

Narrating Trauma

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Abstract: This essay treats of the therapeutic role of narrative in trauma survivors' path to recovery, as described by the psychiatrist Judith Herman in her *Trauma and Recovery*. It underlines the analogies between Herman's scientific acquisitions, reflecting her clinical work with victims of domestic violence, veterans and political prisoners, on the one hand, and Paul Ricoeur's theory of the circle of triple mimesis, on the other. Furthermore, the essay compares Herman's view of forgiveness as impossible "exorcism" of the traumatic experience, with the post-Holocaust debate about forgiveness, referring to Arendt's and Ricoeur's works and Godobo-Madizike-la's witnessing of the unexpected emergence of forgiveness in the context of TRC Committees in South Africa. The focus on forgiveness sheds light on the pivotal role played by empathy not only in the therapist's room but also in the court of a tribunal, and on the socio-political dimension of the work of memory and narrative. Indeed, public testimonies and confrontations between the victim and her perpetrator may awake empathic capabilities in both of them, who otherwise may be trapped to the past and plunged into a never-ending spiral of violence.

Keywords: Trauma; Forgiveness; Narrative; Judith Herman; Paul Ricoeur; Hannah Arendt.

Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*¹ reflects its author's main research and clinical work with victims of sexual and domestic violence, as well as her experience with combat veterans and political prisoners. Trauma survivors are affected by common symptoms, and their recovery process follows a common pathway, with three fundamental stages: 1) Establishing safety; 2) Reconstructing the trauma story (i.e. remembrance and mourning); 3) Restoring the connection between survivors and their community².

The second stage can be seen as the scientific counterpart to Ricoeur's claim that "Narratives [...] are [...] the place where a certain healing of memory may begin"³. In fact, it moves from the assumption that the sur-

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1 Herman (1997). Cf. especially its Chapter IX: *Remembrance and Mourning*.

2 Ivi, 3.

3 Ricoeur (1999b, 9). Both in Ricoeur (1999b) and (2004), Ricoeur indeed applies to the dimension of collective memory and history the categories formulated by

vivor's telling of her own trauma – and then her finally becoming witness of an experience that she was not originally able to incorporate in her autobiographic memory –, may be healing in itself.⁴ This assumption sinks its roots in Aristotle's description, in his *Poetics*, of the homeopathic principle of catharsis, i.e. of “purgation of pity and fear”⁵, experienced by the spectators of the “fearful and pitiable events”⁶ represented in the Greek tragedies.

The second stage of recovery deals with a particular kind of narrative that refers to autobiographical memory, and so has a strong truth-claim, as strong is the survivor's need to be believed and her need to recognize the truth about the events in order to recover, according to Herman.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt states that what is characteristic of human life is that the latter can be told as a story, as there is always a *βίος*, an individual life recognizable from life to death, that rises out of the *ζωή*, the mere biological life⁷. This *βίος* can and wants to be told and heard as a story⁸. Yet the case of trauma survivors constitutes a limit case to both the *possibility of* and the *craving for* an autobiographical narrative, as traumatic experiences challenge the attempt to convert them in stories. In fact, the characteristic of psychological trauma is the contrast between the will to proclaim the traumatic experience aloud, of speaking the unspeakable, and the will to deny it, to banish it from one's own consciousness⁹. Nevertheless, atrocities can never be buried and will emerge as symptoms if they are denied a verbal narrative. This conflicting dialectic between storytelling and secrecy is what has to be overcome in the second stage of recovery.

While “normal memory” is described as “the action of telling a story,” traumatic memory is wordless and static¹⁰ and it is encoded in the form of “vivid sensations and images”¹¹. Herman describes this memory in its untransformed state as “prenarrative”¹², but not in the sense Ricoeur uses

Freud in *Remembering, Repetition and Working Through* and *Mourning and Melancholia*.

4 “All sorrows may be borne if you may put them into a story or tell a story about them”. Isak Dinesen, cited by Arendt in her epigraph to “Action” in *The Human Condition*.

5 Aristotle (1995, 1449b 24-28; 1453b 1-13). I am following P. Ricoeur in his extension of the *Poetics*' tragic model of emplotment to every narrative as common genus including epic and drama. Cf. Ricoeur (1984, 35).

