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# Imagination and Its Pathologies

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## Narrative and the Ethics of Remembrance

Richard Kearney

To tell or not to tell? This is the question I propose to explore here. How much of the past should be remembered and recounted? How much forgotten and forgiven? How do we respect the summons of history—personal or communal—to be recollected again and again so that our debt to the past be honored without succumbing to resentment and revenge? And, finally, how does memory itself negotiate a passage between its opposing fidelities to imagination and reality?

I will attempt to address this question in terms of both literary memory and literal (lived) memory. In my discussion, I will weigh the poetic right to recreate against the ethical duty to represent the past as it actually happened (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*).

### PAST as Present

I begin with the literary example of *Hamlet*, a play that begins and ends with the question of memory.

“Remember me,” says King Hamlet to his son. Tell my story. Carry my memory, my legacy, my legitimacy, into the next generation, to my people, to my children and grandchildren? And why not? Should not every son remember his father. Especially when he was a glorious king, the sun of all the firmament, cut down while still in his prime? Is it not mandatory for any king—and certainly those in Shakespeare’s plays—to end their days confiding their secret stories to their sons, transferred with their benediction and their birthright? Of course. And was not young Hamlet born for this indeed, to tell his father’s story to the people of the Union: the Union of two nations, Denmark and Norway, sealed by the pearl won by his father in the famous duel with Fortinbras the Elder—the day (lest we

forget) of younger Hamlet's birth? Was not Prince Hamlet born to carry on his father's history and avenge his crime?

But there's a rub. First, we can't be sure *who* speaks. Hamlet's friend Horatio, scholar returned from Wurtenburg, says "tis but a fantasy"—or worse "a guilty thing"—that speaks to Hamlet. At best, a ghost one moment there, one moment gone; there and not there, present and absent, the past as present. And when the ghostly, guilt-ridden spirit finally speaks, after much coaxing, he claims he is a creature come, not back from heaven, but hell: from "sulphurous and tormenting flames." He is indeed a "questionable shape."

And there's another rub. If we can't be sure *who* the ghost is, we can't be sure *what* he is saying either. He tells his son, "remember!" Yes. *But what is he to remember?* His father's glories as illustrious monarch, faithful to his people, spouse, and son? No. The irony is that the first thing father tells son is *what he cannot tell him*.

*I am thy father's spirit,  
doomed for a certain term to walk the night  
and for the days confined to fast in fires  
till the foul crimes done in my days of nature  
are burnt and purged away. But that I am forbid  
to tell the secrets of my prison house,  
I could a tale unfold whose lightest word  
would harrow up thy soul. . . . (act 1, sc. v)*

The second thing King Hamlet tells his son is to prevent the "royal bed of Denmark" from being "a couch . . . of damned incest." But here again there are problems, for he adds: "do not contrive against thy mother aught." In other words, another double injunction. First: remember me/remember me not. Second: intervene/don't intervene.

Freud, as we know from his famous reading of the play in *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), sees these paradoxes as the betrayal (in both senses of term) of Hamlet's Oedipus Complex. The repressed desire to vilify the father and possess the mother. Lacan (1982) sees the double injunction as a "tragedy of desire." While Nicholas Abraham (1988) reads it as a symptom of the gap left in us by the untold secrets of others who came before us. King Hamlet's "Remember me!" means *both* (1) to commemorate the ghost's memory by honoring his summons to avenge *and* (2) to recall what the ghost-king actually did if he could only say it (which alas he is "forbid"). This contradictory summons represents what might be described as a *tragedy*

of narrative. We have a story to tell but can't tell it. Or as the narrator of Beckett's *Molloy* puts it, "I can't go on [telling stories], I'll go on."

