

— GOD BLESS —

*A Political/Poetic Discourse Mediated by*

H. L. Hix



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## Richard Kearney

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*In your book On Stories, you talk about national narratives, noting the potential benefits of their role in national identity ("the tendency of a nation towards xenophobia or insularity can be resisted by its own narrative resources to imagine itself otherwise" (81)) and also the attendant risks ("Whenever a nation forgets its own narrative origins it becomes dangerous" (81)). How do George W. Bush's public statements employ the national narrative(s) of the United States?*

When somebody asks you who you are, you tell your story. You don't just produce your birth certificate or your passport, you actually say something about where you come from, and where you're going to, and where you are now. You don't just say *what* you are, you say *who* you are. In the same way a nation is not just geography and climate and demography. It is that, too, and you can know a lot by knowing statistics, but much more than that, the identity of a nation, what enables it to hang together, is a narrative. That's natural; it only becomes difficult or dangerous if people deny that is what is going on, and see it as a literal fact, or a god-given right or destiny.

Every nation has within its stories, if it owns its own narrative identity, multiple migrations and invasions and displacements, and minorities becoming majorities. Think of the United States, all the comings and goings of all those Native American peoples, nations, and tribes. There were more languages spoken in North America when the Europeans arrived here than were spoken in Europe, so that has a whole history in itself, complicated by the comings and goings of the Spanish, the English, the French, the Russians, the Dutch, the Portuguese, and so on. We need to know about that complexity. We need to know our history in order to acknowledge our story; the two are intimately linked. Indeed in many languages (e.g. *histoire* in French, *Geschichte* in German), the same term means both story and history.

It's normal and appropriate that every nation has its story. The story only becomes ideology when it goes unconscious, as Karl Mannheim the other great critics of ideology have pointed out. Ideology is dangerous when the story is dissimulated, and then dominates, when it's not acknowledged, and then exerts power over others, and indeed sometimes over the citizens of a nation, by way of saying 'this is the truth.' Not 'this is our *story*, and it's open to a democratic conflict of interpretations,' but 'this is the truth, it's a fact.' Sometimes that ideological suppression of a national narrative identity can go hand in hand with a fundamentalist religious discourse that says 'we are here because God has sent us here.' In other words, it's not open to interpretation. The danger is when some religious or political fundamentalism takes as a *fait accompli*, or a statement of fact, the story that is the basis of who we are as a nation.

Now, coming to the second part of your question, about what's happening in America today and in Bush's politics: what's happening is that Bush is a fundamentalist, both religiously and politically, and he's taking as a God-given fact the hegemony and superiority of the American nation. America is a nation that can go it alone, that doesn't need to be involved with other nations, and that is following its manifest destiny. The movement west has become the movement north, east, south, and west. I think behind that is a sense of the embattled pilgrim story, going back to the Plymouth settlement, that should be acknowledged and discussed and opened up again, but often isn't. When one thinks of that founding narrative of strangers and saints coming out in the Mayflower, those English saints and strangers were malcontents and sometimes even petty criminals, ostracized and even exiled. They were fighting amongst each other until they landed in Plymouth, and then over the years the saints and the strangers united, made common cause against the enemy, first against the Native Americans, then that morphed into other minority or threatening groups, whether it was the slaves in the slave revolt, and by extension then the black community, or whether it was the French moving down from Canada and east from the Mississippi prior to the Louisiana Purchase, or the Spanish and the Mexicans

moving up from the South. There were always enemies out there, and when they were pacified, and America became America because it had, as it were, appeased the others within or at the borders, then it looked naturally outwards for new enemies.

Most nations do this in different respects. But when you're talking about the most powerful and hegemonic nation, then it has a particular responsibility. In fact, I would say in the twentieth century, once the U.S. had settled its borders and incorporated as many states as it could reasonably supervise, then its enemy became the outsider. Now the reaction was provoked, as in the case of Pearl Harbor, so the enemy became the Japanese, provoking war with all and sundry, and subsequently the Viet Cong, and then in the Cold War the Russians and the Chinese, and more recently al Qaeda and Iraq. One does have enemies, and sometimes they are a real threat: the Japanese were, and the Germans were, at least to many free European nations, if not so directly to America, and arguably the Russians and the Chinese at certain moments in their history posed a threat in certain parts of the world.