6 Aristotle (1995, 1452b 31-32).

7 Arendt (1998, 19) and (1977, 42).

8 Cf. P. Ricoeur's definition of life as “an activity and passion in search of a narrative” in Ricoeur (1991a, 2).

9 Herman (1997, 1).

10 Ivi, 175.

11 Ivi, 38.

12 Ivi, 175.

this word while talking of “Mimesis 1” or “prefiguration”¹³. The traumatic experience, in fact, was lived and registered in a way that resists a successive verbal expression. The fragmented memories are neither one *because of* (*διὰ*) another, nor one *after* (*μετὰ*) another¹⁴. It is not just a plot that is missing, i.e. a causal connection between the events, but also any progress in time¹⁵. The survivor has little or no control over when she recalls her memories, her self is split, and she alternates moments of intense reliving of the trauma, e.g. through flashbacks and nightmares, to moments of numbness. The initial account is emotionless, and lacks of any interpretation of the events. In Ricoeur’s words, one may say that it lacks of the Mimesis 1 stage of pre-narrative understanding of the “semantics of action,” its conceptual network of goals, motives, circumstances, its symbolic system and its temporal features¹⁶. The experience was too unbearable to be registered in its immediacy at a cognitive and emotional level. The uncovering work of exploration of the trauma will be at the same time a work of memory and a work of narrative. The task of this stage of therapy will be to lead the survivor to a reliving of the traumatic non-experienced experience, in the vicarious form of narrative and in the context of a safe relationship with the therapist¹⁷. The latter agrees with the patient the right pace of this path towards the appropriation of the trauma, its “integration.”

Integration is the task of therapy: integration of the fragments of experience in a coherent and understandable narrative, of the experience into a fully developed life story, and of the self split by the fragmenting effect of defence mechanisms into a whole self¹⁸. For the inability to be aware of and tell one’s own story is a threat to one’s sense of identity¹⁹. At the level

13 Ricoeur (1984, 54-64).

14 Aristotle (1995, 1451b 33- 1452a 3; 1452a 21-22).

15 Cf. Kristeva’s reflections about the speech of the depressed, which is “repetitive and monotonous. Faced with the impossibility of concatenating, they utter sentences that are interrupted, exhausted, come to a standstill. Even phrases they cannot formulate. A repetitive rhythm, a monotonous melody emerges and dominate the broken logical sequences, changing them into recurring, obsessive litanies”. Depressive persons, “riveted to their pain, no longer concatenate and, consequently, neither act nor speak” (Kristeva (1989, 33-34).

16 Ricoeur (1984, 54-64).

17 Herman (1997, 183).

18 The loss of integrity of the body and the self finds its representation in “the dreams of borderlines patients, schizoid personalities,” which are often “cascades of sounds, intricacy of lines and fabrics, in which the analyst deciphers the dissociation – or a nonintegration – of psychic and somatic unity” (Kristeva 1989, 27).

19 Gobodo-Madikizela, van der Merve (ed.) (2009, 107). Narrative identity is “the kind of identity that human beings acquire through the mediation of the narrative function. [...] self-knowledge is an interpretation; self-interpretation, in its turn, finds in

of both the individual and the community, “the diseases of memory are basically diseases of identity”²⁰. In order to achieve the integration into a life story, a context to the traumatic event has to be provided through a narrative of the patient’s life prior to the event. The next step is to reconstruct the event as a “recitation of fact”²¹. The work of memory or recollection entails literally to “*recolligere*,” gather again the fragmented memories in the most detailed way possible. It looks like the work of assembling together the pieces of a puzzle²². This work, by analogy with Ricoeur’s description of Mimesis 2, may be described as a work of emplotment, of providing a unity (“a discordant concordance” or “*concordia discors*”), a synthesis to heterogeneous elements as agents, motives and circumstances, connecting them together into a single intelligible order of events²³. The survivor is asked not only to recover the highest possible number of details, of “facts”, but also to talk about their meaning, their context, and her own related emotions.

Trauma narrative, as every narrative, entails ethical judgement. The survivor is called to answer ethical, philosophical, theological and judicial questions arising from the traumatic event. She has to “examine the moral questions of guilty and responsibility”²⁴ abandon her sense of guilt and shame for what happened and learn to see herself as a victim, not responsible for her fate. She has to reconstruct a system of belief, for example in a reassuring world order, that she has lost, or she has to quit the belief that the strong can act as he pleases, e. g. in case of victim of domestic abuse, and learn how things go in ordinary people’s private life²⁵.