*Hamlet*, on this reading, is a story about the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of stories. Ophelia cannot tell her story until she goes mad (when she tells everything but is no longer herself: "Here's rosemary for remembrance"); Claudius cannot tell his story, even in the confessional, until it is forced from him by the play within the play; Gertrude cannot tell her story because she is ignorant of it (she does not know that Claudius killed the King); Polonius and his fellow courtiers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Osric, cannot tell their stories since they say only what pleases or deceives. Even Prince Hamlet cannot tell his story for as long as conscience makes a coward of him. No, not until, dying of a fatal wound he begs his friend Horatio: "absent thee from felicity awhile to tell my story." Which means that this is a play where no one actually tells their story, no one truly remembers, until Prince Fortinbras arrives too late on the scene, and announces: "I have some rights of *memory* in this kingdom/ which now to claim my vantage doth invite me" (act V, sc. ii).

What exactly these rights of 'memory' are no one tells us. And if they could, one has good reason to suspect the play would not have survived the first act. In other words, the play is about a cover-up, a concealment of a crime (or crimes) that the hero, Hamlet, is trying to uncover and reveal. Numerous psychoanalysts over the years—drawn to the play like kittens to a ball of wool—have read between the lines and dared to tell the untold tale. Namely, as André Green (1982) and Nicholas Abraham (1988) would have it, that King Hamlet has done to King Fortinbras what Claudius does to Hamlet (King and Prince)—poison him to secure the rights of kingship. The 'rights of memory' restored by young Fortinbras in the last act would refer, on this reading, to the final righting of the wrong committed against Fortinbras's own father by Hamlet's father. That King Hamlet's 'foul crime' occurred on Hamlet's birthday is surely no accident, as suggested by the Prince's opening invocation of the "dram of evil"—that "vicious mole of nature in (particular men), /as in their birth, wherein they are not guilty,/ (since nature cannot chose his origin). . . ." (act I, sc. iv) The ethics of remembrance, Shakespeare reminds us, proves more complex than it seems. Indeed, were it *less complex*, one wonders if Shakespeare would have spun his marvelous play at all in the first place. It's true: "the play's the thing in which we'll catch the conscience of the king." But which king are

we speaking of? King Hamlet? King Claudius? Hamlet pretender to the throne? Or King Fortinbras who too was to his grave untimely sent?

It's because there's no quick answer to this question that *Hamlet* the play survives to this day, and Hamlet the prince is the most written about person in Western culture after Jesus and Napoleon!

So what's the story? Tell/don't tell! The double injunction that makes us human. The essence of tragedy in literature and life. But there's a difference between literature and life and, I will argue, it's a significant one. Despite certain current views that the imaginary and the real are one and the same, I submit that what is good for literature is by no means always good for life. If at the epistemological level it is often extremely difficult to establish clear referential relations between narrative and world, this does not mean, especially from an ethical point of view, that there is no distinction whatsoever.

### Memory in Fiction

But before proceeding with this vexed issue, let me cite one more example of the role of narrative imagination in fiction. I quote here from a recent novel, *The Bend for Home* (1996), by an Irish writer, Dermot Healey, disciple of Joyce and Beckett and fascinated, like them, by the mystery of memory as recounted in fiction. How does the past alter in the telling? How does fiction change the way things were in order to make a story out of how things might have been. (The future anterior is a favourite tense in fiction). And yet in ostensibly distorting truth, poetic lies can tell another kind of truth, sometimes a truer truth. Here are some anecdotes from Healey's novel that capture this enigma.

1. *There's a song by Percy French called "Come back Paddy Reilly to Ballyjamesduff," seemingly written about a cabman who used to collect Mr French, the road-engineer, from the railway station there. Then the cabman went off to America and things were never the same. Hence the title. One of the verses goes: "just turn to the left at the bridge of Finea/ And stop when halfway to Cootehill." But it can't be done. No matter how you try you can't turn left at the bridge of Finea, unless you go up Bullasheer Lane which leads eventually to the banks of floating reeds on Kinale. Some make a case for the old Carrick road which passes the weeping walls of Carrick Church that stands in a quarry, but the Carrick road is to the right. It's all cod. For the sake of a song Percy French got his geography amiss. Even road-engineers are capable of giving wrong directions in order to get a couplet true. And that's how I found out writers not only make up things, but get things wrong as well. Language, to be memorable, dispenses with accuracy. . . . To top the coincidence my mother took the turn to the left that doesn't exist and eventually found herself in Cootehill. These things happen. That's how it is. She followed the words of the song. (pp. 9–10)*

