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## LAMENTING THE LOST CITY

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### TRAUMA AND LITERATURE

Modern theorists, historians, and psychoanalysts, preoccupied with the unimaginable scale of 20<sup>th</sup> century violence and mass murder, have considered its effect on the survivors largely in the language of psychoanalysis. Frequently, they have resorted to Freud's sense of the word *trauma*, signifying not only the ancient Greek sense of the word as a wound, but a specific kind of psychic damage, an injury so profound that it affects not only the individual's capacity to function normally, but his ability to remember the events that caused it. Memory becomes a central preoccupation of therapy, and nowhere more prominent than in the project of collecting Holocaust testimonies from elderly survivors <sup>1</sup>.

There are some questions that may have no answers but suggest ways to approach the endlessly-discussed issues of representing mind-numbing horrors. Is the recovery of a painful past cathartic? Can memory effect cure? Or is it likely to deepen the trauma of past injury? Does the original injury, if it is on a sufficient scale, remain incomprehensible because the individual's understanding of himself and his society has been destroyed <sup>2</sup>? Do the narrations or fictionalizations of terrible events by artists, or by witnesses who also happen to be artists (Bassani,

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<sup>1</sup> Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's 1992 *Testimony* illustrates the preoccupation of modern Holocaust studies with psychoanalytic theory and with trauma as the necessary condition of the survivor.

<sup>2</sup> Ericson 1995, 94, noted that certain kinds of disasters affect the traumatized survivors in ways that not only destroy their belief in basic human decency, but also their sense of self.

Levi), serve a purpose by giving the reader what La Capra calls a «plausible ‘feel’ for experience and emotion which may be difficult to arrive at through restricted documentary methods»<sup>3</sup>. Is the telling of tale, with its inevitable re-arrangements of factual events<sup>4</sup>, also therapeutic for the teller? Does it produce a ‘true’ version of what happened, or is the stored memory of these events always unreliable because it is not coincident with the events themselves and compelled by the haunted, traumatic past?

Using Freud’s observations of the «traumatic neuroses» suffered by those who had fought in World War I as a basis, Cathy Caruth remarks on the «literal» return of disastrous events in the dreams of the traumatized, and singles it out as a hallmark of trauma. She argues that not only are the returns «literal» but that they are «*true* to the event»<sup>5</sup>. The insistence on the *truth* of what is recalled in dream is a reminder of an ancient and widespread belief in the relationship between pain and truth. In 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE Athens, slaves were frequently tortured in lawsuits until they provided testimony for or against their owners. It was held that the evidence produced by pain was bound to be true<sup>6</sup>.

In cultures where laments for the dead are still performed, the words of the laments are frequently described as being «true» because they are induced by pain. I would argue that this is rather different from being «literal». The truth of pain, lament, and perhaps of the recurring dream may have in common a symbolic weight that is felt by the listener to be of greater value than a normal utterance. This truth involves being on the inside of a traumatic experience, a position that is often fraught with ambiguity. As LaCapra put it, «Trauma is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence; it has belated effects that are controlled only with difficulty and perhaps never fully mastered»<sup>7</sup>.

The disruptive effects of trauma are evident in Dori Laub’s eloquent description of what it means it to be «inside the event» of the Holocaust. Laub reminds us that the experience of disaster does not nec-

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<sup>3</sup> LaCapra 2001, 13.

<sup>4</sup> *Ivi*, 17, quotes Hayden White’s description of narrative accounts being not only factual statements [...] and arguments but also consisting of «poetic and rhetorical element by which *what would otherwise be a list of facts is transformed into a story*» (emphasis LaCapra’s).

<sup>5</sup> Caruth 1995, 5 (emphasis Caruth’s).

<sup>6</sup> Holst-Warhaft 2000, 48-50.

<sup>7</sup> LaCapra 2001, 41.

essarily produce a reliable witness, «someone who could step outside of the coercively totalitarian and dehumanizing frame of reference in which the event was taking place, and provide an independent frame of reference through which the event could be observed»<sup>8</sup>. Given the impossibility of independent commentary on atrocity from within, «One might say that there was, thus, historically no witness to the Holocaust, either from outside or from inside the event»<sup>9</sup>. During their incarceration, the inhabitants of the concentration camps had no-one to address, to appeal to. In Laub's view this meant they had no sense of self, which denied prisoners any ability to bear witness to themselves. In contrast to the belief that pain inevitably produces truth, Laub noted that many survivors he interviewed came to think of themselves as complicit in their persecution. Telling their stories would, in the view of some survivors, reveal «the *real* truth, the one that involved the destruction of their humanity»<sup>10</sup>. This distortion of reality is not unique; it is common to the dungeons of the Inquisition or the gulags of the Soviet Era, to large-scale persecution and murder of innocent people when it occurs away from the eyes of the general population. Persecutor and victim develop a relationship that gradually seems normal and even justifiable. The delusional reality of everyday life in the camps is thought to be responsible for the delay or, to use a term often linked to modernity itself, the belatedness of literature that addresses the holocaust.