The therapist helps the patient reconstructing the events, and providing a new interpretation of the traumatic experience. Her role is tricky, as she constantly runs the risk to superimpose her own interpretation and feelings to the story²⁶. At stake is what Ricoeur calls the problem of voice, of who is telling the story. The main narrator of her own story – even if not author of her own life²⁷ –, must remain the patient and not the therapist.

narrative, among other signs and symbols, a privileged mediation; this mediation draws on history as much as it does on fiction, turning the story of a life into a fictional story or a historical fiction, comparable to those biographies of great men in which history and fiction are intertwined” (Ricoeur 1991b).

20 Ricoeur (1999b, 7).

21 Herman (1997, 177).

22 Ivi, 184.

23 Ricoeur (1984, 64-70).

24 Herman (1997, 178).

25 Ivi, 196.

26 Ivi, 179.

27 Ricoeur (1991a, 32). Cf. Arendt (1998, 184).

Nevertheless, the latter has to help the patient to attribute a new definition to a particular relevant detail and redefine the trauma as a story of dignity and virtue instead of humiliation and shame²⁸. Herman brings the example of a woman whose child was taken away by the Nazis, and who has always lived the memory of this event with a sense of shame and guilt. The same woman rediscovers her status of mere victim after a new “configuration” – “co-written” with the therapist – of her own biography, that leads her to substitute the sentence “They took away my child” for the sentence “I gave them my child.” This reversal (*περιπέτεια*) with respect to her usual narrative of her story, leading to a new awareness and recognition (*ἀναγνώρισις*)²⁹, may help the victim to recover her ability – apparently destroyed by the trauma – to feel emotions, including compassion (*ἔλεος*) towards herself³⁰.

In order to achieve the catharsis³¹, this work of plot construction and moral understanding has to go along with an emotional work, in a therapist’s room as well as in a Greek theatre. The survivor is asked to talk about her bodily sensations, her emotions, as “the recitation of facts without the accompanying emotions is a sterile exercise, without therapeutic effect.”³² Apart from helping the survivor to use the language, reconstruct the events and provide a new interpretation of the traumatic experience, the therapist has to share with the patient “the emotional burden of the trauma”³³. Herman stresses the fact that the therapist mustn’t be neutral towards the trauma the survivor has suffered and is reliving during the therapy. A position of moral solidarity is needed. Empathy, and not just a cognitive knowledge of what happened, is required. “The reconstruction of the trauma is not a criminal investigation” and the therapist is not a detective, but a compassionate witness and ally.³⁴ The therapist was not there when the event took place, but she engages in a relationship of mutual trust, required in every testimony³⁵. The political dimension of the therapeutic narrative,

28 Herman (1997, 181).

29 Cf. Aristotle (1995, 1450a 32-34).

30 Cf. *ivi*, 1450a 32-34; 1452a 1-4 and 1452a 23- 1452b 8.

31 Here I am using the term “catharsis” in the meaning it takes on in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, and not in Herman’s work. About the metaphorical use of the word “catharsis” by Aristotle: “In the ancient medical practices of Hippocrates and others, catharsis referred to medical treatments that involved cleansing poisonous liquids or discharging body fluids through vomiting and diarrhoea” (New World Encyclopaedia).

32 Herman (1997, 178). Cf. Aristotle (1995, 1452b 9): one of the components of the plot must be the *pathos*.

33 Herman (1997, 179).

34 *Ivi*, 180.

35 Ricoeur (1999a, 17).

its quest for justice, is stressed in particular in the “testimony method”³⁶ for treating survivors of political torture, in which the traumatic narrative becomes a denunciation, even if in the room of a therapist instead than in the court of a tribunal.