2. *The first real essay I wrote was about rain. I remember reading it out in the De La Salle Brothers School. I stole the lines from a book by Charles Lamb that I found in the attic. Imagination. . . . begins with our first lie. It's hard for me to remember my first lie, since I've told so many. And now I'm at it again. Can I lie here and sidestep some memory I'd rather not entertain, and then let fiction take care of it elsewhere, because that is sometimes what fiction does? It becomes the receptacle for those truths we would rather not allow into our tales of the self. The made-up characters feel their way by virtue of thoughts that novelists deny having. So I'd like to describe my first stab at fame, even though it shames me. It was a combination of lies and a fondness for words that started me. I can still remember the liquid feel of those words for rain. How the beads were blown against a windowpane, and glistened there and ran. The words for rain were better than the rain itself. I wanted to type up words. . . . (p. 57)*

3. Healey goes on to describe, finally, how he achieved his first fame, like Synge's Playboy before him, "by the power of a lie." He describes returning to a wedding in his native Cavan after some months in exile in London. At the wedding reception he finds himself seated beside the editor of the local newspaper, the *Anglo-Celt*, in which he'd published his first short story some years previously. Asked by the editor how the writing was going for him in London, Healey made up a story about having finished a play that would soon be shown on British television. Responding to the editor's more detailed inquiries, Healey invented a string of fibs—it was called *Nightcrossing*, he'd received an advance of one thousand pounds and so on. The dancing started up then and Healey forgot all about the "play he'd never written." He returned to London a few days later but his lie was to return to haunt him. Seated in an Irish pub in Piccadilly a week after the wedding, another ex-pat came in and clamped a copy of the most recent *Anglo-Celt* down on the bar:

"Look," says he.

*And there I was on the front page with a cigarette in my mouth over a small headline that read: CAVAN AUTHOR FINDS FAME. . . .*

*(My friend) would set me questions about the plot, and the more he asked the more I had to invent.*

*In time I invented a producer from ITV, a Mr Evans, if you don't mind, who lived in Hammersmith. Apparently I saw him from time to time. He went over the shots and camera angles with me. I even eventually set a date when it would be broadcast to the nation—November 10th, let's say. In fact I began to believe in it myself. I believed the script existed. The more of the story I invented, the more real it became. Then I'd suddenly wake out of a dream terror-stricken by my duplicity. Slowly I tried to extricate myself from the lie. There were problems with production monies, I said. There were production difficulties. Something had gone wrong down the line. The date for the broadcast came and went. No one mentioned it.*

*But in fact I had set myself a duty. Everything I write now is an attempt to make up for that terrible lie. Had I not lied I might never have tried my hand at fiction. The truth is the lie you once told returning to haunt you. (pp. 59–60)*

In short, Healey, like Hamlet's ghost, enjoins us to tell our tale but not to tell it as it happened! He contrives to straddle the extremes of telling and not telling.

### Poetic Exigency

Healey is responding here to the double injunction of all poetics—tell it but do not tell it as it was. This double exigency can be interpreted in different ways, of course. On the one hand, there is the Beckettian view that “silence is our mother tongue,” and that all forms of remembering (apart from involuntary memory à la Proust) are distortions, stories we invent to ward off the “suffering of being.” Hence Beckett’s resolve to dismantle the narrative form, paring his stories down until they become “residua” or “no-texts”—anti-novels. Seamus Heaney offers a recent ironic variation on this same tune when he writes: “Whatever you say say nothing.” The best stories are the stories never told—hence Heaney’s corollary counsel to “govern the tongue,” to write poetry rather than fiction.

Against this, there is the Joycean tradition that says: tell everything!—a tradition that produces *Finnegan’s Wake* (the text of “allmen”) rather than Beckett’s *No’s Knife* (the text of “noman”). The Joycean impulse celebrates the fictional re-creation of history in its entirety working to the refrain of the garrulous washerwomen by the Liffey: “mememormee, mememormee!”

So while the former poetic exigency may be expressed as *tell nothing whatever you tell*, the latter translates as *tell everything you can tell*.