The difficulty is, do you know your enemy or do you not know your enemy? To know your enemy, I think you need to know their story and to know your own story. If you don't do that, you've got two fundamentalisms facing each other. I think one of the lessons of the Cuban missile crisis was, as Robert McNamara points out in the documentary *The Fog of War*, that Kennedy and Khrushchev actually knew each other. McNamara is very interesting in describing how that war was averted because Kennedy and McNamara knew their enemy. In Vietnam, they did not know their enemy, and as McNamara tells in that documentary, when he went to Vietnam after the war, he sat down with the generals and the leaders of the enemy he had been opposed to, and they had a conversation. He said he realized during the course of this dinner that we had never understood the Vietnamese. They had told him, 'we were never for the Russians, we were terrified of the Chinese, that they would reclaim us as part of their empire, we didn't want to spread international communism but to protect our own nation, we wanted to defend *ourselves*.' McNamara said the scales fell from his eyes and he recognized that we had not *understood* our enemy.

What's going on today is in large part the Bush administration going to war on false pretexts, and not understanding the story that is sending them to war: the need for the alien, the outsider, the stranger who will constitute the nation as a single body politic, particularly after 9/11. But also not appreciating or acknowledging the complex story of the nation they are invading and occupying, Iraq. Now it's all coming out in the wash, as Iraq breaks out into civil war. But if one had understood the history and the story beforehand, this would have been different. That so few people in the military going over there even spoke the language means we weren't listening—quite literally—to the other. There was a problem of translation, an inability to exchange stories and histories. *That* leads to war, and I think Bush is incredibly culpable in this regard.

When I hear Bush on the radio this morning denouncing Nancy Pelosi's visit to Syria, he's flying in the face of what the Baker commission has recommended: that one talk to the enemies, Iran and Syria. Bush says, 'no, no, we must ostracize them, not treat them as partners in dialogue,' and that's just another example of not talking to the enemy. One doesn't have to be a Buddhist and follow the 'no enemies' principles, or a Christian passivist who turns the other cheek. We can just start with basic simple philosophy, knowing how we are made up, and how we're to avoid war, violence, and belligerence. We need to exchange our stories with one another, because our story of triumph is almost invariably going to be someone else's story of a wound, a scar, a failure. And vice versa. We need to exchange skins in order to fully appreciate that. That's hard to do with Hitler or Stalin, I'm not saying all enemies are the same, and al Qaeda are a bad lot, but that's not the point. The point is, when you go to war with another *nation*, it's important to understand the complex and layered stories of that nation, because they are *not* well-represented by the bin Ladens or the Hitlers or the Stalins of this world.

*If I read your book correctly, part of your claim is that simply being able to correctly identify one's enemies is contingent on this narrative exchange, so that the current failure to exchange narrative memories has led us to mistake who the enemy is.*

I would also say that, in addition to the narrative exchange of stories and histories, there is something else that we need: compassion, or empathy, or *caritas*, it goes by different names. This is common to all the wisdom traditions of the world, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, Islamic, etc. It's not just an epistemological exchange of narrative information or plots; it also requires that element of empathy in order to achieve justice.

But coming back to the mistaking of the enemy, I think that's a very good point, and it's interesting how very often the enemy morphs conveniently to the "supplementary enemy," as Edward Said called it, the perfect enemy, the Punch for the Judy, the Satan for the Savior. Thatcher hung onto power in ways that are very similar to the ways Bush is hanging on at the moment: cover-ups, tough talk, going to war. She declared war on Bobby Sands, refused to compromise and say yes you can wear 'political prisoner's' clothes in Long Kesh Prison in Belfast, and that exacerbated the war with the IRA for another ten years or more, and deferred final settlement in Northern Ireland for decades. Then the enemy morphed into Galtieri, and she goes to war with the Falklands and gets re-elected a second time. A nation at war is not going to throw their leader and commander-in-chief out of office. Then, having settled that affair in the Falklands, which was a storm in a teacup, the enemy morphed into Ghaddafi and Thatcher and Reagan sent the bombers to Tripoli. Today, incidentally, we see Blair and Bush welcoming Ghaddafi as an ally, and ex-IRA men like McGuinness and Adams serving as ministers in the Northern Ireland Assembly (alongside Paisley!). Yesterday's terrorist, today's hero. It's very interesting how quickly one of our greatest enemies can become one of our greatest allies in the war against terrorism. More recently and dramatically of course the enemy morphed into Saddam Hussein, then bin Laden; and if bin Laden is eventually caught, it will morph into someone else. There seems to be a recurring human need to define oneself as pure and sovereign over against a malevolent Alien or Other. Carl Schmidt and Hobbes said as much. But they were wrong to see this as inevitable. It is a common social pathology and perversion, but it is not a natural necessity. The dialectic of the 'complementary enemy' can and ultimately must be resisted and changed.