The political meaning of the trauma narrative – evoked by the metaphors of testimony and witness – entails the recognition of a truth claim to the patient’s story. Every story can be told and retold in innumerable ways. The possibility to tell otherwise is rooted in the activity of selection of memories that Ricoeur calls “active oblivion”³⁷. Moreover, in the case of a repressed past, when memory is progressively unburied, the patient may have conflicting memories of the same event, and she herself may doubt and hardly accept the reality of the memories³⁸. Nevertheless, Herman shares with Ricoeur the idea that “we must never eliminate the truth claim of what has been”³⁹. She seems to be confident that most times, even in presence of strong amnesiac gaps, truth can be rescued, and that is what really matters, as truth has a restorative power⁴⁰. It seems that an unbearable truth works always better than a more comfortable lie. Among the various possible narratives, Herman probably believes the therapeutic story to be the one that retells the past and its sufferance in the most faithful way.

Furthermore, Herman is very critical towards a certain use of hypnosis⁴¹. Legitimate in case of persistent form of amnesia⁴², hypnosis should not be used to erase or change traumatic memories. Her charge seems to arise from the belief that abreactive treatments are useless and damaging, as memory cannot really be buried. But maybe she is also claiming an unconditioned respect for the task of psychoanalysis as work of uncovering the truth and learning to face it. In this case, despite the high risk of suicide among the survivors, Herman would affirm that what is true – ethically true – at the political level is also deontologically correct in psychiatry. Namely that the reality, “what really happened,” however horrible it may be, has to be told, to subtract it to the erosive power of time⁴³, to affirm justice and give voice to the victims, to re-establish morality where evil won, by attributing responsibility and guilty. I am talking about that “duty to

36 Herman (1997, 182).

37 Ricoeur (2004, 106-107).

38 It is through a narrative shared with the therapist that the survivor’s memories can acquire a stronger sense of reality.

39 Ricoeur (1999, 15).

40 Herman (1997, 181).

41 *Ibidem*.

42 Ivi, 185.

43 Aristotle (1999, 222b 16-20).

remember”⁴⁴ Ricoeur refers to and that makes Primo Levi curse those who will forget the Holocaust⁴⁵.

It is referring to this wish, shared by most patients, to get rid of the trauma, that Herman introduces the word “catharsis” as synonym of exorcism, and as an impossible goal of psychoanalysis, opposed to integration. Integration does not lead to a magic transformation, to a “purging” of the evil of the trauma. Herman admits that the reconstruction of the trauma is never entirely completed, and she implicitly recognizes that one can never put the word end to a narrative about his own past, as long as one keeps living. Integration can never be achieved once and for all. Other stages of the survivor’s life cycle will reawaken the trauma. However, the major work of the second stage is achieved when, through the working through of narrative, the memory is progressively desensitized and the work of memory replaces the “repetition compulsion”⁴⁶. After many recitations of facts, the telling of the trauma story no longer gives rise to intense feelings, and starts fading like other memories.

When the task of telling the story is achieved, the story belongs to the past, and it may happen not to be the most important event of a life-story. A rape survivor even defined it as “boring,” as no more playing a very interesting role in her life, a thought that may appear “heretical”⁴⁷. The fragmented memories are integrated into a plot, and the whole experience into a life story where past, present and future appear again like distinct entities. The “configuration” of the survivor’s past life story becomes the necessary step towards a “refiguration” of her present, that can be now lived as the time of decision, of what has to be done, and of a new engagement with life and people. This is the task of the third stage of therapy, by analogy with Ricoeur’s third stage of Mimesis, where the narrative experience brings about an alteration in the reader’s world, a “refiguring of the world of action under the sign of the plot”⁴⁸. The survivor “is ready to incorporate the lesson of her traumatic event into her life, [...] to protect herself against future dangers and deepen a sense of alliance with those whom she has learned to trust”⁴⁹.

44 Ricoeur (1999b, 9). About narrative as a tool of justice in Ricoeur’s work, cf. McCarthy (2007, 237-239).

45 “[...] Meditate that this came about. /I commend these words to you. /Carve them in your hearts [...] /Repeat them to your children /Or may your house fall apart, /May illness impede you, /May your children turn their faces from you” (Levi 1995, 11).

