Bill was a beautiful man. He was a wise, deep, elegant, curious, brilliant, scrupulous, angry, chivalrous, tormented, honest, kind, stubborn, inspiring, funny, loving, beautiful man. Above all he was a teacher. That is what Bill Richardson loved to do. To teach and write, write and teach, for sixty years of his academic life, mentoring and forming over three generations of students. And during all those years of masterful pedagogy, Bill was as challenging and he was inspiring. For every time he commented NG (no good) or MA (what do the Medievals say?) in the margins of an essay, he invariably added: ‘You can do it – encore!’

*Ní bheidh a leithéid ann aris.*

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How are we to ‘interpret’ psychic traumas which seem to defy meaning and language? Traumatic wounds are by definition unspeakable. Yet from the earliest of literatures, we find tales of primal trauma which testify to a certain catharsis through storytelling. And we witness a special role played in such tales by figures called ‘wounded healers’. By way of exploring the cathartic paradox of telling the untellable, I will look at some examples drawn from both classical mythology and contemporary literature (including, James Joyce and Holocaust testimony).

My basic hypothesis is this: while traumatic wounds cannot be cured, they may at times be healed – and such healing may take place through a therapy of narrative catharsis. In short, healing by word. A transformation of incurable wounds into healable scars.

**ORIGINARY STORIES OF WOUNDING:**

**Odysseus**

In Homer’s great epic, the hero Odysseus is condemned to act out the wound of his own inherited failure, his own existential finitude, again and again. The name Odysseus means ‘bearer of pain,’ and we learn during the course of the poem that he is carrying wounds both suffered and inflicted by his forebears. Indeed, the ultimate act of recognition when Odysseus returns to Ithaca coincides with the exposure of his childhood scar, identified by his nurse Euryclea.

The poem begins with Odysseus absenting himself from the wounds of his birth and upbringing, his autochthonous origins in Ithaca, sailing off to heroic glory. But his attempts to become an immortal warrior are constantly thwarted by reminders of his mortality (the brutal carnage of Troy and subsequent calamities and failures). The decisive rupture of the
lure of Calypso is central to this disillusionment - Odysseus chooses earthly nourishment over godly ambrosia.

Originally leaving Ithaca as an aspirant hero, Odysseus returns as a beggar: a lowly outcast finally recognized by the smell of his flesh (by his dog, Argos) and the touch of a scar on his thigh (by his nurse, Euryclea). It is significant that Euryclea only touches her master’s scar after a very detailed narrative about how Odysseus received the original wound in a childhood hunting incident with his grandfather, Autolycus (bk 19, v 393-469) – a typical example of transgenerational trauma. The narrative ‘working through’ leading up to Euryclea’s touch, takes all of seventy-seven lines. The climactic moment of ‘recognition’ (anagnorisis), in short, takes the form of a double catharsis of narrativity and tactility. The hero comes to final self-knowledge by both acknowledging and embodying the story of his own primal wounding.

One of the words Homer uses for ‘scar’ is oulen (Od, 19.391). It is a term often associated in Greek literature with ‘trauma’, as in Plato’s Gorgias, 524c, "oules en to somati...hypo traumaton", where oulen means both ‘trace’ and ‘scar’. While the wound is timeless and non-representable, the scar appears in time: it is a carnal trace which can change and alter over time though it never disappears. Scars are written on the body; they are forms of proto-writing. And narrative catharsis is a process of working through such carnal traces.\(^1\)

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\(^1\) Speaking of transgenerational trauma in the Odyssey, there is also the trauma of the son – Telemachus. In addition to the childhood wound at his father’s premature departure and mother’s subsequent obsession with Odysseus’ absence – there are several accounts of the child Telemachus being subjected to a terrifying death experience. According to Hyginus, Palamedes (a friend of Odysseus) "put the baby Telemachus in front of his father’s ploughshare... to expose Odysseus' pretended madness." But there are further allusions to patricide and infanticide in the story, told by Eugammon of Cyrene in the epic Télégoneia, which describe Telemachus being "killed unwittingly by Telegonus, Odysseus’ son by Circe”. Telemachus’ traumatic wounds, like those of his father, remain, however, largely hidden and uncovered – alluded to rather than exposed. The father-son cycle of patricide-infanticide clearly finds echoes in the later Oedipus cycle, as we shall see below.

