

# Narrativity and memory: Towards an ethics of responsibility

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Original article

## SUMMARY

Prisoners of the Nazi concentration camps explained that the need to recount all that horror stayed with them in life. In this moment, they were founding an "ethics of the testimony"; that is to say, the salvation of the victims by means of their memory.

Indeed, Ricoeur shows that "time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative". In this sense, he points out that narrative plots constitute "the privileged means by which we form our confused, shapeless and, at limit, dumb, temporary experience". In spite of that, experience does not always end by being object of a story. Sometimes, the traumatic experience prevents the individual from taking control of their personal history. There is a strong temptation to deny that the experience has taken place, or it is lived as if it happened to another person. In those "dark nights" of the soul, in those moments of extreme dispossession, "the question of *who am I* refers not to nullity, but to the nakedness of the question itself" (Ricoeur).

For that reason, so that it is not an unbearable sequence of events, we narrate a story and we look for its meaning. We do not do it to forgive or to forget, but to obtain "the privilege of judgment". If forgetting leads to the failure of tradition, the truth, conversely, is not "a discovery that destroys the secret, but the revelation that does it justice" and which allows it to be passed on to future generations (Arendt).

**Key words:** Narrativity, memory, human rights, ethics, responsibility.

## RESUMEN

Cuando los prisioneros de los campos de concentración nazi explicaban que aquello que los sostenía en la vida era la necesidad de contar todo aquel horror, estaban planteando una "ética del testimonio", es decir, la salvación de las víctimas mediante la actualidad de su recuerdo.

Precisamente Ricoeur muestra que "el tiempo deviene tiempo humano en la medida en que es articulado de manera narrativa", señalando de este modo que las tramas narrativas constituyen "el medio privilegiado por el cual reconfiguramos nuestra experiencia temporal confusa, informe, y al límite, muda". A pesar de ello, no siempre una experiencia alcanza a ser objeto de un relato, ya que la experiencia traumatizante a veces impide al sujeto apropiarse de su historia personal. Hay una fuerte tentación de negar que ésta haya tenido lugar, o es vivida como algo que le sucedió a otro distinto de uno. En esas "noches oscuras" del alma, en esos momentos de despojo extremo, "la pregunta de *quién soy yo* no reenvía a la nulidad sino a la nulidad misma de la pregunta" (Ricoeur).

Por eso, para que no sea una secuencia insoportable de acontecimientos, narramos una historia y buscamos su significado, no para condonar u olvidar, sino para obtener "el privilegio de juzgar". Si el olvido conduce a la quiebra de la tradición, la verdad en cambio no es "un descubrimiento que destruye el secreto, sino la revelación que le hace justicia y que le permite ser transmitido a las futuras generaciones" (Arendt).

**Palabras clave:** Narratividad, memoria, derechos humanos, ética, responsabilidad.

*When "the prisoners of Nazi concentration camps explained what they had endured in their lifetime, it was a need to tell of the horror; what they were evoking was the salvation of the victims through the actuality of their memory. They wanted not only to remember the dead, but to save them".<sup>1</sup>*

## STORY AS A DEFINITIVE VICTORY OVER THE THREAT OF NON-SENSE

When Paul Ricoeur proposes that "time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative",<sup>2</sup> he is indicating that narrative plots are "the privileged means by which we reconfigure our confused,

unformed, and, at the limit, mute temporal experience."<sup>2</sup> In effect, one cannot arrive at *oneself* except by the agency of our own histories, by the way in which we come to terms with them, and by the way in which they take shape, whether moderated or becoming intractable. The understanding that each person has of themselves is narrative, because it cannot be captured outside of time. Stories transform human

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Received: November 1st., 2012. Accepted: May 29, 2013.

events that are not necessarily connected to each other into a structure of plot and it is the *configuring imagination* that gives them *meaning*.<sup>3</sup> Dissimilar components are articulated in this way as they can be circumstances that are sought, encountered, or unwanted...

At first glance, everything happens as if the narrative plot that performs the *synthesis of the heterogeneous* and the *discordant concordance*<sup>2</sup> achieves a definitive victory over the challenge of *non-sense* contained in negative determinations. In effect, in every plot there appear various levels, some that dynamically intervene in their development, and others that remain stable but also contribute to determining the *sense* of the story.

It is therefore impossible to imagine a communication that is absolutely transparent. As demonstrated by Schleiermacher, *misunderstandings* form part of the task of comprehension. Indeed, in all of history, it is impossible to find an objectively determinable end, a definitive close, or an absolute starting point. Neither does it lend itself to be subdivided into merely objective temporal sequences.<sup>4</sup> In reality, we only describe the many ways in which histories occur or reoccur, some being told from long ago, others by contrast breaking through suddenly. Therefore, understanding a history, participating in it one way or another, means opening oneself up to its many horizons.