It has often been observed that the Holocaust did not immediately produce works of literature, that there was a gap of roughly twenty years between the end of the War and the emergence of literature by insiders and observers. But Theodor Adorno's remarks on the impossibility of writing poetry in the face of the Holocaust were at best a half truth, and at worst an audacity<sup>11</sup>. Poetry and prose of high quality did emerge from inside and outside the camps, including the poems of Dan Pagis, Paul Celan, Nelly Sachs, and Jaroslav Seifert. And prose works like those of Primo Levi, or Iakovos Kambanellis<sup>12</sup> remind us that there was, even in the distorted reality of the camps, some kernel of humanity

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<sup>8</sup> Laub in Caruth 1995, 66.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ivi*, 67.

<sup>11</sup> Rose 1996, 143. See also Holst-Warhaft 2000, 179.

<sup>12</sup> Primo Levi's name and works are too well-known to require references, but the Greek author and survivor of Mauthausen concentration camp, Iakovos Kambanellis is not so well known. His *Mauthausen*, originally published in Athens in 1965, and translated into English in 1995, is a literary memoir that deserves more attention.

that surfaced occasionally and shone the brighter for its rarity. Perhaps the most striking example of a writer who produced a diverse body of literature both as a prisoner and immediately after his experiences in Theresienstadt, Auschwitz, and two labor camps near Buchenwald, is that of Hans Günther Adler, who wrote in German and whose works are only now available in English<sup>13</sup>. Adler's exhaustive analysis of camp organization (*Theresienstadt 1941-1945*) is still unavailable in English despite its central place in German Holocaust literature<sup>14</sup>. This is surprising in itself but the reaction of German publishers to his novels is even more difficult to comprehend<sup>15</sup>. Despite the recognition of his literary gifts by other German writers, the book did not find a publisher until 1962, more than a decade after it was written. The reason for the delay seems to have been the unwillingness not of writers to use any kind of literary form to depict their experiences but of the audience of readers, publishers and critics to accept the idea that a work of aesthetic ambition and value could be produced under such conditions. Adler justifies his transformation of a real experience that included the death of his wife and parents, into a work of art, saying:

it is a question of different categories of reality, and there is nothing to be gained from holding fast to facts in literature, facts that only a chronicle of experience or an academic work of history or sociology can properly encompass, while in a work of art these experiences are recast, transformed, even incinerated – a process through which literature arises.<sup>16</sup>

Adler's defense of literature about the camps makes nonsense of Adorno's claims about what should or could be said «after Auschwitz». For those who survived, those who had the gift of literature to sustain them, not writing literature about the single most important event in their lives was, it appears, not an option. They wrote compulsively in whatever way they felt would best convey their experience to an audience. This did not mean that the writing was either easy or that it could be done to satisfy the reader. Like Adler, many survivors experimented with form and eschewed the usual labels of literature to categorize their work. The

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<sup>13</sup> For a review of the new English translation of Adler's novels and a discussion of the reception of his work in post-war Germany, see Ruth Franklin's article in *The New Yorker* (31 January 2011, 74-9).

<sup>14</sup> Franklin 2011, 74.

<sup>15</sup> When Adler presented the manuscript of his novel *The Journey*, written in 1950-51, to the publisher Peter Suhrkamp, Suhrkamp «vowed that the book would not be published while he was alive» (*ivi*, 78).

<sup>16</sup> *Ivi*, 79.

problem, as Levi, Camus, and others understood, was to make the scale and nature of their experience credible.

The poet Mark Doty, writing in a web forum organized by Sandra Gilbert to discuss the use of poetry as part of a monument to the victims of 9/11, said:

I was a little shocked, just a few weeks after 9/11, when calls for contributions to poetry anthologies concerning the event began to circulate. I understand the human need to say something, to give shape to grief, but surely the first response to such a rupture in the fabric of the world ought to be a resonant, enormous silence. To come to quickly to words is, ultimately a form of arrogance; the easy poem suggests loss is graspable [...] I believe that elegy needs to fumble its way toward what sense it can make, and that meaning wrested out of struggle – with the stubborn refusal of death to mean – is the only kind worth making.<sup>17</sup>

I will return to the idea of the postponement of articulating a response to traumatic loss when we consider the traditional laments of mourning, but Doty's remarks remind us that there is an inner struggle between the compulsion to tell the world about these events (something Levi felt strongly), and the refusal to mourn the extraordinary disruption of mass death in conventional literary language. This disgust with literature's conventions is memorably voiced in Dylan Thomas' *A Refusal to Mourn the Death by Fire, of a Child in London*:

The majesty and burning of the child's death.  
I shall not murder  
The mankind of her going with a grave truth  
Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath  
With any further  
Elegy of innocence and youth.<sup>18</sup>

and in Neruda's *I Explain Some Things*, a poem about the bombing raids of the Spanish Civil War, in which the poet cannot bring himself to choose a metaphor for the horror he witnessed:

Bandits with airplanes and with Moors,  
bandits with finger-rings and duchesses,  
bandits with black friars making blessings,  
kept coming from the sky to kill children,  
and through the streets the blood of the children  
ran simply, like children's blood.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Doty 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas 2003, 106.