\(^2\) Erich Auerbach, ‘The Scar of Odysseus’ in Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature (A. Francke Verlag, 1946; English translation Princeton University Press, 2003). Odysseus’ name, given by his grandfather, Autolycus, means ‘son of pain’. It comes from the fact that his grandfather was a bringer of great pain to many whom he plundered and robbed – in collusion with Hermes, the ‘partner of his crimes’. Odysseus himself is both a bringer of pain to others (the Trojans) and a witness of great pain himself (the death of his friends and his own exile and homesickness). The fact that the name Odysseus is given in the middle voice carries this double sense of being both a receiver and giver of pain. It is only when the secret scar on his thigh (which even Athena could not disguise) is revealed by Euryclea (bk 19, 455-527), that the secret story of his name and his childhood wounding is also finally disclosed, the scar serving as a trace of repressed (and repetitively acted out) wounds which have informed Odysseus’ life from childhood to old age and which are only disclosed in the last act. In addition to Auerbach’s seminal essay on the subject, one might also note here the pioneering research on hermeneutic meanings of wounds and scars by Shelley Rambo (‘Refiguring Wounds in the Afterlife of Trauma’ in Carnal Hermeneutics, ed Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor, Fordham UP, New York, 2015) and Karmen MacKendrick (Word Made Flesh: Figuring Language at the Surface of Skin, Fordham University Press, New York, 2004). See also our examples of writing the flesh in our discussion of carnal hermeneutics – Queequeg’s tattoos, stone and skin hieroglyphics etc – in ‘What is Diacritical Hermeneutics?, Journal of Applied Hermeneutics, Vol 1, no 1, University of Calgary, 2011 and in Carnal Hermeneutics, edited Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor, Fordham UP, New York, 2015. For some more explicitly therapeutic analyses of scarring (including self-cutting) as a form of bodily protowriting see Gillian Staker, ‘Signing with A Scar’ (2006) and Stuart Pizer, ‘Catharsis and Peripeteia’ (2013).
What I am suggesting – following Aristotle’s notion of *muthos-mimesis* in the *Poetics* – is that certain kinds of narrative may bring about a catharsis of our most basic passions, through ‘the purgation of pity and fear’. But such healing must be understood in a very specific manner - not as facile closure or completion but as open-ended story: namely, as a storytelling which forever fails to *cure* trauma but never fails to try to *heal* it. As Samuel Beckett’s unnameable narrator puts it: ‘I can’t go on, I’ll go on’. And in the very effort to narrate the unnarrateable, there is, curiously, not only therapeutic caring but pleasure: the pleasurable purgation of pity and fear by pity and fear. More precisely, we interpret the role of narrative catharsis here as a twofold transformation of the passions (*pathemata*) – namely; the distilling of i) pathological pity (*elias*) into compassion and ii) of pathological fear (*phobos*) into serenity. Compassion spells a proper way of being ‘near’ to pain; serenity a proper way of remaining ‘far’ from it (keeping a healthy distance, as we say, lest we over-identify or fuse with the other’s pain). Catharsis, according to Aristotle, makes for healthy citizens. Purged emotions lead to practical wisdom.

**Oedipus**

In his analysis of the Oedipus myth, Lévi-Strauss notes that the proper names for Oedipus and his patrilineal ancestors all refer to ‘wounds’ which cause difficulty in walking: Labdacos (lame), Laios (left-sided), Oedipus (swollen footed). Each of these figures acts out the crimes and wounds of a previous generation: Laios raped the son of his host, Pelops, thereby committing the equivalent of incest and the betrayal of hospitality. His double transgression replicates the curse (*ate*) of his own father, Labdacos, and is repeated by Oedipus in the next generation. This fatal trans-generational lineage comes under the heading of the ‘House of Labdacos’ and involves a recurring acting out of unspoken *traumata* (Greek for wounds).