In spite of this, an experience does not always become the object of a story, given that subjects are sometimes impeded from appropriating traumatic experiences as part of their personal history. There is a strong temptation to deny that it ever took place, or it is lived as something that happened to somebody else. There are many rich examples of this in clinical psychotherapy. The task of the Self is to transform these *fragmented documents* into an historical construction that provides the author and their partners with the sensation of *temporal continuity*.<sup>5</sup> However, a cohesion will never be definitively understood, nor conquered. Narrative identity is, by definition, a fragile identity, made up of ecstasies and letdowns.<sup>6</sup>

## AN IDENTITY BUILT BETWEEN THE CRACKS

Narrative identity is also the sphere in which the extreme lack of identity itself is sometimes experienced. In these "dark nights" of the soul; in these moments of utter despair, "the question of *who am I* refers not to nullity, but to the nakedness of the question itself".<sup>7</sup> Analyzing certain histories, one understands that "each experience establishes a synonym in order to tell of extremely violent trauma, and with more refractive reason, of the 'synthesis of the heterogeneous' that takes place in narrative plot".<sup>8</sup>

It is no longer possible to continue claiming that there is an unlimited freedom to retell and establish new realities.

If everything that happened could be dissolved and substituted by newer and newer *versions of itself* even if they are more coherent, more freeing and beneficial for the what is being analyzed,<sup>9</sup> the past would lack effectiveness.

Very often, "the *sense*" of personal identity itself instead resides in the *cracks*, in departing from a wider social unit, in the small techniques with which it is resistant to pressures, providing *strength and confidence* in our world. But in other cases, "inconsistencies" refer to the retroactive elaboration of the traumatic effects of some "past" events that are *only* made afterwards if certain conditions are created: this is what Freud<sup>10</sup> calls *Nachträglichkeit\**, *retroactivity*. These inconsistencies reveal something very valuable: the presence/absence of what it "outside time"; or *Zeitlos*. In this sense, Freud considers the devastating effects that open incurable wounds and destroy auto-regenerative resources of the psyche as something "extemporaneous".\*\* Like "saturated phenomena",<sup>11</sup> they are "unfinished event"<sup>9</sup> traumas, which impede a restructuring of the sense and of the history because of the psychic anguish. Because of this, they end up being a sort of *non-fact*, a *non-occurrence* and it is these that are perhaps more radically "outside of time".

How can these pieces of "past experience" be captured and joined up when they are irretrievable by memory because they are unacceptable, ignominious, even to the point of experiencing that *in fact* they never happened? How can it be accepted and conceived that this experience could be lived *just now* in a new condition, *for the first time*? Particular example that comes to the fore are acts of gratuitous violence such as torture and terrorism:

*"Atrocities, however, are not easy to overcome. The effort used to deny in order to forget is always fruitless. To remember - and tell - and know - the truth is a condition for the reparation of social order and for the recovery of the victims. To speak the truth - to speak about what happened - or to keep it secret are the usual contradictory tendencies that are produced when facing with traumatic experiences. If the truth cannot be found in words, it is spoken through symptoms; symptoms which give an account of the untellable and at the same time keep it trapped in an indecipherable language. These symptoms speak through the human body, they are metaphors of an experience that continues to cause pain. Or they are social metaphors that need to be placed in their context in order to understand their meaning and their consequences".<sup>12</sup>*

*Nachträglichkeit* introduces us to the process that one is not responsible for apparently delayed traumatic effects. It is not about "deferred action", "après coup", or a *posteriori*; rather, the "work of memory", of "damaged memory" (or

\* Jacques Lacan has been credited with drawing attention to the importance of this term.

\*\* The *extemporaneous* of the *Unconscious* in Freud also refers to the indestructible insistence of instinctual emergencies, to the almost indestructible resistance to re-emphasized representations, to clinical events of the *Unconscious*.

what Ricoeur refers to as (*blessée*).<sup>13\*</sup> But in truth, does this become a true reworking? Or is it a *shadow* that follows the person constantly, unable to become one with them? Is this presence not better thought of as a Void, a presence of the inexpressible? Is a process of establishing and re-establishing the *sense* of this experience therefore possible? Is it possible that that which is "outside of time" in all its forms, is remembered and lived as an integral and inseparable part of the flow of experience? These *affective marks*, which belong to the original title of the experiences of *persisting* in life, and which keep track of a void and a denial, continue in the lives of survivors.

In these critical situations it is almost impossible to bear witness. As demonstrated by Agamben<sup>14</sup> in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, the truth of what happened is very difficult to tell and it is even disbelieved. There, also, resides the "inhumanity" of horror, which becomes "human" when it is put into words, with all the difficulties that implies; there resides the courage of taking charge of what remains of the human after experiencing the inhumane from which nobody was exempt.