<sup>19</sup> Neruda 2003, 925.

Modernity may have offered the writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a broader range of language with which to address the unspeakable. Dislocation, interruption, uprootedness, obliqueness – even incomprehensibility, absurdity, experimentation – all contribute to and help express a sense of loss that pervades so much modern literature. Modern Greek poet George Seferis spent most of his creative life mourning a loss that remains, for Christian Greeks, the greatest since the Fall of Constantinople and is simply referred to in Greece as ‘The Catastrophe’. I am referring to the loss of Smyrna following the Greco-Turkish war of 1920-22. Seferis’ family left Asia Minor before the city was destroyed, and he was not a direct witness to the devastation. Nor did his family suffer the loss of their entire livelihood as was the case for most of the more than one million refugees who were forcibly resettled in Greece after the war. And yet that event, and the impossibility of visiting, let alone recovering his ancestral home, caused Seferis to fill his poetry with images of loss and exile, exile that was repeated when he left with the Greek court for Egypt in World War II. Doubly displaced and cognizant of the devastation caused by the German occupation of his country, Seferis felt that he could not communicate the horror of these events to his readers. He chose, instead, to speak in fables:

And if I talk to you in fables and parables  
it’s because it’s more gentle for you that way; and horror  
really can’t be talked about because it’s alive,  
because it’s mute and goes on growing:  
memory-wounding pain  
drips by day drips in sleep.<sup>20</sup>

The «memory-wounding pain» that «drips» is a reference to Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* (179-80) a work in which the perils of keeping memory alive are murderous. And yet Seferis suggests in an earlier poem (and reiterates in a later one) that there is also a cost to forgetting:

Among these decimated villages  
on this promontory, open to the south wind  
with the mountain range in front of us hiding you,  
who will calculate for us the cost of our decision to forget?<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Τελευταίος Σταθμός* (*Last Stop*), written in October, 1944. Translation by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard 1973, 303.

<sup>21</sup> *The Decision to Forget* becomes the title of a later poem by Seferis, written during the war years (*ivi*, 303).

## THE DANGERS OF REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING

The dangers of remembering and the decision to forget tragic events were discussed many centuries before the development of psychoanalysis. In a fascinating essay on memory and amnesty – in its ancient Greek sense of the deliberate erasing of memory – Nicole Loraux discusses the ban that was placed not once but twice on recalling an event that was damaging to the civic self, that is to the Athenian people<sup>22</sup>. The first ban, coupled with a large fine, was imposed on the playwright Phrynichus, when his play *The Capture of Miletus* was staged at the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and caused the audience to burst into tears by reminding them of their misfortunes when the Persians captured Miletus. From then on, Athenian playwrights were, as Loraux notes, careful to set their tragedies in remote periods and locations so as to avoid being accused of affecting the audience too painfully. The second ban, placed almost a century later, was on «recalling the misfortunes» of the defeat of Athens by the Spartans, and the violent «oligarchy of the Thirty» that followed<sup>23</sup>. This decree imposed an oath on Athenians not to recall the events that had recently torn the city apart. It ascribes an active role to remembering, which is regarded as potentially dangerous to the city and capable of stirring further civil strife. Was the ban effective? History suggests not.

To judge by all the things that set the «restored», though toned-down, democracy after 403 against the democracy ending in 405, one could wager that no operation of memory was successful in closing the wound, so deep was the gash made in the city by the conflict.<sup>24</sup>

The consequences of disobedience were serious. One democrat lost his life for it<sup>25</sup>. Having executed him, and placed blame for the past conflicts only on the «Thirty Tyrants», the new rulers of Athens believed that political life in Athens could resume its course. Not only did amnesty benefit the political life of the *polis*, but the erasure of memory was

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<sup>22</sup> Of Amnesty and its Opposite was originally published as an independent essay in 1988 and included as an appendix to Loraux 1998.

<sup>23</sup> The ban was a cornerstone of the democratic reconciliation of 403 BCE. It is regarded as paradigmatic of amnesty, and was linked, even in antiquity, with the first ban imposed on Phrynichus (Loraux 1998, 86-87).

<sup>24</sup> *Ivi*, 88-89.

<sup>25</sup> Aristotle speaks of a single instance of an unnamed man who «spoke of the misfortunes» (*Athenian Constitution* 40.2). He was dragged in front of the Council by a moderate democrat, Archinos, and put to death.

reinforced and linked to the spiritual life of the city through the setting up of an altar to Lethe (Oblivion) on the Acropolis. But the official banning of memory did not mean that individuals forgot. Rather, it was a warning that memory was dangerous, even the memory of the dead.

