Proceedings of the 25th International Conference on Literature and Psychoanalysis: 243-247

Relocating the Holocaust: Testimonies and Traumas

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I want to talk in a way that summarizes, all too quickly, a great deal of history and a great deal of material that has to do with witnessing trauma. I'm going to begin with a moment in a film that was produced about ten years ago called *The Long Way Home*. This is quite a well done documentary. It has to do with the years following the Second World War, and it focuses particularly on the Jewish survivors but it's about experiences that extend to millions of displaced persons as well, in Europe between the years 1945 to 1948. It's very well narrated by Morgan Freeman and contains readings on his part, and others, of a great number of diaries, letters, and so on. There's a great deal of verbal documentary evidence as well as visual documentary evidence in this film. Part of the way through there's a moment that really astonished me for a number of reasons, some of them very personal. An American soldier, a Rabbi who is the chaplain in his platoon finds himself on the outskirts of Dachau with no assignment, nothing to do. He doesn't know how he can contribute to the recovery. Although he had seen a glimpse of what had occurred, what and who remained in the camp, he couldn't get himself to go in for days. But finally he felt he had to try to do something. So he went into a barracks where survivors were still living in the same exact conditions that they had been liberated from, "on shelves", as he says. And it was very dark. He couldn't see anyone for a while.

And he says he heard a voice, and the voice said, "Do you know my brother?" And he was startled because he recognized the voice, and he said, "Yes, I know your brother. And it turns out that the brother was a psychiatrist that this man, who was a doctor, knew in Cleveland. And what he did was literally to recognize a voice. And he then began a project which led to a lot of other attempts at reconciliation of families, including this man with his brother.

What struck me there was the incredible moment of the voice recognition. Let me tell you a personal root of this. I have exactly the same voice as my now deceased twin brother. So when the Rabbi soldier recognized the voice that way I said to myself, "Well wait a minute, there's something here". Because my experience at that moment linked up with a larger resonance, with the repeated emphasis in Holocaust and trauma writings about witnessing of the voice, giving people a voice, letting people have a voice, the way we used the voice metaphorically, but also literally, in speaking. The moment in the video rooted in me and ramified. Literally, the voice, and the echoing response in ourselves to the voice. And that in turn links up with the ways in which, in our culture and places all around the world, but particularly in America and some parts of Europe, we have devised

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contemporary technologies in order to give tens of thousands of survivors a voice. We are creating huge archives of video testimonies in which people have an opportunity to be seen, but even more importantly to be heard. And we're also creating in parts of the world, not just in America and Europe, but in say South Africa and other parts of Africa, opportunities for reconciliation which give victims as well as perpetrators a voice, a forum to speak.

The voice has many levels of resonance and meaning in this process. And it is part of a process of validating witnessing that has accelerated astonishingly since the Second World War. Recently a very interesting book called *The Era of the Witness* by Annette Wieviorka, written in French about six years ago, was translated into English. Wieviorka's book is a response to the phenomenon of generating what you might call the technology of witnessing: writing, video, documentary testimonies, and so on. Wieviorka briefly recounts a history that is important to recall in light of contemporary confessional media. The need to witness the traumatic experiences of the World War II period – I'm saying it that way deliberately because it extends beyond the Jewish victims – began immediately. We now have and continue to discover written testimonies of the experience, the traumatic experiences, that were done immediately and hidden, transmitted in other ways, sometimes secretly. They're literally being dug up all the time. There are documents buried around the crematoria that are still to be found. Nobody will ever know how many thousands of such documents were buried and not found. In the ghettos, documentation became an obsession. People were writing and burying and trying to preserve a record of the experience as it was happening.

But then a period, which is manifest in other traumatic situations, say Viet Nam, a period of silence follows, a period of non-acceptance. Nobody wants to hear this anymore, even though the victims can't stop talking right after the experience. Nobody wants to hear you. And so a silence descends. And then some ten or fifteen years later something else happens. The voice begins to re-emerge. This happened with writing about Vietnam, it happened in the period just before the Eichmann trial which brought personal testimony into a focus. It was the moment of witnessing that defined what you might call the era of the witness, because the Eichmann trial was a deliberately staged witnessing of the Holocaust for television, not just for the education of the Israeli public. So at that point witnessing became a pedagogical tool, not just to teach about the Holocaust but to teach about trauma and its effects in general.