In particular, "for the survivor, death is not, first of all, 'non-being, or nothingness', but a certain experience of the 'without-response'", as indicated by Derrida<sup>15</sup> in "Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas".

The survivor never knows with certainty why they survived, and although they may desperately seek a response, they will never fully have one: to live now implies personally working through the guilt that they lived while others, the majority, died. They feel as though they are usurping an existence that does not completely belong to them, an existence that would perhaps be lived by someone else.\*\*

In the clinic we are often confronted by the untellable, the incommunicable.\*\*\* If just one word had to be used to describe the term for this decline caused by horror, it is the presence of the unjustifiable, the unacceptable, the un-analyzable, because the analyst is confronting the mutilation of capital and of the psychic potential that it is not in their power to "repair" and which the analyzed party *is not capable of revealing*.<sup>16-18</sup> We are not reduced by this to producing a simple replenishment, but rather, to accepting this difficult task of enabling the subjects to reinvest supports, objects, projects capable of opposing the continuing action of Thanatos, responsible for these definitive mutilations. Because the *task of grieving* "in terms of reconciliation with the loss itself, this will remain forever an unfinished task", and "this patience towards oneself even possesses the features of a vir-

tue".<sup>13</sup> Ricoeur recognizes that the unity of the plot of the story endlessly clashes against all of the contingent events which call the hopes created through the previous path of their lives into question. There is a desolate contingency of human action, given the irreversibility and finality of past actions such that we cannot know how and when they originated, and the unpredictability of future actions.<sup>19</sup>

Conventional narratives, those beautiful and soothing stories into which sense has been carefully woven, do not manage to give an account for human *temporality*. In effect, the *extemporaneous* will inevitably be broken because it is precisely from and in these outbreaks that *time is temporalized*. It always starts again, but never from the beginning, or rather, without ever definitively knowing where the beginning, middle, and end of the narratives are. Every "moment" will forever be *referring to* and *attracted by* other "moments" in establishing a *fractured history* that is *over-determined* by a "before" and "after". The establishing function of the story is not cast aside in this sense; rather, it seeks to establish the conditions and means for which the *extemporaneous* can be in some way embraced, in some cases set, and in others left free for an unforeseeable but enriching activity. So that it does not become an overwhelming sequence of events, we narrate a story and seek a meaning, not to condone or forget, but to obtain "the privilege of judgment", according to Hanna Arendt.<sup>20</sup> If forgetting leads to the failure of tradition, the truth, conversely, is not "a discovery that destroys the secret, but the revelation that does it justice"<sup>21</sup> and which allows it to be passed on to future generations.

## THE DUTY OF MEMORY AS A DUTY OF DOING JUSTICE

Although "the totalitarian rule" always seeks to form "pockets of forgetfulness" into which disappear "all of the facts, both good and bad", this is destined to fail, as "there are too many people in the world for forgetting to be possible. There will always be a man alive to tell the story",<sup>21</sup> the truth will always filter through the cracks left by the supposedly omnipotent power. Remember so as not to repeat, so said Adorno.<sup>22</sup>

"But what does it mean, then, to do justice to the victims? What does it mean to do justice to these injustices which are taken over by memory? How to you make present those who are absent, not because they are no more, but because they were made to be no more, they were disappeared?"<sup>23</sup>

\* In this case, it is not about removing "resistance of the repressed" (*Verdrängungswiderstände*), the primary obstacle in the work of interpreting the path of traumatic memories. Here, beneath the "compulsion towards repetition" there is a tendency of passage to the act (*Agieren*), which Freud calls a "substitution of memory": the patient reproduces the forgotten fact under the guise of action. Remembrance, repetition, and pre-elaboration are three components for a reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) of the patient with what is repressed.

\*\* Guilt can also be experienced by those who were never in situations of torture or terrorism, as indicated by Karl Jaspers in *The question of German Guilt*, Barcelona, Paidós, 1999.

\*\*\* It is also the impossibility of guaranteeing any *correspondence* between representation and what is being represented; it is the difficulty of theorizing an "object" that is as necessarily elusive and objectifiable as the "unconscious"; it is the possible correlation between "interpretations" or "reconstructions" and "factual history".

To do justice to personal damage - death, kidnapping, torture, threat - is impossible; only a modest but fundamental justice will suffice, namely, the full awareness of "the irreparable". Faced with political damage - the murdered and the disappeared are denied their *right to citizenship* - the only way out is for them to be back in society again. To repair or do justice for social damage, when society has been fractured and impoverished by violence, is to recover the victims and the perpetrators.<sup>23</sup>

In particular, justice that is memory alone is not enough. We must talk of reconciliation.\* But for this, the perpetrator must recognize their harmful action and understand what it has done. The victim alone can give a pardon, and nobody can demand it of them; it is given freely, which is not the same as gratuitously.