### From Stories to Histories

What is fine for fiction is another matter when it comes to history. Here the double injunction—tell/don’t tell—may have very different resonances and consequences, especially at an existential and ethical level. It is this contrast between fictional and historical remembrance that I wish to explore in the remainder of this chapter. If fiction is entirely free to recreate the past *as it might have been*, history has a duty to recount the past *as it actually was* (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*). If it is true, as Paul Ricoeur claims, that “l’imaginaire ne connaît pas de censure,” the same cannot be said of historical narrative. The difference is crucial, though not always self-evident.

To illustrate this contrast between literary and nonliterary forms of narrative memory, I will concentrate on some controversial “case histories” in psychotherapy, before briefly touching on the more general debate about the role of narrative in the recounting of public historical events.

### Suppressed Memory

In psychotherapy the double injunction—tell/do not tell—would seem to be resolved. A cure happens when one gets to the bottom of things, when the suffering subject manages to remember and recount the *whole story*, or at least as much of it as is recoverable and utterable given the lapses of time between the events of trauma and the recall of those events. This at least seems to be Freud's view in the famous case of Dora. Here Freud believed he could cure his patient's hysteria if only he could reconstitute the "missing pieces" in Dora's fragmented narrative. Freud's theory was that hysterics suffer from blockages of memory that result in "hysterical conversion symptoms" such as (in Dora's case) insomnias, depressions, coughing fits, and so on. The psychoanalytic hypothesis was, accordingly, that Dora would be cured once her repressed desires and traumas were recovered in and through narrative—that is, once she succeeded in telling her *full* story. In this instance, her secret desire to marry Herr K. The cure would therefore comprise a narrative cure made possible by the recovery of repressed desire through analytic discourse and transference.

The same applies to Freud's other case histories—Little Hans, the Ratman, the Wolfman, Schneider—a telling concession being that the decisive evidence is revealed more as "creative narrative" than as "scientific fact." But there is an immediate problem, is there not? How are we to know whether the narrative is "true" or not? It was precisely the difficulty of responding to this question that provoked the controversy surrounding Freud's changing views on the seduction theory—at one time suggesting that childhood memories of abuse were real, at other times claiming they were fantasy.

I don't propose to get into the history of this well-rehearsed controversy here. Suffice it to say that from an ethical and juridical standpoint (whatever about the complex epistemological issues of how we can ever *know* the past as past), it *does* and *should* matter whether a recovered memory relates to things that actually happened or not. And this mattering pertains to both the person allegedly abused and to the person who allegedly perpetrated the abuse.

Let me give some examples. We have seen recently, particularly in the United States, a wide debate on the so-called false memory syndrome. This has been documented in a number of highly publicised books, such as Michael Yapko's *Suggestions of Abuse: True and False Memories of Childhood*

*Sexual Trauma* (1994), Lenore Terr's *Unchained Memories: True Stories of Traumatic Memories, Lost and Found* (1995), Lawrence Wright's *Remembering Satan* (1994), and Mark Pendergast and Melody Gavigan's *Victims of Memory: Sex Abuse Accusations and Shattered Lives* (1996). Even if none of these authors wish to contest the validity of the persistent memory of infantile sexual abuse, some of them cast serious doubt on the use of suggestion and trancework techniques in cases of long-term recovered memory. Wright, for instance, cites the case of a Mr. Ingram, accused by his daughter of performing sexual abuse rites on her after she had recovered a long repressed memory thanks to (1) her reading of some recent literature on Satanic rituals and (2) a number of trancework sessions with psychotherapists. The accused himself confessed to the crimes, after sustained interrogations by police and psychologists during which he was assured that the more he acknowledged the abuse the more clearly his own (repressed) memories of such events would be recovered. As Paul Ingram admitted, "My memory is becoming clearer as I go through all this. . . . It's getting clearer as more things come out." The basic "suggestibility" premiss of the interrogators was: If you have the *feeling* that such abuse occurred, even if not actually the cognitive awareness, then it did occur. Mr. Ingram was condemned to twenty years of imprisonment before the case was contested and reopened. (One can think of more notorious cases of such suggestion-confessions running from the Salem witch trials, so brilliantly captured by Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, to the recent investigations of collective Satanic abuse of children in the Orkney Islands off Scotland.)