Mourning and its excesses haunt the tragic theater, nowhere more than in the plays that deal with the history of the House of Atreus. Clytemnestra and Electra were terrible reminders to the Athenians of the dangers of the connection between mourning that refuses amnesty (oblivion) and violent retribution. A ban on women's lamentation in Athenian funerals pre-dates the two edicts banning remembering, reminding us that this connection had been made before by the Athenian state, again in a political context, and with an explicit emphasis on women<sup>26</sup>.

It is interesting that it was George Seferis who refused to describe the horrors he witnessed during the second World War, and yet understood that there was a cost to his (the use of the first person plural also implicates his contemporaries) decision «to forget». What Seferis seems to be saying is that however much I, as an individual, am haunted by the loss of my ancestral home in Asia Minor or the occupation and devastation of my country by the Nazis, poetry is not the place for me to refer directly to these events. I have a personal, perhaps civic obligation, to use the oblique language of myth and fable in order to spare my readers – and myself – pain.

## METAPHOR AND HISTORY: CONFRONTING DISBELIEF

Camus, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957, only six years before Seferis, also made a decision to address the horrors of the occupation of his country by the Germans in a literary fable, but one prompted by very different motives. As a journalist and active member of the resistance he had witnessed and chronicled the real events taking place in his country. He was not, however, a Jew, and did not experience the horror of the camps at first hand. His decision to use the metaphor of the plague as a way to write about the camps was motivated by reasons entirely opposite to Seferis' gesture of suppressing memory.

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<sup>26</sup> In the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE in Athens, but also in other Greek city states, bans were imposed on excessive lamentation by women at funerals. For a detailed discussion of these bans, see Margaret Alexiou 1972 and 2002, and Gail Holst-Warhaft 1992.



Its evasion of literality was necessitated partly by the conditions under which it was begun: the France of the occupation and resistance. A large part of the text first appeared in a collection of resistance texts published clandestinely during the war<sup>27</sup>. The metaphor of the plague was also perhaps the only adequate analogue for the scale of the Nazi destruction, and it allowed for the possibility that the Holocaust could be seen in relation to a small number of other apocalyptic historical events that have both stupefied and taken people by surprise. As the narrator of Camus' novel marvels: «There have been as many plagues as wars in history; yet always plagues and wars take people by surprise»<sup>28</sup>.

Camus wrote of the horrors of the Holocaust *in medias res*, conscious of his «chronicle» as a dangerous act of resistance. He was, nevertheless, a novelist, and his claim to report «what happened» is only true in the sense that laments for the dead are 'true'. If he resorts to the metaphor of a plague set in a non-European landscape, he still claims to be telling the truth. His narrator works, as he says, «with three kinds of data: first, what he saw himself; secondly, the accounts of other eyewitnesses [...]; and lastly, documents that came into his hands»<sup>29</sup>. Camus' fictive narrator insists that his chronicle is a reliable account of the events that took place in Oman, supporting his claim not to simply be telling a story but writing an objective history by indicating the multiplicity of his sources. At some level this was a self-protective device, not only because of the time at which his narrative was first conceived but because the very nature of the events he was writing about defied the imagination. The scale of the destruction demanded a frame of reference for which plague was perhaps the singular European analogue. Both catastrophes demanded a rare clarity of perception that Camus knew himself to possess. For the majority of victims and witnesses, belief was difficult. Camus attributed the disbelief to the fact that the plague/Holocaust victims were «humanists: they disbelieved in pestilences»<sup>30</sup>. As Shoshana Felman writes: «Because our perception of reality is molded by frames of reference, what is outside them, however imminent and otherwise conspicuous, remains historically invisible, unreal, and can only be encountered by a systematic disbelief»<sup>31</sup>.

Camus' solution to the issue of disbelief was to creatively represent

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<sup>27</sup> Shoshana Felman's chapter on Camus' *The Plague* in *Testimony* is the source for much of this information. Felman and Laub 1992, 93-119.

<sup>28</sup> Camus 1948, 35.

<sup>29</sup> *Ivi*, 6.

<sup>30</sup> *Ivi*, 36.

<sup>31</sup> Felman and Laub 1992, 103.

a situation whose allegoric distancing allowed the reader to at least begin to comprehend what in reality he or she could not or did not wish to understand. Literature of this kind, like the laments of the skilled keen-er, enables imagination by its own willingness to engage imaginatively in the suffering of others. To the extent to which it can communicate this suffering to an audience, it can be said to speak the truth.