This recurrence of trauma (inflicted or suffered) takes place over three generations and the only solution to this curse of cyclical repetition is, it appears, the conversion of the untold wound into a form of enacted storytelling – in this case, the symbolic emplotment of Oedipus’s tragic narrative. Only this can effect a cathartic transformation of passions which suspends the compulsive acting out of trauma. The basic thesis, in sum, is that myths are machines for the purging of wounds: strategies for resolving at a symbolic level what remains irresolvable at the level of lived experience.

Let me briefly unpack Levi-Strauss’s argument. Human existence is cursed by a tragic (because impossible) desire to escape the trauma of our autochthonous origins. Namely, the desire to buck our finitude - to deny death. (As Levinas puts it, ‘*l’existence est notre

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traumatisme originel’). The effort to surmount our earthly finitude is repeatedly acted out in the struggle with monsters: Cadmos kills the dragon, Oedipus defeats the sphinx. But these attempts to overcome mortality are ultimately impossible for we are scarred by irreconcilable fidelities: to both earth and sky, to immanence and transcendence, matter and spirit, nature and culture. So for Lévi-Strauss, great mythic narratives - beginning with the synchronic myths of la pensée sauvage - are attempts to procure cathartic relief by balancing these binary opposites in symbolic constellations or ‘mythemes.’ In a word: what is impossible in reality becomes possible in fiction.

MODERN STORIES OF WOUNDING

Many modern psychologists who have supported Lévi-Strauss’ claim that the cathartic function of myth is by no means confined to ‘primitive’ societies but continues to operate in the human psyche today. Examining the depth structures of mythic stories, both Maria Louise Von Franz and Bruno Bettelheim make the point that folklore and fairy tales can serve to heal deep psychic wounds by allowing trauma victims or other disturbed persons find expression for inhibited feelings. Myths enable us to experience certain otherwise ‘inexperienced experiences’ – that is, events that were too painful to be properly registered at the time but which can, après coup, be allowed into expression indirectly, fictionally, ‘as if’ they were happening. Thus good and evil mothers, for example, in famous folk tales allow for the symbolic articulation of children’s deeply ambivalent attitudes towards their own mothers (good fairy godmother because loving, nourishing, present/wicked witch or foster mother because controlling, punishing, absent). And the same goes for surrogate fathers (as benign protectors or malign castrators).

Joyce: Writing trauma into fiction

Many writers can be considered wounded healers. In the case of Joyce, we find someone, I have argued elsewhere, who wrote books in order to transform personal and collective trauma into art. The personal traumas related to the death of Joyce’s young brother (alluded to in the first of his famous ‘Epiphanies’) and a brutal mugging in Dublin in 1904. The collective trauma related primarily, I believe, to the Irish famine. When Joyce visited Carl Jung in Zurich - hoping he would cure his daughter, Lucea - Jung replied that he could not cure Lucea’s madness and that Joyce had only managed to cure his own by writing Ulysses! In short, Joyce is Stephen Dedalus ‘writing the book of himself’ in order to save himself from melancholy.

Let me say a brief word about the mugging at the root of Ulysses. In a letter to his brother Stanislaus on November 13, 1906, Joyce announced that he had just begun a new “short story.” It was called Ulysses. He came up with the idea, he explained, because of a memory triggered by a recent mugging in a street in Rome. He had just been fired from his job at the Nast-Kolb Schumacher bank, and drunk all his severance pay (which should have paid the

rent and help provide for his one year old son, Giorgio). On his way home Joyce was robbed and left lying in the gutter, destitute, despondent, and bleeding. And it was at that very moment that he suddenly remembered something: being assaulted several years previously (June 22, 1904) in Dublin and rescued from the gutter by a man called Hunter, “a cuckolded Jew” who dusted him down and took him home for a cup of cocoa - “in true Samaritan fashion,” as Joyce put it. This repetition of woundings triggered a lost memory where an immigrant Jew came to the rescue of a wounded Dubliner and planted a seed of caritas in his imagination.