As a result of certain abuses of the memory of abuse (even if such be the exceptions rather than the rule), the whole notion of psychological memory is being challenged. As Walter Reich argues in his essay, "The Monster in the Mist: Are Long Buried Memories of Child Abuse Reliable?": "Given memory's indispensability and frailty, it's striking that so many of us are ready to play so fast and loose with it. When we uncritically embrace reports of recovered memories of sexual abuse, and when we nonchalantly assume that they must be as good as our ordinary memories, we debase the coinage of memory altogether. What we *should* do is shore up the legitimacy of an imperfect but precious human capacity—the capacity to attest to events that we have always remembered—by resisting the creation of a new category of memory whose products are so often mere inventions conjured by the ministrations of recovery spe-

cialists. Instead, too many of us undermine that legitimacy by according to recovered memories, even the most bizarre ones, the same status—psychologically as well as legally—that we accord to traditional forms of memory” (1995, 38).

The undermining of testimonial memory in this way does a grave disservice not only to those falsely accused of abuse but also to those many victims of real abuse. The question of the *veracity* of narratives of childhood abuse—recovered or persistent—is of capital importance (especially, I repeat, from a moral-judicial point of view).

### Missing Pieces

Let me return for a moment here to the famous case of Dora. The possibility of “suggestion” is far from absent in this controversial case history—which itself comprises a history of revisions and controversies. As several of Freud’s contemporaries and successors noted, the “talking cure” did not actually work for Dora for the probable reason that Freud constructed her story according to his own unconscious identifications—in particular, with the virile Herr K. whom Freud believed Dora secretly wished to marry. Freud’s remarks about Dora’s resistance to his hypothetical interpretation of her hysterical symptoms may thus actually betray a *countertransference* of his own desires onto his analysand—a complex psychoanalytic phenomenon that Freud himself had not yet come to fully appreciate, as Lacan and others observed. But Freud did, in fairness, have the professional honesty to call this case history a “fragment,” thereby at least implicitly acknowledging that the “missing pieces” of Dora’s story were never fully filled in or completed by Dora herself.

The question raised by this fragmentary narrative is therefore: *Whose story is it anyway?* Dora’s or Freud’s? Certain commentators, most notably Claire Kahane in *In Dora’s Case* (1990), construe the oblique, truncated, and unfinished character of Dora’s story as itself a signal of its singular truth. Hysteria, this argument goes, is by its very nature an experience of fragmentariness and its truthfulness derives from its uncompromising and legitimate resistance to Freud’s attempt to play the omnipotent father-god capable of filling in the fissures and fractures of her story in order to sign off a “total account.” Dora’s narrative has thus become in certain feminist circles a *cas célèbre* of genuine feminine resistance—hysterical or otherwise—to the phallogentric exigency to “tell everything.” According to this view, it is

precisely the covert, oblique, and obscure elements in Dora's version that constitutes a necessary female refuge from the male imperative to know and appropriate anything alien to it.

This reading is persuasively developed by Jane Gallop (1990) who argues that hysterical discourse is a paradigm of "woman's story" ("Keys to Dora"). And it is also invoked by Stephen Marcus in his literary-psychological account, "Freud and Dora: Story, History, Case History" (1990), where he cites Dora's narrative as an exemplary instance of modernist fiction, displaying four central common features: (1) the impossibility of access to truth, (2) the dissolution of linear narration and its explosion into multiple, often competing, perspectives, (3) the existence of an unreliable narrator (Freud), and (4) the undecidable relation between fiction and reality, both inside and outside of the discourse.