Writers who were interned in the camps understood, as Camus did, the problem of disbelief, and adopted various strategies to overcome it. Asked in an interview why he had written about the experience of the camps, Primo Levi answered that he wrote because he felt the need to write. Inside Auschwitz, he and some of his fellow inmates had a recurring nightmare of returning home to their families and telling then about their experiences only to be confronted by disbelief<sup>32</sup>. This dream Levi compares to that of Tantalus «which was the dream of ‘eating-almost’, of being able to bring the food to one’s mouth but not succeeding in biting into it. It’s the dream of a primary need, the need to eat and drink. Such was the need to talk about it»<sup>33</sup>.

The problem of disbelief continued to haunt many of the survivors. Not only did the listeners turn away, as Levi feared, but they did not wish to hear about the atrocities of the camps. Levi wrote persistently of what he had seen, publishing his first account of his experience in Auschwitz in 1947, and although fewer than 2000 copies of the first edition of *Se questo è un uomo* were sold, he went on telling his tale for the rest of his life. His use of the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as an epigraph for *I sommersi e i salvati* reminds us the telling of his «ghastly tale» is a compulsion, a necessity he can not avoid.

And this compulsion may be why works of literature have done what testimony could not achieve. If all writing by survivors of the camps is by its very nature extraordinary, Levi’s writing is exceptional in that he was a writer of rare skill. Or perhaps some of that rarity was a product of the experience itself, as he claimed. He even claimed to have been «enriched» by his time in Auschwitz: «so much so that it took me only a few months to write *Survival in Auschwitz*, and I remember writing it without ever faltering»<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> Levi was interviewed by Ferdinando Camon on various aspects of his writing and thought (Camon 1989). In the short chapter *Why Write?* (41-43), Levi talks about his writing as an act of «therapy» and «liberation».

<sup>33</sup> *Ivi*, 42.

<sup>34</sup> *Ivi*, 61.

## «UNA LAPIDE»: THE OUTSIDER AS WITNESS

That Levi himself was the model for Giorgio Bassani's survivor in *Una lapide in via Mazzini*<sup>35</sup> is suggested by the failure of the Ferraresi to listen to Geo's tale of his experiences in the camp. The grotesque, bloated figure of Geo, who returns to Ferrara from Buchenwald looking like a drowned man, finds his name inscribed on a memorial plaque to the dead on the wall of the synagogue in the Via Mazzini. His presence in the town is embarrassing since he has already been memorialized, and so lost his place among the living. When he slaps Count Scocca, a well-known fascist informer, in the face, Geo seems to administer a similar shock to his own psyche. In place of the grotesque jocularity with which he has responded to questions about the camp since his arrival, he resumes his prisoner's clothing and begins to talk compulsively of his time in Buchenwald. But the townspeople have no desire to listen. As life in Ferrara returns to normal, Geo appears to be a madman, and everyone is relieved when, one day, he disappears. It is as if his tale had fallen on deaf ears, and yet, as the narrator admits, Geo's tale has become interwoven with the memory of the town, in which the name Buchenwald is as indelibly engraved as his own on the memorial plaque:

[...] anche la città si ricomponeva a poco a poco nel profilo assonnato, decrepito, che secoli della decadenza clericale, succedutisi di colpo, per maligno decreto della storia, ai lontani, e feroci, e gloriosi tempi della Signoria ghibellina, avevano ormai fissato per ogni possibile futuro in maschera immutabile. Tutto, in Geo parlava del suo desiderio, anzi della sua pretesa di ritornare ragazzo, quel ragazzo che era stato, sì, ma insieme, precipitato come era nell'inferno senza tempo di Buchenwald, non aveva potuto mai essere.<sup>36</sup>

The unwillingness of the townspeople to deal with a man who had survived the concentration camp and returned expecting justice, is something that Levi would certainly have understood. Memory is kept alive, Bassani suggests, by the exceptional, by the misfits, the outsiders, the compulsive witnesses, and by the writers like himself. The ordinary citizens do not wish to hear about, and perhaps cannot even comprehend, the horrors of the camps unless they are filtered through the structure of a narrative or poem.

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<sup>35</sup> Bassani 1960.

<sup>36</sup> *Ivi*, 115-116.

Dori Laub writes that «massive trauma precludes its registration [...], the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out»<sup>37</sup>. Indeed, our understanding of psychological trauma, from Freudian theory to the contemporary discussion of post-traumatic stress disorder is premised on the belief that the ‘wound’ inflicted by the traumatic event must be ‘worked through’ in a process that recreates the original experience. Such a process blurs the distinction between the traumatic event and the language in which it is expressed. As Rebecca Saunders notes of lamentation: «The traumatic moment is [...] simultaneously phenomenal and rhetorical, recorded and produced by the language of lamentation, both a record, and the creation, of the traumatic moment»<sup>38</sup>.