Jean-Paul Sartre says in his "Portrait of the Anti-Semite," written in 1946, that if the Jews hadn't existed, Hitler would have had to invent them. If he had eliminated them all, as he had wished, then it would have become another group. The mistaking of the enemy is almost a pathological necessity once the process starts, until somebody blows the whistle and says, 'we've got to know our enemies, and we've got to understand our scapegoats, and we've got to understand what we are doing.' Everybody accepts now the Iraq war was not about weapons of mass destruction, and that al Qaeda were not allied in any way with the Saddam Hussein regime. Everybody realises that now, but at the time an awful lot of people went along with that lie, including Congress. And one wonders, following Sartre, how people can follow that lie when they must know it's a lie. I think there's huge responsibility for not owning your stories and your history, and saying 'well, we all *thought* it was true.' Somebody was telling a lie, and it was the responsibility of those in power to expose that lie. There *must* have been people in Congress who had a keen sense of that. There were people in other nations throughout the world who were saying so, including Hans Blix, who was saying 'give us more time, let's get to the truth.' And the French and the Greeks. . . . But no, the White House and their so-called 'coalition of the willing' did not want to listen.

One of the strongest nations at the time to stand up against Bush and Blair was France and Chirac, and we all know the hate campaign that went on against France. It came out in all kinds of common ways, people pouring bottles of French wine down the drain, french fries being banned from the menu at the White House, John Kerry during the campaign being diminished because, as the phrase went, 'he looks French, speaks French, and eats French.' It was extraordinary, the venom displayed toward the French. Here you had an ally that was quickly becoming an enemy because they were saying, 'be careful: you're going into a war on the basis of a lie.' When you don't listen to even your friends about who your enemies are, then you're in trouble. It's never too late for a nation to discover the lie, expose the lie, and try to understand one's own story and the stories of others. But as long as Karl Rove rules the roost, these stories will not be told, because he's a master



spinner of false stories, he's a master narrator of counterfeit plots, but he's always, like the Wizard of Oz, going to keep himself behind curtains. Still, there are the Nancy Pelosis—I use her as a figurehead for all the people who voted for an alternative to Bush—who are out there talking to the Syrians today, and maybe tomorrow the Iranians, which is what the Baker report said we should have been doing over a year ago.

*Returning to this key sentence in your book, “Whenever a nation forgets its own narrative origins it becomes dangerous” (81), it sounds like one could rewrite that sentence as “whenever a nation begins to manipulate its narrative origins, to selectively apply its narrative origins, or to deny that its decisions manifest some original narrative, it becomes dangerous.”*

Yes, the manipulation of the narrative is what's particularly dangerous. Behind Bush there's Cheney, and behind Cheney there's Rove. Behind Blair there was Alistair Campbell. Behind Hitler there was Goebbels and Leni Riefenstahl. The people who make the movies and forge the rhetoric are responsible for this manipulation of the story. Hitler himself was a pretty imaginative, if perverse, storyteller. Remember he was a failed artist who decided he would make Germany a work of art, and we know the consequences. *Mein Kampf* is above all a narrative about us and them, the pure and the impure, the elect and the damned, the pure Aryan race heading for the Third Reich versus all these contaminated, dispensable minorities, in particular the Jews. These are stories, and for the most part the people who tell them and manipulate them know what they're doing. They make every effort to ensure that those who are listening to them do *not* know what they're doing. And that's where the double manipulation comes in. It's not just twisting the story as an act of artifice and forgery, it is then manipulating the audience into believing that the story is the true story. In other words, that it is history. The story hides as History, as *the* history.