Several weeks after the Rome mugging, Joyce and Nora were given tickets to an opera whose librettist was called Blum. This second moment of happenstance, after his humiliating fall in a Roman alleyway, furnished the name of his paternal protagonist, Leopold Bloom. Thus was born the longest short story ever told - *Ulysses*. The tale of a father (Bloom) and a son (Stephen) traversing wounds on the way to healing.

In a pivotal scene in the National Library, at the heart of *Ulysses*, Stephen expounds his central theory of the father/son idea in *Hamlet*. His thesis is that Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* the year his son, Hamnet, died, and his own father, John Shakespeare, was dying. The play, he argues, is about the transmission of mortal trauma between fathers and sons. In short, according to Stephen, Shakespeare wrote “the book of himself” in order to avoid the madness of melancholy, that is, in order to properly mourn his father and his son in a way that he was unable to do in real life. The play itself thus serves as a symbolic “working through” of an otherwise irresoluble crisis in which a father (King Hamlet) commands his son (Prince Hamlet) to do something impossible: that is, to remember what cannot be remembered! To tell something that cannot be told. A double injunction. An unbearable burden. An impossible story. The double bind of trauma: «To speak is impossible, not to speak is impossible.»

«Remember me, remember me…»

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says the ghostly father to his son, while at the same time adding:

«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…»

The ghost’s unspeakable secrets—for which he is condemned to the latency of purgatory, those «sulphurous and tormenting flames» ⁸—these very things are precisely what remain secret. The secret “crimes committed in his days of nature” (youth) are, King Hamlet tells us, forbidden tales. In short, the things to be remembered cannot be told in the first place! We are concerned here, I suggest, with traumas. Unspeakable things which we do not possess but which “possess us”—like spectres. For traumas, as Cathy Caruth writes, describe ‘overwhelming experiences of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.’ ⁹ I think Hamlet perfectly qualifies.

**Bamber: The Good Listener**

A final example of the power of narrative to bring about catharsis can be found in the testimony of Helen Bamber, a founding member of Amnesty International and one of the first counsellors to enter the concentration camps after the war. Her goal was to encourage survivors of horror to convert their trauma into stories and thereby find some release from their mute and immutable paralysis. The main reason for this, we are told in her biography by Mark Belton, is that she managed to integrate her own suffering into her understanding and was accordingly an exceptionally ‘good listener’.

In Bergen-Belsen, Helen Bamber encountered ‘impossible stories’ which had to be told. She describes this narrative paradox – of telling the untellable – in her experience of counselling victims after her arrival in the camps in the immediate wake of the liberation.

*(I) would be sitting there in one of those chilly rooms, on a rough blanket on a bed, and the person I was talking to would suddenly begin to tell me what they had seen, or try to tell what it was like…Above all else there was the need to

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⁷ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 1, sc. 5.
⁸ Ibid, act 1, sc. 5.
⁹ Caruth, Cathy, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History*, in C. Nouvet (ed.), *Literature and the Ethical Question*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1991, p. 181. Caruth adds: «The experience of the soldier faced with sudden and massive death around him, for example, who suffers this sight in a numbed state, only to relive it later on in repeated nightmares, is a central and recurring image of trauma in our century» (ibid).
tell you everything, over and over and over.\textsuperscript{10}

Eventually Bamber realized that what was most important was to sit closely beside the survivors and to ‘listen and receive this,’ as if it were part of you and that the act of taking and showing that you were available was itself playing some useful role. A sort of mourning beneath and beyond tears: ‘it wasn’t so much grief as a pouring out of some ghastly vomit like a kind of horror.’\textsuperscript{11} The purgative idiom here is not accidental. (Catharsis in Greek most commonly referred to the physical act of voiding toxic liquids). What Bamber’s accounts of these basic first-hand testimonies makes evident is that Holocaust stories – like all stories of deep pain – are to be understood less as tales of heroic triumph over adversity than as truncated, tentative quasi-narratives that call out to be heard: impossible stories that the victims and survivors nonetheless have to tell. Indeed Primo Levi, one of the most famous narrator-survivors, compared this narrative impulse to retell the story as something as basic as an ‘alimentary need’. For without such conversion from aphasia to testimony, from silent wounds to narrated words (however stammered or inarticulate), the survivors could not survive their own survival. They could not lift themselves from their bunks and walk out the gates of the camps. They could not pass from death back into life.