In another of the *Storie ferraresi*, *Una notte del '43*, a paralyzed man, Pino Barilari, witnesses the massacre of eleven local inhabitants by the Fascists from his window and shouts the news to town. Despite his role as vocal witness to the atrocity, when it comes to the trial of the murderers, Barilari refuses to testify in court. The point, Bassani reiterates, is not to use memory as a means to exact retrospective justice; there is no retribution that would restore the lives of the eleven innocents, or the millions who died in the camps. Society may be indifferent to history, but the compulsive witness still has an effect on collective memory. Like the ancient mariner’s, his insistence on being heard compels the listener to hear what he doesn’t wish to hear, and his tale becomes inscribed in public memory. The very intensity of the traumatic tale makes its teller appear unbalanced, even crazy. It is commonly believed that the women who perform laments suffer a temporary insanity, that they «act out the disorder brought about by death»<sup>39</sup>. It is this performative, cathartic aspect of lament that makes it compelling.

Writing about loss, not only of friends, but of an entire community, is, in itself, traumatic. The psychoanalytic discourse of trauma has merged with the literary and historical, producing a body of theory in which trauma has often been de-coupled from pathology, and taken in its original Greek sense to mean a wound, a wound that can and often does heal itself. Writers who have addressed the experience of genocide, war, and torture have been recognized as chroniclers, perhaps compulsive, but not pathologically so. Camus’ narrator in *La Peste*

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<sup>37</sup> Felman and Laub 1992, 57.

<sup>38</sup> Saunders 2007, 47.

<sup>39</sup> Holst-Warhaft 2000, 38-42; also Bourke 2003, 166.

felt compelled to «play the part of a historian» in order to chronicle the traumas he has witnessed. Bassani's decision to collect his fiction under the title *Il romanzo di Ferrara* in 1974, and his constant reworking of the volume until he arrived at the version published in 1980 suggest a similar obsession with chronicling the events of 1937-1943. And yet Bassani's historical project was criticized, as Marianne Shapiro writes, for its lack of commitment to historical reality and political ideology<sup>40</sup>. Bassani's narrow focus on the Jewish community of Ferrara and their fate was neither an idealistic or a realistic project of recovery, but a compulsive reaction to the trauma he experienced, a necessity imposed by the enormity of the event. Only by focusing on the community he understood from within could he make its members 'real' to his readers in all their variety and sameness, in their tragic acceptance of a fate that was historically conditioned by ethnicity and yet vividly embodied in the life and death of individuals. Like the citizens of Cavafy's anonymous metropolis in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Jews of Ferrara are «part of a world preparing for its own death, sometimes in a spirit of stoic awareness, sometimes with a languor not uncommon among high civilizations awaiting destruction»<sup>41</sup>.

The comparison with Cavafy is not gratuitous. Cavafy lived in an Alexandria that had lost any apparent relationship to its past grandeur. As a poet displaced by history, language, and his own clandestine homosexuality from a city that was once a model of tolerant cosmopolitanism, Cavafy spent his creative life as a poet-historian, recalling a forgotten world of Alexandrian brilliance. His Alexandria, like Bassani's Ferrara, is a quasi-mythical city, a paradise lost but compulsively re-peopled and recorded for his readers. For Bassani, though, the desire to recover a lost chapter in the life of his city was complicated by the guilt of having survived its destruction.

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<sup>40</sup> Shapiro 1972, 31. In a 1991 interview, Bassani referred to Croce in explaining his identification with Italian Jews on the basis of ethnicity rather than religion: «La mia religione era quella della libertà. Credevo nella libertà come religione: seguace anche in questo di Benedetto Croce [...]» (Bassani 1998, 1341-1342).

<sup>41</sup> Shapiro 1972, 34.

## TURNING LOSS INTO THE LITERATURE OF LAMENT

In Roland Barthes' notes on his mother's death he wrote: «Everyone guesses the degree of bereavement's intensity. But it's impossible (meaningless, contradictory signs) to measure how much someone is afflicted»<sup>42</sup>. As a writer, Barthes struggled with the same concerns as some of those who experienced the mass deaths of the camps, especially the morality of turning his loss into «literature». «I don't want to talk about it, for fear of making literature out of it – or without being sure of not doing so – although as a matter of fact literature originates within these truths»<sup>43</sup>. These are the words of a literary man, a man who may not have wanted to make his mother into literature but whose every experience, especially his most painful loss, found its way into his writing. «Don't say 'mourning'», he enjoined himself but also the ghostly reader who would one day analyze his every sentence: «It's too psychoanalytic. I'm not *mourning*. I'm suffering»<sup>44</sup>. And six months later he noted, «Each of us has his own rhythm of suffering»<sup>45</sup>. Initially, there seems no possibility of a rhythm; for the newly bereaved, the fabric of reality is torn apart.