46 Ricouer (2004, 104).

47 Herman (1997, 195).

48 Ricoeur (1984, 77).

49 Herman (1997, 197).

The development of a new self can start only after mourning the old self that the trauma has destroyed⁵⁰. “It is quite possible that the work of memory is a kind of mourning”⁵¹, Ricoeur says reading Freud, as every memory refers to a loss – of persons or abstractions like fatherland and freedom –, to which we can reconcile through mourning. That every memory entails a loss is particularly true in case of trauma survivors. It may be loss of important people, of bodily integrity, of moral integrity, of one’s own system of beliefs, or loss of what one has never had, such as a serene childhood and the belief in good parents, in case of incest survivors. The telling of the story inevitably leads the survivor in a deep grief, in a descent to mourning that is necessary to healing, and cannot be bypassed. Mourning implies acceptance of loss as loss, without whom the trend towards melancholia is always possible. Herman talks about a frequent resistance to mourning out of pride, as a way to deny victory to the perpetrator. But grief – as well as the commitment to therapy –, has to be reframed as an act of courage, and as a part of that range of emotions that the survivor has to rediscover to go back to life. Real empowerment originates from the recognition that, even if she has not been responsible of her fate, the survivor is now responsible of her recovery. This is a moral choice and act of will, and she has to use her strength and skills at their highest level.

Resistance to mourning may appear as a fantasy of magical resolution (“catharsis”) through revenge, forgiveness and compensation. The wish of revenge and even – when it goes beyond a certain limit⁵² – the wish of compensation, are both unsuccessful because they trap the survivor in the past and they tie her life to the perpetrator’s one. As well as its opposite, i.e. revenge, forgiveness is considered by Herman as an attempt to empowerment destined to failure, an impossible exorcism of the traumatic experience. Her main argument is that forgiveness is “divine,” out of reach for most victims and therefore frustrating. Despite a rediscovered power of love in the victim is both a clue to and a source of healing, love does not need to be directed to the perpetrator, who is more likely to be object of indifference, or even compassion. In her view – rephrasing Herman’s thought in Arendtian words –, forgiveness is a miracle that cannot be expected, and therefore its ethical status and its possible healing role do not deserve further investigation⁵³.

50 Ivi, 196.

51 Ricoeur (1999b, 7).

52 Cf. Gobodo-Madikizela, van der Merve (ed.) (2009, 55).

53 For an opposite view, consider Enright’s inclusion of the “work” of forgiving in his psychotherapy programme. Cf. Gobodo-Madikizela, van der Merve (ed.) (2009, 62-64).

In *The Human Condition*⁵⁴, Arendt's philosophical considerations about forgiveness as human miracle – rooted in man's ability to act in full freedom and spontaneity –, would lead to different conclusions if applied to a psychoanalytic context. With its gratuitousness and unpredictability, forgiveness breaks the “automatic” cycle of vengeance. Undoing the deeds of the past, it can remedy to the irreversibility of human actions and men's lack of “sovereignty”⁵⁵, making a new beginning possible for both the offended and the offender. In this view, forgiveness appears as a real, and not alleged, sign of empowerment, of reaffirmation of the victim's agency, and it allows to progress, constituting a crucial step towards the third stage of recovery characterized by an engagement with the future. By extending Arendt's reflection on forgiveness to the psychoanalytical interpretation, Julia Kristeva sees the latter as an act of forgiving itself, as the giving of meaning “allows for the rebirth of the subject, who thereafter is capable of redrawing his psychic map and his links with others”⁵⁶.

In her lay reading of Christian forgiveness, Arendt recognises forgiveness to harbour a political potentiality. Nobody can forgive himself: as any political action, and being a “kind of judgement,” forgiveness depends on plurality and thus, we may add⁵⁷, on the “enlarged mentality”⁵⁸, and the communicability of the “common sense”⁵⁹, notions that Kant works out in

54 Arendt (1998, 236-243).

55 For “sovereignty”, Arendt means the capacity to foretell and control the consequences of one's actions. Cf. Arendt (1998, 233).

56 Kristeva (2001, 83). “Forgiveness: giving in addition, banking on what is there in order to revive, to give the depressed patient (that stranger withdrawn into his wound) a new start, and give him the possibility of a new encounter”. “The solemnity of forgiveness [...] is inherent in the economy of psychic rebirth” (Kristeva 1989, 189-190).