We are historically responsible for what we have done and for what we stop doing. When Primo Levi<sup>24</sup> asked himself *what can we do*, his response was that if the witnesses disappeared, there was no memory; nor, for that matter, the possibility of justice. Therefore, there is a need for the witness to continue remembering, maintaining the conscience of an injustice that demands justice and even transforming us all into "witnesses".

In this way, memory that fights against forgetting allows the rights that were once denied the victims to remain alive and valid. "The duty of memory is the duty to do justice, through memories, to an other than the self",<sup>13</sup> and forgetting involves the sanction of injustice. As indicated by Todorov,<sup>25</sup> a genuine memory always becomes exemplary in the way in which it assumes responsibility, not only for preserving the past, but above all else, for the commitment to avoid the repetition of horrors in the present. In terms of the concept of "retrospective responsibilities", this is the responsibility for the results of certain behaviors, above all those that are brought about intentionally, either by action or omission. "Prospective responsibilities" are *a priori* responsibilities before possible events that should be observed or taken care of in an obligatory fashion.

In particular, the suffering of a population cannot be forgotten because narration permits survival and overcoming of suffering. In this sense, narratives must go from individual lives to becoming the ethical and cultural heritage of a population. It will be memory, that *retrospective justice* as indicated by Reyes Mate,<sup>1</sup> that brings back to us the faces of the *oppressed* as an open process of salvation of forgotten histories, and from the start affirms *responsibility* as the first ethical step that leads us to bear their fate.

\* The theme of "reconciliation" is to be covered in another work, such as has been carried out by the Jewish and German communities, victims of ETA, Serbs (Orthodox Christians), Croats (Catholics) and Bosnians (Muslims) of the ex-multiethnic state of Bosnia-Herzegovina which, as a consequence of the conflict that lasted more than three years, produced more than 100,000 military and civil victims and left 1.8 million displaced. Something similar is happening in the populations of Chile and El Salvador ...

## DAMAGE TO THE PLAN OF LIFE, REPAIR AND EXONERATION

If being guilty of something before someone is *to be culpable*, "repairing the guilt can only be surpassed by exoneration"; that is, by the forgiveness that the victim provides. "Who in any case pardons is the other, the same who made us guilty before", affirms Castilla del Pino.<sup>26</sup>

One is guilty of damage caused, but it is not primarily an impairment of vital goods and economic losses; it goes further than physical and moral damage, it is damage to the person themselves; that is, damage to their *own life plan*\* and everything that affects it. Their radicalism harms nothing less than the person's right to choose their own destiny; that is, the subject's freedom to choose a manner of acting. This is therefore a loss or grave impairment of their personal possibilities in a manner that is irreparable or very difficult to repair (Fernández Sessarego)<sup>27</sup> and for which a symbolic repair can only be reached upon including the guarantee of no repetition, of a "never again".

In this sense, the requirement is to not blame the victim, to interpret the psychological manifestations of the affected person as a response to a traumatic situation, and not assume that an presumed underlying psychopathology will cause the victim to generate the same destabilizing fact. Unlike post-traumatic stress disorder which refers to a disruptive fact or event, situations suffered by the victims because of State terrorism prolong themselves over time and maintain many specific disruptive episodes.

For example, the taking of children during the Argentine dictatorship does not simply constitute a "traumatic episode", but a process that takes up a significant part of people's lives. For the families of the disappeared or the relatives seeking their now grown-up children, the criminal act does not end; they are therefore considered imprescriptible crimes, which also affects their mental health, given that the traumatic event does not stop happening.

Finally, the power to contextualize these facts beyond the individual is essential to reparatory ends in these traumatic situations.<sup>28-34</sup> In this sense, the symbolic reparatory effect of all State policies in this respect is important.<sup>35-38</sup> As the Vicar of Solidarity in Chile pointed out:<sup>12</sup>

*"...truth, justice, and reparation of the damage caused to those affected, and to society, are fundamental elements in achieving true reconciliation. The entire nation must commit itself to a future process of democratization, the construction of a society of solidarity, and unshakeable respect for individual and civil human*

\* Post-traumatic stress disorder does not take into account the multiple symptomatological manifestations of trauma, the profound and persistent personality alterations it causes, or its permanence and continuity over time. One limitation of the concept is the lack of consideration for the meaning of the traumatic acts for the victim. In crimes against humanity, the dignity of the person and their life plan is intensely and directly affected over time.

rights" as the "elements that form institutionality" (*La Tercera newspaper*, Chile, 25-11-1989).\*

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Declaration of conflict interest: None

\* Quoted on p63 in Lira (comp.), op.cit. ref. 12.