Responding to the death of her husband, most recent in a series of family losses, poet and critic Sandra Gilbert felt as if death's door had suddenly opened<sup>46</sup>. She noted how often the bereaved describe their response to such loss as a desire to follow the dead through that opening<sup>47</sup>. Among others, the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce wrote, «In its first stages, grief is a kind of madness [...] we feel guilty for living, it seems we are stealing something that doesn't belong to us, we would like to die with our dead»<sup>48</sup>. Bassani, who admired Croce's work greatly, must have experienced this guilt to a degree that cannot be imagined. If Primo Levi and H.G. Adler felt they had no choice but to bear witness to the horror of what they personally experienced, Giorgio Bassani must also have felt there was no choice but to transform the guilt of survival into a literary lament for the loss of his entire community. That his Proustian recovery of the pre-war Jewish life of Ferrara (*Il romanzo di Ferrara*) takes a lyric

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<sup>42</sup> Barthes 2010, 26.

<sup>43</sup> *Ivi*, 27.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>45</sup> *Ivi*, 28.

<sup>46</sup> Her long and fascinating meditation on death and mourning is titled *Death's Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve* (Gilbert 2006).

<sup>47</sup> *Ivi*, 3.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Gilbert 2006, 3.

form is both surprising and predictable. The Biblical lament for Jerusalem eulogizes the beauty of the fallen city, which is praised as «the Great Lady among nations/the Princess among states» (Lamentations 1.1) <sup>49</sup>. The city is also described as fine gold that has been tarnished and its people as golden vessels that have turned to earthenware (4.1-2).

Bassani's project of transforming his city into a surrogate for Jerusalem occupied most of his creative life. The works of fiction that were collected and revised first in 1974 under the title *Il romanzo di Ferrara* and republished with further revisions in 1980, are a testimony not so much to the fate of individuals, but to the walled city that was both refuge and prison for its Jewish inhabitants, its dual symbolism echoed in the titles of three of its parts: *Dentro le mura*, *Il Giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, *Dietro la porta*. As other critics have remarked <sup>50</sup>, the references to enclosed, walled spaces is ambiguous; just as the walls of the city protected its inhabitants, including the Jewish community, for centuries, they offered only an illusion of communal enclosure. With the decline of Ferrara's most famous leaders, the Este family, the Catholic Church was quick to revoke the privileges Jews had enjoyed and they were forced into the poor, medieval streets of the city where they were distinguished by compulsory yellow badges. Fascism and the racial laws that began their second exclusion from Ferrara society were merely a return to that fall from grace Jews had experienced before. The Napoleonic wars granted them a brief respite and made it possible for families like the Finzi-Continis and for Edgardo Limentani (in *L'Airone*) to acquire large estates.

Whether or not Bassani was conscious of the parallel of his *Romanzo* to the laments for Jerusalem, he wove a multi-layered mixture of Greek, Roman, Medieval Italian and Jewish myth and symbol into his portrait of Ferrara and nowhere more obviously than in his *Giardino*. He knew that the word 'Paradise' once meant a walled estate. The Finzi-Continis live behind the walls of their garden in a state of grace and refinement that excludes the ordinary citizens of the city, a space within and beyond the walls. Their Garden of Eden is dominated by a Nordic-featured beauty whose name, Micòl, is the same as the wife of King David and who, like her Biblical predecessor, is destined not to bear children <sup>51</sup>. Classical associations add to the layers of Biblical reference

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<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Greenstein 2010, 67-84.

<sup>50</sup> See, *inter alia*, Douglas Radcliff-Unstead 1987, 13.

<sup>51</sup> Schneider 1974, 48. Schneider's article offers a detailed analysis of Micòl as the

in the Charon-like figure of the guardian Perotti, and the Cerberus-like Great Dane that follows Micòl wherever she goes: «Mi tiene sempre dietro. Io spesso cerco di confondere le mie tracce, ma lui dopo un poco, sta' pur sicuro che mi ritrova. È *terribile*»<sup>52</sup>. Helpless to avoid her implacable familiars as she is her tragic destiny, this quasi-mythical young woman occupies the center of the garden of Eden. Lovely and never quite attainable, she is both lamenter and lamented. Like the female narrator of the Book of Lamentations and the city of Jerusalem, she is conscious of her death not as an individual loss, but as the end of an era which can never be recovered.

Classical parallels are also obvious in the structure of the novel that unfolds like a Greek tragedy, its outcome revealed in the opening chapter. Echoing the presentiments of death that haunt the heroine, adumbrations that in no way diminish her enjoyment of the present, the novel begins in the Etruscan cemetery outside the city walls. Here death seems a natural, even enviable continuation of life. In its distance from the present, death appears to lose its tragic aspect until a child's question disturbs the adults' equanimity. «Perché le tombe antiche fanno meno malinconia di quelle più nuove?» asks Giannina<sup>53</sup>.