History at its best is a conflict of interpretations. Take Ireland, where I come from: the Battle of the Boyne has divided the Protestants and the Catholics, the Unionists and the Loyalists,

for hundreds of years. The battle took place between William of Orange and King James. That story is for the Protestant Irish a history of triumph, vindication, liberation, whereas for the Catholic Irish it is a story of defeat, disinheritance, and alienation. What's the truth? History is the very conflict of interpretations, none of which by itself is the Truth. It *was* the story of victory for one and of defeat for the other. What makes for the truth of history, if I may use that terminology, is precisely that plurality of perspectives that compose the layered complexity of history. So to understand history one must understand the complexity of an interweaving of facts and truths with stories and narratives, and have tolerance for a certain plurality of views.

*Let me try connecting what you've just said with something you said earlier. We need the epistemological exchange of narratives, but also a sympathy with the other story. But part of your assertion seems to be that a manipulation of our own national narratives is essentially a failure of empathy with ourselves: insufficient sympathy with our own national narratives.*

That's right, and if I may put it like this, with the others in ourselves. After various battles, invasions, migrations, democratic shifts, constitutions, civil wars, all of what makes up who and what we are today, it's always a responsibility to dare to be complex, to resist the simplicity of a single idea or of a single identity. There may well be excesses in multiculturalism, but it has the salutary effect of reminding people how complex and confused things are. And if you're complex and confused, you don't go to war for no reason, on the basis of a lie, because you will ask yourself, 'is this a good thing to do?' That's why Hamlet didn't go to war with Fortinbras, because he realizes it's a complex matter. Maybe his father, King Hamlet, had killed King Fortinbras, maybe not. It's what made Pope Paul VI a wise pope: he was complex, he didn't rush to decisions, and edicts, and injunctions. It's what made Jimmy Carter in my view a great President: he wasn't sure all the time, he was subtle and sophisticated. Some would say that's bad leadership, but if that's bad leadership give us more of it: we'd have fewer wars.

Look at Mandela, who says, after years of suffering in prison ‘I now have power, but I’m not going to hang on to it, I’m going to cede part of it to another.’ This was one of his great virtues—because he saw the complexity of things, and he saw the danger of people latching onto a single leader. We know what *una voce, una duce* led to in Italy in the Fascist period. In contrast, complexity and confusion, a conflict of different views, are pluses, not minuses, when it comes to war and understanding the others within ourselves. As Socrates says, we have to know ourselves before we can know others; although I think it happens simultaneously because it’s often the encounter with the other that forces us to re-examine our own narratives. If you go back to the religious model of going to your spiritual guide or confessor, or in psychotherapy your analyst, it’s the encounter with the other who asks the questions—‘who are you?, why are you here?, why do you feel this pain?’—It is this encounter that enables you to reconfigure yourself in some way, by retelling your story in a different way, one that loosens up fixations and fixities that prevent you from knowing who you are and from living in a free and imaginative way.

*It sounds as though that’s one way of formulating a criticism of Bush’s ways of narrating the U.S.: that it’s full of fixations and fixities rather than self-reflective concerns.*

Yes, and it goes all the way down, even to how immigrants are treated and how the poor are treated. Even to how the media are treated. When we hear the news each day—even the best news reporting, say on NPR—the figures that are available are of U.S. wounded. We rarely hear of the number of Iraqi civilians. It’s very hard to get a figure on how many Iraqi dead there are since the American occupation. Why are we not getting these facts? Why do we not know the pain of the ‘adversary’? I’m not talking about the insurgents or the resistance fighters, or whatever we want to call them, but *civilians*. That’s not telling the full story, but only part of it, and unfortunately it’s sometimes only when one is sufficiently wounded in one’s own being, in other words when the enemy fights back and the body bags starting coming home, that one asks, ‘are we going in the right direction?’ As long as things are going

smoothly, one doesn't have the same impetus to ask for all of the facts, for full disclosure. If I were a fortune teller, I would say that what Bush or Cheney or Rove need at the moment is another war, and that's most likely Syria or Iran. I think that's probably all that can save them at this stage. The 'alien' needs to be reterritorialized. But I pray wise resistance will prevail.

