identify* and *empathise* with the victims. “Horror attaches to events that must never be forgotten. It constitutes the ultimate ethical motivation for the history of victims. The victims of Auschwitz are, par excellence, the representatives in our memory of all history’s victims. Victimisation is the other side of history that no cunning of reason can ever justify and that, instead, reveals the scandal of every theodicy of history”²⁴.

But if narrative universalises our identification with victims it can also singularise it. The ethical role of remembering victims equally serves a function of *individuation* in our historical consciousness — namely the duty to respect the *uniquely unique*

23. P. Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, p. 188. A more recent example of this dilemma is the controversy surrounding the graves of Vlasenica in Eastern Bosnia. As a *Times* editorial commented (Jan 29, 1996): “What should be done in response? Should the action be merely actuarial, confined to helping in the count of victims and bodies?... The dead of Vlasenica must be allowed to tell their tale before the International War Crimes Tribunal”.

24. *Ibid.* p. 185-86.

character of events, from the Holocaust and Hiroshima to the Gulag and Tienemien Square.

This is, of course, where the ethics of narrative opens onto the larger historiography debate. For an historical event to be remembered it must be retold. In however subversive, truncated or deconstructive a manner, it must be *recounted*. That is why Ricœur reproaches positivist historiographers like Carl Hempel for seeking to rid history of narrative, reducing it to a matter of generalisable laws and statistical data. Narrative imagination prevents abstract historiography from neutralizing injustice or, quite simply, *explaining things away*. It preserves the *specificity* of historical suffering from sanitizing homogenisation, thereby restoring what Ricœur calls our “debt to the dead”. A *theoria* of historical laws and facts needs to be supplemented here with a *phronesis* of singular narratives. This is why the dramatic historical narratives of Primo Levi or Milena tell us more about the human reality of the Holocaust than mere catalogues of statistics. Just as one could argue, analogously, that the narratives of Michelet or Simon Schama offer more human insight into the French Revolution than encyclopaedic information lists.

But, careful, I am not recommending here an exclusive disjunction between narrative and science: either *narrate* imaginatively or *explain* scientifically. Both are complementary. To better explain is often to better narrate, and vice versa. For too long, the ruinous dichotomy between *erklären* and *verstehen* has prejudiced several continental philosophies against any dialogue with science.

What I am saying is that history is always told, one way or another, and the best way to combat historical distortions (of, say, revisionists like Irving or Faurison who claim the Holocaust never happened) is: 1) to prove their reports of events scientifically erroneous, and 2) to prove their narrative interpretations of the events ethically erroneous.

Such a dual approach — narrative *and* empirical — would also safeguard history from what Frederic Jameson has called the “postmodern cult of the depthless present”²⁵. The latter, as noted at the outset, contrives to reduce narrative to a mere play of simulation devoid of any reference to historical memory or truth.

25. Frederic JAMESON, “Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”, in *New Left Review*, 145 (1984), p. 53-91.

Signifiers relating to signifiers without any signified beyond themselves. Such a postmodern model becomes, in Baudrillard's hands, a play of such pure "irreference" that the realities of war and suffering dissolve into TV games of "hyper-reality"²⁶.

V: Conclusion

Postmodernism denies the distinction between what is real and unreal in our representations of things. And this is, I believe, one of the reasons why postmodern "irrepresentability" and "irreference" have become synonymous with narrative irresponsibility — that is, the abandonment of any narrative claim to recount past experience a) "as it actually was" (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*); and b) "as if" (*als ob*) we were actually there to experience it²⁷.

In many cases, of course, historical and fictional narratives overlap — whether it be in historical novels like *War and Peace* or novelistic histories like Michelet. In both cases, however, the narrative act of *standing-for* the past provides us with a "figure" to experience *and* to think about, to imagine *and* to reflect upon. The narrative function of empathic identification in no way contradicts the scientific function of recording objective facts "as they actually happened". If anything, each complements the other.

It is worth recalling, in conclusion, that the postmodern eclipse of historical narrative is not just a threat to testimonies of suffering. It is also a threat to our narrative capacity to represent exemplary models or figures who guide and motivate human behaviour — be it Achilles or Aeneas, Siddhartha or Abraham, Socrates or Saint Francis, Melena or Maximilian Kolbe. Narrative memory is not just a question of testifying to past horrors; it is also — as both Aristotle and Kant remind us — a matter of representing ideals and virtues.

The ethical potential of narrative I have been exploring in this paper may be summarised, finally, under three main headings: 1) the *testimonial* capacity to bear witness to a forgotten past; 2) the *empathic* capacity to identify with those different to us (victims and exemplars alike); and 3) the *critical/utopian* capacity to challenge Official Stories with unoffical or dissenting ones which open up alternative ways of being.

26. Jean BAUDRILLARD, *Simulations*, New York: Semiotext, 1983.

27. P. Ricœur, Conclusion to *Time and Narrative*, Vol 3.

While narratives are, as we have seen, clearly not always on the side of the angels, they do possess the power to disclose dimensions of otherness. And it is ultimately this power of disclosure which, I suggest, marks the basic ethical ability to imagine oneself as another.

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