57 About forgiveness as paradoxical judgement, cf. Kristeva (2001, 77-89).

58 Cf. the second maxim of common sense, on which the *sensus communis aestheticus* draws on, in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (Arendt 2005, 311-313). It is “the maxim of the enlarged mentality”, that is to say trying to “put oneself in thought in the place of everyone else”, (Arendt 1982, 71) arriving at a “universal point of view” (Kant 2007, 125). It is not a matter of replacing one's own thought with that of others, conforming to their judgment or to that of the majority, nor the result of an empathy or chemical reaction allowing a sort of communion of minds among men (Arendt 1982, 43). What is involved, instead, is the ability to think with one's own head, trying to put on clothes that do not belong to one. The point of view that we will reach *will* be general, but at the same time closely connected “with the particular conditions of the standpoints one has to go through” to get there (ivi, 44).

59 Cf. Kant (2007, 123-124). Common sense, for Kant the basis of any judgment (Cf. Kant 2007, 123-124), is not a sense generally possessed by men, but is the shared sense of reality, in virtue of which men constitute a community; not simply a ‘gemeiner Sinn’, but a ‘gemeinschaftlicher Sinn’. It is the kind of sense that allows us to identify as the same thing what is perceived in different aspects by different people and by the same person in relation to each of his or her private senses, thus becoming the basis of lan-

his *Third Critique* and that Arendt draws freely on. At stake is the relationship between human plurality and communication, which is enhanced in Arendt's reading of the Aristotelian definition of man as ζῷον πολιτικόν together with that of man as ζῷον λόγον ἔχον, "living being capable of discourse"⁶⁰.

According to Arendt, the faculty of forgiveness takes roots on love, since love has an incomparable power of disclosing the "who," because of its unconcern for "what" the loved person may be and do⁶¹. The act of forgiving, indeed, "takes the person into account:" "no pardon pardons murder or theft but only the murderer or the thief. [...] We always forgive somebody, never something," and we forgive for the sake of the person as "every man is, or should be, more than whatever he did or achieved"⁶². Nevertheless, since love's very nature is "unwordly," Arendt tries to "redeem" forgiveness both from a religious and transcendent dimension (the love of one's neighbour, rooted in God's love), and from what the tradition usually calls

guage and communication. Cf. Arendt (1982, 70) and Arendt (1978, 119). In Arendt's thought, common sense appears as important as it is ambiguously connoted. It is not clear, in fact, to what extent it can be a source of judgments, *or* exclusively of prejudices, shared, i.e. whether it is a form of understanding of the phenomena of the World wittingly approved *or* passively undergone. Common sense is at the basis of dialogue and understanding with other members of the community, in that it makes it possible to abstract from the limitations inherent in exclusively private 'knowledge', allowing one to look at the World as at a familiar and intelligible abode. On the one hand, it seems to perform this function in virtue of its 'automatic' character (Arendt 1978, 78-79), which opposes it to the aimless questions of reason. "It is the sixth sense's function to fit us into the world of appearances and make us at home in the world given by our five senses; there we are and no question asked" (ivi, 59). On the other, the need to explain how common sense can access the different points of view of others, in virtue of which it becomes common and not merely private, forces Arendt to refer to the real public space or the virtual one on which critical thought exercises itself as the condition of its formation; and therefore to the questions man is faced with by the points of view of his interlocutors. Thus rescued from an automatic and unreflecting dimension, common sense, however, risks becoming at the same time too fragile a stay to direct us in the World. So that, as soon as it is associated with that activity of thought with which elsewhere deep enmity is sanctioned, common sense seems to lose even the possibility of acting as a 'compass' in the World of appearances.

60 Cf.: Arendt (1977, 23); Arendt (1950, 100); and Arendt (1998, 26-27): "To be political, to live in a *polis*, meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence. In Greek self-understanding, to force people by violence, to command rather than persuade, were prepolitical ways to deal with people characteristics of life outside the *polis* of home and family life, where the household head ruled with uncontested, despotic powers, or of life in the barbarian empires of Asia, whose despotism was frequently likened to the organization of the household". Cf. Aristotle (1926, 1142a25 and 1178a6 and following).