There is a time for wounds to open and a time for wounds to close. As with the physical process of granulation where scar tissue is formed from within the wound, allowing for a proper mix of exposure to air and protective closure, so too with the psyche. Working-through of trauma calls for a delicate equipoise between silence and speaking, invisibility and visibility, if the wound is to grow into a scar. If one covers the pain too soon, it fester and needs to be reopened at a later time for new scar-tissue to form; if one covers it too late, infection can set in and the pain becomes intolerable. Wounded healers know, from their own experience of woundedness, two basic things: 1) the right timing between too early and too late, and 2) the right spacing between too near and too far. As important as sensitivity to timing is being careful neither to over-identify with suffering (too close) nor to remain an indifferent observer (too removed). It is a matter of tact, in the sense of both tactility and know-how. An art of ‘exquisite empathy.’\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{Conclusion}

What these various examples suggest is that stories become cathartic to the extent that they combine empathic imagination with a certain acknowledgment of the cause and context of the suffering - thereby offering a wider lens to review insufferable pain. The degree of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{10} Mark Belton, \textit{Helen Bamber: The Good Listener}, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998. Cited On Stories, pp. 139-140.
\item \textsuperscript{11} ibid
\item \textsuperscript{12} The common notion of ‘tact’ as both carnal and cognitive finds another etymological ally in the equally colloquial term, ‘savvy’, with its double sense of both knowing (savoir) and tasting (sapere, savourer). See our opening essay in \textit{Carnal Hermeneutics}, ed Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor, entitled \textit{The Wager of Carnal Hermeneutics}, especially pp 15-56. A similar sense of hermeneutic tact and savvy is part of the process of ‘exquisite empathy’ currently being researched by a number of pioneering physicians and therapists. See ‘Self-Care for Physicians caring for Patients at the End of Life’, Michael Kearney, Radhule Weininger, Balfour Mount, Richard Harrison and Mary Vachon, in \textit{The Journal of American Medical Association}, March 18, 2009, vol 39, no. 11.
\end{itemize}
detachment afforded by the narrative representation may be small indeed, but without it one would be smothered by trauma to the point of numbness. Without some mediation through muthos-mimesis, one risks succumbing to the sheer over-whelmingness of horror. Indeed, in this regard, it is telling that several camps survivors have recounted how they finally achieved some relief from the trauma when they recognized themselves, from a certain formal distance, in characters portrayed in narrative accounts of the holocaust, often well after the events took place. One could cite here the important debates on the role of mourning in recent cinematic works like Schindler’s List (Steven Spielberg, 1993), Shoah (Claude Lanzmann, 1985) or Life is Beautiful (Roberto Benigni, 1997), not to mention the literary accounts of authors like Wiesel, Hillesum, Amos, or Levi. Indeed one concentration camp inmate who was fortunate to make it onto Schindler’s original list confessed that she was never able to reconnect with her trauma in the camps until she actually saw herself played by a professional actor in the Spielberg movie – half a century later. Only then, through the detour of fictional narrative, could she reintegrate her pain and tell her own story.

These various narrative testimonies – cinematic, theatrical, literary, documentary – invite first and subsequent generations to recall, in however flawed or fractured a manner, the unspeakable events of trauma ‘as if’ they were experiencing them for themselves. And even though such narrative representations inevitably fail to do full justice to the singularity of the original horror, they allow, in spite of all the odds, many people to remember what actually happened; and this is important so that, in Primo Levis’ words, ‘it may never happen again’.

Cathartic healing involves the narrating of past wounds both as they happened and as if they happened in this way or that. And it is precisely this double response of truth (as) and fiction (as-if) that emancipates us from our habitual protection and denial mechanisms. One suddenly experiences oneself as another and the other as oneself - and thereby begin to apprehend otherwise unapprehendable pain.

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