By now, today, the witnessing of trauma has become a general cultural obsession in America and other parts of the world, so that what we're seeing and hearing is a strangely robust phenomenon. I didn't know when I came here that the recently published diary, *A Woman in Berlin*, would be the subject of one of our talks. But I'm grateful to Ann Wyatt-Brown for discussing that book, because it's one example of many in which there is a kind of universalizing and generalizing of the witnessing of trauma going on in our culture. In her talk, Ann voiced no distinction made between Germans and Jews. Between one victim and another. In the Berlin woman's diary, even her husband becomes a kind of victim, although he's just returning from the German army. This is a phenomenon that's happening in a very broad way today. The Pope, for example, recently visited the cemetery in which he mourned the loss of the young German lives that were a part of the German traumatic experience of the Second World War. When we read trauma narratives and when we listen to witnesses, there's a kind of dedifferentiating of historical experience that encourages a sense of equivalence, and in some ways that's a very valid sense because pain is pain and trauma is trauma and war is war and suffering is suffering.

But on the other hand – and Wieviorka makes a big point of this – the witnessing process, the testimonial process begins to work against historical knowledge. It begins to create a sense that all of us have suffered, that in some way everyone is a victim, and in some sense we're all subjects of historical abuse. Trauma then becomes a universalized experience which we can use for pedagogical purposes, and in fact this is the explicit intention of the Holocaust museum in Washington, to teach people tolerance by using a convenient example -the events and survivors of the Holocaust. We can easily see how this intention becomes problematic.

How, then, do we differentiate among traumatic experiences? How do we retain the particularities of history that might actually teach us to act differently as opposed to endlessly

witnessing the effects of universal traumatic experiences? I have asked myself that question many times, having been immersed in testimonies for a long time – written testimonies, visual testimonies, archives of testimonies. If you spend time in these archives – I think everyone who's been in these archives has had this experience – you can easily feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of traumatic accounts. There are tens of thousands. There are a few thousand at Yale. There are 50,60, maybe 70 or 80 thousand now in Los Angeles, at the Shoah Foundation that Steven Spielberg started, now housed at USC where a lot of people can have access to it. The Shoah archive is digitized. You can search some 50,000 testimonies, whereas, if you go to the Fortunoff Archive at Yale you have to watch an hour and a half of each person in order to have an account of a person's experience. This is analogous to listening to the Nixon tapes. You can spend easily the rest of your life doing nothing but listening to testimonies.

Nobody will ever be able to do this. We've accumulated more testimony than we can witness. And it's certainly not simply for a historical record because as we know memory is extremely slippery, constantly changing. Holocaust accounts, like accounts of dreams, change every time they are told, and a great deal of this material is not very useful for historical documentation. In fact, if you listen to any particular survivor's account, you're likely to come away with some questions about historical factuality – did this happen there or there, do you remember this or this – because the witnesses are frequently simply invited in a general interview structure to tell their stories with very little dialogue. There's no opportunity for questioning, dialogue or conversation. You're in a sense a mute witness to the testimony because you can't actually interact with people.

So what can we learn from these testimonies? That's the question I began to ask myself. Aside from the overwhelmingly prevalent nature of traumatic experience, what can we learn from these things? Well this is where the voice comes in for me because as I am listening to these accounts, and I've listened to several hundred on various occasions, I hear distinctive voices. This is an interesting fact about human beings. As we grow beyond adolescence and into our later years – and most survivors are old – what changes least is our voice. And of course I'm sensitive to that because when I hear my voice on the tape of this presentation, I will hear my dead twin brother's voice. It's uncanny in the case of twins that you hear someone else's voice. When I hear the testimonies I listen for a distinctive voice, how the person speaks as well as the exact words they say, the tone and style of the voice. And one of the values of a psychoanalytic way of listening is that you listen for the exact words, but you're also hearing a way of speaking, a voice, a persona. Occasionally the voice stops. It happens in virtually every account. The voice gets stuck. Sometimes there's an emotional body language that goes with this, sometimes it's just a kind of stutter or silence. But the voice stops. And so I began to ask myself why are these voices stopping, when does the voice get stuck or pause. And a pattern began to emerge. The voice stops at a moment of remembered separation. One survivor stops, and then says, "Then I remembered it was Passover and we couldn't celebrate". He recalls, his voice repeats, an experience of being cut off from a life-sustaining ritual. "That was when I lost sight of my father" says another survivor. Voice stops. That was when a particular traumatic crisis occurred. The voice stops when there's a break in the sense of the continuity of experience. You can watch and listen to this in testimony after testimony. The voice also stops when there's a moment of particularly strong emotional representation. I mean that literally. The emotion returns; it is not displaced to narrative or expressed symbolically. We share a feeling from a past made present. A survivor, for example, is talking about hunger and his voice stops.