61 Arendt (1988, 242).

62 Arendt (1968, 248).

eros. Therefore, she tries, a little ambiguously, to root the faculty of forgiveness not exclusively on love but on the Kantian “respect,” which she defines as “a kind of ‘friendship’ without intimacy and without closeness,” like Aristotle’s “political friendship.” This regard for each person *qua* person, independently from admiration or esteem⁶³, would be in the political realm the analogous of love in the private sphere. Yet, according to Arendt, this theory of forgiveness collapses in front of Nazi crimes, that challenge human capacity of understanding as well as moral, linguistic and juridical categories⁶⁴. In these cases⁶⁵, the principle whereby the criminal as a person can be forgiven because he or she is more important than anything he or she has done does not hold. The worst evil, Arendt observes, seems to be that perpetrated by “nobody,” that is to say by human beings that refuse to be ‘persons’⁶⁶, seeing themselves as mere “mechanisms,” not free and hence not guilty. “Most evil is done by people who never made up their mind to be either bad or good”⁶⁷ and so that, though not losing the quality of human beings⁶⁸, they have refused “voluntarily”⁶⁹ to constitute as “persons” through the activity of thought⁷⁰. If this is absent, there is not a “who”, a personality to whom to attribute this activity⁷¹. The Holocaust appears thus to Arendt as the irreversible, unpunishable, and unforgivable evil⁷².

63 Arendt (1998, 242).

64 Cf. f. e. Arendt (2005, 310).

65 Arendt (1963, 470).

66 Arendt, (2003, 93-95)

67 Ivi, 180.

68 Ivi, 95.

69 Ivi, 111.

70 Ivi, 105-106, 111. Banal evil is knowable in its effects but is not entirely comprehensible, because it lacks motivations, “judgments.” Thus when thought is related to evil, it is frustrated because it finds nothing. Attributing Eichmann’s actions to a non-thought does not amount to justifying the Nazi criminal, but means trying to understand, giving a place in the world even to “banal,” “unthinkable” evil, which in actual fact belongs to it. Hence thinking and judging constitute efforts that no man can refuse to make, in that what is involved is his responding to the idea of humanity vis-à-vis himself and the other men with whom he shares the world, since men, not “Man,” live on the earth and inhabit the world (Arendt 1998, 7).

71 Arendt (2003, 105-106).

72 Arendt (1998, 241). Actually, it is not very convincing to set unforgivability, unpunishability and irreversibility of a crime in a relationship of mutual implication. The criterion of the reversibility of a crime appears arbitrary, and not a possible basis for forgiveness. Besides, the latter must not be considered as an alternative to punishment, which otherwise risks being assimilated to revenge. One can forgive a criminal and yet recognize, for instance for educational purposes, the legitimacy and the necessity of punishment, the alternative to which, on the legal plane, is a pardon.

Independently from the historiographical issue about the uniqueness of the Holocaust⁷³ for its quantitative and qualitative difference with respect to other events of gross human rights violation, it may be arbitrary to take for granted a survivor's perception of her repeated traumatic experience to be necessarily less intense and painful than an Holocaust survivor's one. On the contrary, all trauma survivors have a "need to have the rupture with ordinary experience acknowledged by others," and not placed "in a continuum with ordinary evil"⁷⁴. Criticizing Herman's "conflating" of excess of memory and amnesia, both treated as causes of complex post-traumatic stress disorder," Kirmayer highlights the different social dimension that distinguishes Holocaust survivors' narrative from the narrative of the victims of childhood abuse. At stake is the difference between "a public space of solidarity," on the one hand, and "a private space of shame," on the other, which would explain the fact that Holocaust survivors are more prone to intrusive memories, while childhood abuse fosters dissociative amnesia⁷⁵.

Despite her disagreement with the advocates of the possibility of forgiveness even in borderline cases, Herman seems to share with most of them the idea that forgiveness cannot be unconditional, but presupposes a sign of contrition and repentance by the perpetrator⁷⁶. If forgiveness requires this condition, it can hardly be achieved in the exclusive dialogue between the therapist and the survivor that Herman sees as the main place where healing may happen. Herman focuses on the theme of speaking in public about the trauma as action undertaken by a minority of survivors to fulfil a social mission or for need of compensation in the form of retributive justice⁷⁷. Adopting the approach of restorative justice, instead, an institution successive to the first edition of her work, i.e. the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa, moved from the same principle that telling one's story could be healing in itself, but tried to give voice in public to the narratives of the victim as well as the perpetrator. TRC tried to promote reconciliation by satisfying the victim's need to be

73 Cf. Friedlander (1992, 108-127).

74 Kirmayer (1996, 26).

75 Ivi, 26-27. "Trauma shared by a whole community creates a potential public space for retelling. If a community agrees traumatic events occurred and interweaves this fact into its identity, then collective memory survives and individual memory can find a place (albeit transformed) within that landscape. If a family or a community agrees that a trauma did not happen, then it vanishes from collective memory and the possibility for individual memory is severely strained" (ivi, 25).