When the Cold War was over and Vietnam was over, there was a whole flurry of stories, mainly in the media and popular culture, about the alien. *Men in Black* and *Alien I, II, III, IV*: all these movies and books about aliens and alien abduction and alien invasion. It became quite a fad, until the 'extra-terrestrial' alien, invoked by Reagan in his meeting in Iceland with Gorbachev, resulted in political constructions such as "star wars." If the alien enemy that threatens us and makes us a nation in response to "them" isn't available on this earth, then you deterritorialize it and locate it in the extraterrestrial. But every so often there is a repressive and reactive need, especially after an event such as 9/11, to immediately reterritorialize the enemy. And if you happen to be dealing with al Qaeda, who happen to be an international terrorist group, very small at the time, you can't pin the enemy down. You've got to find the enemy, track him down: 'we will get bin Laden, dead or alive', as Bush boasted. So if you're going to play out the Wild West or Manifest Destiny scenarios, you've got to be able to locate and identify and territorialize the enemy. Hence the need to make Saddam Hussein the enemy. Ironically, it's become a fiction turned into fact, because al Qaeda has rushed into the vacuum, and probably *are* now more territorially located in Iraq than in any other country, whereas there were none of them there before, given Saddam Hussein's deep distrust of al Qaeda and bin Laden. It's become a self-fulfilling prophecy: you're going in to get al Qaeda, but they weren't there, they had no connection with the Iraqi government, but now they are there, so weren't we right all the time and how can we leave Iraq now to the whims and caprices of al Qaeda and civil war?

*You contend that "in the aftermath of World Wars and Cold Wars, America has begun to rediscover hidden divisions within the national body politic and*

*is responding by inventing new narratives of the alien 'other'" (102). But it sounds to me as though you're saying that the reaction to September 11 is not unique, but that it's a predictable, recurring pattern.*

I agree, but it's not inevitable that it occur, if one does the critical work of discerning between story and history, and the therapeutic work of 'working through' pain and compassion. That's a philosophical work and a political work, and it's also a spiritual work.

*To me, that's a key question. How do "we" do that work? My book is trying to understand why there was a time lag between September 11 and the collective realization of the inadequacy of our response. Bush did what he did in his first term, and then we re-elected him. How do "we" (the public, individual citizens) do the spiritual work at moments like this, when our leadership is manipulating national narratives? How do we get to more valid uses of national narratives?*

Well, in part it's a challenge and the task for the media, for education and public discourse at all levels, especially university education, and of intellectuals. One could argue that intellectuals betrayed the nation by not criticizing and not investigating the structures of power and the manufacture of consent. People like Said and Chomsky, people who were prepared to stand up and say that our foreign policy is absolutely wrong: the fact that they were treated as wackos and crazy lefties was extremely sad. As is the fact that NPR is down to begging and pleading to have enough support to keep on the airwaves, to get out the only reasonable and responsible radio journalism we have in this country, half of which comes from the BBC anyway. Here is the most powerful nation in the world, with some of the best universities in the world, and some of the best publishing houses in the world, and the best technology of transmission, and it is a mess at the level of having any coherent sense of public intellectuals or public discussion about what is going on. Everyone in America should be saying, like Hans Blix, 'give me more time to reflect on this.' But reflection is not seen as a priority, and the rush to judgment is a way of covering things up and not thinking things through.

I have great hope for public discussion in America. I think NPR is wonderful, and I think some of the journalism is really super, but it doesn't get out to everybody. This seems to me to be a big cleavage in the States. They talk about red and blue states, but it's deeper than that. After 9/11 people asked, 'why do they hate us?' That was a very good question. That was a very honest response to how kids in the Middle East and elsewhere, how so many people could be anti-U.S. This is a call to examine one's conscience. Part of that hatred is of course totally unjustified—al Qaeda needs to examine its conscience and its history—but this was an occasion for America to examine its history, and to ask why we are now at the lowest point of credibility in our entire history. In the immediate aftermath there was an abandonment of responsibility, but I think with the recent elections that is changing. I am very optimistic; there are huge resources within the American nation. Look at the founding fathers, look at the Constitution, look at the literature, look at the philosophy (James, Dewey, Emerson, Pierce, Thoreau, Said, Sontag, Chomsky), look at the political theory, look at the great universities, there is so much that can be drawn upon. It's people like you doing this project, Chomsky going on NPR, Susan Sontag denouncing torture in the *New York Times*, that get people thinking and talking. There is hope.