Then he says, "You don't know what it felt like, being that hungry". So the voice stops when the trauma recurs. Jean-François Lyotard calls this the "differend", the moment beyond language. The survivor says, "I don't know how to say this". Voice stops. "I don't know what to say". The voice will stop.

To better understand these "differends", I began to listen for the silences surrounding the expressions of guilty memory. My time does not permit a full exploration of the intricate phenomena of shame and guilt in Holocaust testimonies. Suffice it to say that I began to focus on the expression, the overt expression of guilt. If you are at an archive like the Spielberg archive, you can

search for these narratives. You don't have to listen for three weeks to find them. You can enter the key words "survivor guilt' and you will be presented with 600, 800, 2.000 instances of when people explicitly talk about feeling guilty. When you search that way, you find that the voice also stops when there's a moment of guilt. I began to hear two kinds of guilt in the testimonies. One I would call "Guilt For" and the other I would call "Guilt As". What I mean by "Guilt For" is guilt for having done or not having done some particular thing. "And then I didn't hold on to his hand. I feel guilty that I let him go". One woman says in a Fortunoff archive testimony, "I handed over the bundle", which is what she calls her infant child that she gave to an SS officer in a terrified, unthinkable moment. Or: "I didn't share my food, I'm ashamed to say, because I was so hungry, and I feel guilty about that". Guilt For. There are very many instances of "Guilt For" having done *and* for not having done something. This is an affect that Robert Lifton observed as very prevalent among the survivors of Hiroshima because it's so important in Japanese culture to help people when they're in distress. Survivor of the atomic bomb felt very guilty for not being able to help other victims in the aftermath of the explosion.

But there's also another kind of guilt that is expressed when the voice stops, and this is what I am calling "Guilt As". Its core meaning is, "I am guilty for surviving, guilty for being alive. I am guilty because I lived and they died". That's a deeper kind of guilt, an existential guilt. It reminds me of a paper Arnold Modell wrote many years ago, in the 1960's in which he speaks of "Ur fantasies", archaic, perhaps universal, fantasies. An Ur fantasy might take the form, "If I have something good, I am depriving another or it", as if there were a certain amount of goodness or provision in the world and if I possess some of it this is because I have stolen it. An extreme form would be "All the good things I have are stolen". This may be related to feelings of envy later on, but it is a sense of being Guilty For having something that in fact you had no control over having. Moments like that stop the voice also.

Listening in this way began to offer or restore to me a sense of the particularity of testimonies. I was learning that if you listen with this third ear you can begin to redifferentiate the victims from the perpetrators, and the victims *in* the perpetrators, within the great sea of testimony that we have created and which tends to merge all voices into universal, undifferentiated and a historical experiences. That became for me the central value of spending time in the archives and in the history of testimonies because it provided a way to reconcile the leveling effect of testimony with the particularities of history, without which I don't think we will learn very much from the culture of the witness.

On the other hand I wouldn't claim that this has a healing effect. What it does is to create what Susan Gubar calls a kind of "proxy witnessing", in which I become or feel that I've become a container for the witness, as that other voice becomes then a presence in me, and I can say to myself I have listened to someone who is in some sense still present from the past, one who has been there. And so another value of the witnessing process is that I can then in some way try to contain a moment of historical experience, a person's experience heard in a living voice from that person -the expression of, "I was there!" that echoes all the way back to the *Book of Job*. "I was there and I have lived to tell it". By containment, I mean what Bion and other psychoanalysts mean, not just holding something of another's experience in me, but in some way using it as a form of self-transformation. That "proxy" too is a value of witnessing.

But for the "proxy witness" something remains – and let me end with this. What always remains, I think, in this process is what Susan Brison calls the "surd" element of trauma. Brison uses that word, very interestingly, in its mathematical sense. A "surd" in mathematics is something that doesn't fit in a sequence. A simple example would be for me to say 2, 4, 6, 8, 11, 12, 14, 16. Where did the 11 come from? It is a "surd", mathematically speaking. Traumatic experiences are frequently voiced with a sense of something *absurd* in that the coherence of the narrative does not, finally, account for the experience that gives rise to it. The felt memory of the experience is not fully metabolized in the narrative, is felt to be beyond the language itself. And the witnessing or a proxy witnessing of narratives also is a way for us to contain something of this historical absurdity.

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