Her father explains that the length of time the dead have been dead affects our capacity to mourn for them. But it is the nine-year-old who teaches her parents and the narrator that death is always tragic and must always be mourned:

«Però, adesso che dici così [...] mi fai pensare che anche gli etruschi sono vissuti, invece, e voglio bene anche a loro come a tutti gli altri».<sup>54</sup>

The novel moves from the ancient cemetery of the Etruscans to the Jewish cemetery of Ferrara where the theatrical, grandiose tomb of the Finzi-Continis stands, a temple in a walled space, a monument to the bodiless dead. Like their walled garden, the family mausoleum must have offered an illusion of immortality and substance to the Finzi-Continis. In fact, the only thing that can rescue them from oblivion is an intruder at their gate, and at their tomb: the narrator-lamenter, whose task it is to repopulate the garden and put flesh on the bones of the disappeared. The mourning of the Finzi-Continis, above all the beautiful Micòl, is the

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embodiment of Bassani's ideal of the free spirit who affirms life in the face of death.

<sup>52</sup> Bassani 1998, 356.

<sup>53</sup> *Ivi*, 320.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*.



fullest expression of Bassani's lament for the lost Jewish community of Ferrara. Micòl is the city and the city is her.

Edward Greenstein notes that the Biblical laments draw on a tradition of city laments in the ancient world, particularly in Mesopotamia<sup>55</sup>. These city-laments, which are revived in Greek literature with the loss of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453, appear to draw on a lost tradition of elegy, or mourning poem for an individual, but the interaction between these genres and the imagery of the Book of Lamentations suggests a reciprocity of influence that links the lost beloved to the city itself in an unbreakable bond. The beloved cannot be separated from the city, nor the city from its lost or exiled inhabitants. Judith Butler suggests that there is a social component to the losses of modern life – the losses of AIDS, for example – and that «[l]oss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to other, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure»<sup>56</sup>.

The sense of being part of a community means that when we lose that community or place, we understand better who we are. Even our individual grief, a condition that is thought of as isolating, may, in Butler's opinion, furnish us with «a sense of political community of a complex order [...] by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility»<sup>57</sup>. It is interesting to consider the persistence of this tradition in relation to the attempts to understand trauma as a quintessentially modern phenomenon<sup>58</sup>. Caruth's discussion of the crisis of truth is typical, when she asks «how we in this era can have access to our own historical experience, to a history that is in its immediacy a crisis to whose truth there is not simple access»<sup>59</sup>. What appears to be a rupture with the past and a wholly modern phenomenon of unimaginable loss may perhaps be better understood by looking at past responses to losses of an entire city or community. In terms of the community's knowledge of the world, these losses were similarly unfathomable. There was, however, a tradition through which to voice loss. Did this tradition help recovery?

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<sup>55</sup> Greenstein 2010, 67-84.

<sup>56</sup> Butler 2004, 20.

<sup>57</sup> *Ivi*, 22.

<sup>58</sup> In *Lamentation and Modernity in Literature, Philosophy, and Culture*, Rebecca Saunders makes a detailed and often persuasive case for the connection between lamentation and modernity (2007).

<sup>59</sup> Caruth 1995, 6.

Was it recuperative?

It is perhaps impossible to answer this question, but, as Rebecca Saunders argues, in her study of lamentation and modernity, there is a way in which the traditional rhetoric of lament seems oddly appropriate to the sensibility of tradition-averse modernism. Laments are not a form of consolation. They veer between anger, praise, and bleak acknowledgement of reality. They are performative, and use the devices of the theater to stage grief. Acknowledging the difficulty of articulating pain in the immediate aftermath of loss, they substitute one person's mature articulation of pain for another's. The delayed composition of laments is common. At Greek funerals, for example, a mother who has lost a child is not expected to compose a lament at the graveside. Instead, a woman gifted in the art of lament will compose a lament on her behalf, but she draws on her own experience of personal pain to do so. This 'aesthetic of pain' that is the pre-requisite for what the community judges to be a 'good' lament allows for the delayed response of the traumatized, and the need for an understanding of loss that can only come with time.

The survivors lament their dead and resent them for abandoning them to life. Making laments is a painful business, but not lamenting may be worse. An altar to Lethe on the Athenian Acropolis does not guarantee the mercy of forgetfulness. The mothers of the 'disappeared' in Argentina could not be bought off, even by the bones of their dead children. They made their own lives into an endless quest for the truth about their children's death, not to satisfy their private need to know; most of them knew all too well how they died, but so that the truth could become public. In their despair and loss the individual Mothers became a community of mourners and activists. They found a voice.

Perhaps one reason for the delayed response of some writers to the Holocaust was the fact that their entire community, all those who would have been fellow-mourners, had disappeared. It took time to assemble a community of survivors, and for those who had the gift of lament to find a voice that might express the magnitude of the suffering. Mourning for the murdered, the disappeared, the dead in war or plague, is always a desire to keep memory alive. For the lamenter, the task will always be to speak in whatever form he or she knows will persuade us she or he is telling the truth about those who cannot tell their own tale, and for the places where they lived their lives.

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