### Memory and Ethics

What some of these commentators seem to ignore, however, is that if it is true that at an *aesthetic* level it matters little whether there is an accurate correspondence between narrative and reality, it matters hugely at an *ethical* level. It certainly mattered to Dora—who got worse rather than better thanks to Freud's countertransference account and to all those other victims of abuse, trauma, or manipulation. What is good for the modernist or postmodernist novel is not necessarily good for actual life. There is, after all, a need to discriminate (as best we can) between the purely story-element of case histories and the history-element as a reality-reference to the past "as it actually happened." The two strands—fiction or fact—are, of course, always intimately interwoven in the narrative text (oral or written), but that does not mean that the strands can never be, at least partially, disentangled and distinguished. Consequently, while I would not for a moment deny that literary analogies between Freudian case histories and modernist fiction can teach us much about the subtle and sophisticated uses of narrative, such analogies do not do justice to the ethical significance of memories of real suffering—memories that the sufferers who recount them wish to be *recognized as true*, that is, as referring to events that did happen.

The moral implications of such an imaginary/real distinction in the operation of narrative memory are crucial not only for psychological cases of abuse but also for the more public and collective cases of historical crime. The instances of revisionism and negationism with respect to the Holocaust and other genocides in history are timely reminders of the fundamental

stakes involved. The whole nature of memory as historical witness is at issue here. While revisionist historians like Faurisson and David Irving deny the existence of gas chambers, antirevisionists like Lawrence Langer in *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (1991) recall just how fragile and indispensable the role of testimonial memory is. Indeed, Langer's scrupulous distinctions between 'deep memory' and other variant categories of remembering—'anguished', 'humiliated', 'tainted', and 'unheroic'—represents just the kind of typological work that is necessary to answer those who would discredit the legitimacy of personal and historical remembrance. As Walter Reich aptly reminds us:

The institution of memory deserves the respect and protection it can get. One indication of just how vulnerable to manipulation it already is can be appreciated from the fact that Holocaust deniers have managed to receive, in recent years, a respectful hearing on college campuses and elsewhere, despite the existence of mountains of firsthand and corroborated traumatic memories of the Holocaust provided by many thousands of survivors—memories that don't have to be recovered because they are all too vividly, and all too persistently, remembered. Holocaust deniers began to achieve their victory over memory even before efforts were made to establish the new category of recovered memory. If recovered memory continues to remain unchallenged as a new form of memory, then one can only guess how much more vulnerable to doubt and manipulation legitimate memory will become. Memory is one of our most precious human assets. It needs protection from those who, by debasing it, diminish its integrity, even as victims of sexual abuse need protection from those who, by abusing them, diminish their humanity. (p. 38)

## Conclusion

Sometimes, some places—Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Rwanda—it is important to let go of history, to heed Nietzsche's counsel to "actively forget" the past in order to surmount the instincts of resentment and revenge. Other times, other places—Auschwitz being the time and place *par excellence*—it is essential to *remember* the past in order to honor our "debt to the dead" and to ensure that it never happens again. As Ricoeur argues in "The Memory of Suffering": "we must remember because remembering is a *moral duty*. We owe a *debt* to all the victims. And the tiniest way of paying our debt is to tell and retell what happened at Auschwitz. . . . [B]y remembering and telling, we not only prevent forgetfulness from killing the victims twice; we also prevent their life stories from becoming banal . . . and the events from appearing as necessary" (1995, 290).

Narrative remembrance can serve two functions: it can help us to remember the past by representing it (as it “really was”) or to forget the past by reinventing it (as it might have been). In fiction, the role of reinvention is what matters most—even in historical novels like *War and Peace*. In psychotherapeutic and historical testimony, the function of veridical recall claims primacy. Distinguishing between these two separate, if often overlapping, functions is, I submit, of great ethical importance. As is discerning *when* it is right to remember and *when* it is better to forget—; and, as important, *how much* we should remember and forget. (Genuine amnesty, in forgiving the past, is never mere amnesia.)

These are critical hermeneutic tasks requiring far more detailed analysis than I can provide here. But if the matter is crucial, it is also extraordinarily complex. To be reminded of this, we need only recall the difficulty that arises when one is asked, like Hamlet, to *remember and forget* at the same time. Such a double injunction can lead to great literature—but not always to a great life. Hamlet, the suffering Prince, paid the price with his own life. As have many before and since.

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