76 Dennis B. Klein represents an exception. Cf. Gobodo-Madikizela, van der Merve (ed.) (2009, 113-129).

77 Herman (1997, 207-211).

recognized as such and encouraging the perpetrator to take responsibility over his action, granting him amnesty in exchange for a detailed and truthful confession of his crimes.

Through the mutual listening of the perpetrator's and the victim's stories, a sense of moral imagination may spring up⁷⁸, the distance between the two parts be narrowed, and eventually forgiveness may come unexpectedly⁷⁹. The perpetrator – stricken by the victim's narrative –, may start experience the sufferance of the victim “as if” it was his own. On the other hand, the victim may try to make intelligible how the perpetrator came to commit those deeds, and eventually she may not reduce him to the latter, and let the resentment go. A new circle of mimesis may start, and new narratives may be “written.” Achieving a different narrative about the other, also the two parts' own narratives may change. The offender may start seeing himself as a person in need of forgiveness, and the offended as a survivor more than as a victim eager of revenge or resentment. Only through a “narrative reframing of one's other” and of one's own self, forgiveness can be sincerely requested and conceded⁸⁰. That is what Arendt affirms to be impossible to happen in the case of Nazi crimes but it is somehow at stake in her *Eichmann in Jerusalem*⁸¹, both when she focuses on Eichmann's lack of moral imagination, which made him able to commit horrible deeds, and when she underlines the necessity of understanding him as an ordinary man refusing the more comfortable common view of Nazi criminals as inhuman, demonic monsters⁸².

The path towards reconciliation does not necessarily require amnesty, as it happens in TRCs. Forgiveness does not preclude or replace punishment. The distinction between ethical and juridical level, and then between forgiveness and mercy, is crucial in Ricoeur, which recovers from Arendt the idea that one forgives the criminal for the sake of the person, of the “who” that is not reducible to “what” that person may have done⁸³. In Ricoeur's view, forgiveness is a form of “active oblivion,” addressed not to the criminal action but to its meaning for the present and the future. It contributes to heal the “wounded memory”⁸⁴ allowing to move into the future⁸⁵. Ricoeur refers to the extreme forgiveness, the evangelic love for enemies,

78 Gobodo-Madikizela, van der Merve (ed.) (2009, 152).

79 Ivi, 159.

80 Ivi, 107.

81 Arendt (1964).

82 Arendt (1963, 471).

83 Arendt (1968, 248).

84 Ricoeur (2004, 105).

85 Ivi, 110.

as absolute gift⁸⁶, and he attributes to it, together with the work of mourning, the power to contrast an excess of memory as well as its opposite, both symptoms of pathologies of a memory that remembers “too much” or tries to forget what cannot or should not be forgotten. These pathologies are represented by an excess of victimization and the never-ending logic of revenge, on the one hand; by the traumatic form of “passive oblivion” as “repression,” or the strategy of escape from memory (“semi-passive or semi-active oblivion”)⁸⁷ on the other⁸⁸.

In views that may appear extreme, forgiveness is seen as an act of ethical responsibility towards the perpetrator, to prevent his moral downfall⁸⁹, however terrible his deeds may have been, and however painful and challenging it can be for the victims. For the victim’s forgiveness is seen as the *condicio sine qua non* of the perpetrator’s ability to self-forgive⁹⁰. Nevertheless, forgiveness cannot be other than a gift⁹¹, and not a perpetrator’s right, and as a gift it “cannot be demanded or coerced”⁹².

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86 Ivi, 115.

87 Ivi, 99-106.

88 Cf. n. 75.

89 Gobodo-Madikizela, van der Merve (ed.) (2009, 166).

90 Ivi, 141.

91 Ricouer (2004, 113). Kristeva (1989, 216).

92 Gobodo-Madikizela, van der Merve (ed.) (2009, 157).

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