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Postmemory

The future has collapsed upon itself, and we are burdened more by what we come after than by what awaits us. (Boyarin, 1996, p.143)

And yet, at the same time, this is exactly the crux of the second generation's difficulty: that it has inherited not experience, but its shadows. The uncanny, in Freud's formulation, is the sensation of something that is both very alien and deeply familiar, something that only the unconscious knows. If so, then the second generation has grown up with the uncanny. And sometimes, it needs to be said, wrestling with shadows can be more frightening, or more confusing, than struggling with solid realities. (Hoffman, 2005, p.66).

Beginning by Looking Back

Eva Hoffman's reflections on second generation experience, the 'second generation' here being the children of Holocaust survivors, lead us straight into the question of what it means to inherit suffering, and indeed what it means to 'inherit' another's experience at all. What are these 'shadows' to which she refers? Are they the experiences that the parental generation has had, transmitted precisely through their overt behaviour – the stories they told their children about their lives, their overprotection or silent avoidances, their investment in and ambitions for their children ('not letting Hitler win' - Hoffman, 2005, p.66)? Or are they something passed on more subtly, as if through a kind of telepathic process, whereby the material implanted in the child is impossibly strange and overwhelmingly incomprehensible, and so remains like this, shadowing psychic life? To what extent, we might also ask, is this kind of shadowing a heritage of those 'traumatic' experiences that cannot be talked about easily, but are freighted with a significance that might not be interpretable to those who have not actually lived them? Is it ever possible to absorb such experiences if one has not been there oneself, because it is only people who have been through a traumatic experience who can appreciate fully what it means? A terrible, dark Jewish joke quoted by Devorah Baum captures some of the essence of this difficulty, albeit framed in pain and theological bitterness.

Elie Wiesel goes up to Heaven, meets God. He tells God a Holocaust joke: God doesn't laugh. Wiesel shrugs: 'I guess you had to be there.' (Baum, 2017, p.46)

This 'joke' is about theodicy: God cannot have been present at Auschwitz. But it also plays on the question of identification with suffering: is it possible to 'get the joke' if one has not had the experience oneself, but only engaged with its consequences indirectly? Yet if this is not possible, then the meaning of experiences will rarely be conveyable from one person to another, and the testimonies of those who were directly involved have to be received in silence, without anyone else having the authority to comment or speak about how they have been affected. No-one else would have the right to claim understanding, because only those who have gone through the events have testimonies that can count. There are some who argue this way; even Primo Levi, whose literary witnessing has possibly had more impact than anyone else's, doubted that he could speak in the name of those who had perished. Here is the famous passage on this issue, much quoted and referenced and on the whole assented to whilst also being denied:

I must repeat – we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. This is an uncomfortable notion, of which I have become conscious little by little... We who were favoured by fate have tried, with more or less wisdom, to recount not only our fate, but also that of the others, the submerged; but this was a discourse ‘on behalf of third parties,’ the story of things seen from close by, not experienced personally. When the destruction was terminated, the work accomplished was not told by anyone, just as no one ever returned to recount his own death. (Levy, 1988, pp.63-4).

Yet it is clear from the immense readership that Levi’s books have had, and their status as paradigmatic testimonies, that his challenge, despite being ‘repeated’, has not been fully absorbed. Or at least, his and others’ attempts to speak ‘on behalf of third parties’ has largely been treated with proper seriousness and respect. All this is to say, it does seem possible to convey something of the experience; and if this is not the whole story, if we can never know for sure what would have been said by those who cannot speak, there is sufficient in these testimonies to be getting along with. Maybe the ‘shadows’ that Hoffman refers to apply here: the shadows thrown by experiences may not be the experiences themselves, but they have the shape and possibly even the texture of those experiences, and they seem capable of passing across boundaries, of seeping from one person to another. In addition, it is possible that the shadows, examined closely, also make the original experiences visible to those who might not otherwise be able to look directly at them.

Discussing intergenerational connections, and the meaning of the passing of a generation, Lisa Baraitser (2017) makes a link between the experience of being affected by something one cannot quite identify, and the processes of reflection embedded in the practice of psychoanalysis. She writes (p.102) that the ‘attempt to make sense of something that one knows has occurred, and yet in some profound way one seems to have missed, is at the core of a psychoanalytic sensibility in which events come to be significant after an ordinary event that has bypassed memory and language.’ According to Baraitser, this experience is at the heart of what Freud refers to as ‘historical truth’, ‘the indelible trace of experience on the psyche prior to the capacity for the event to be encoded in a recallable way, a trace that can only be reproduced rather than remembered, as its original form is lost’ (Ibid.). This is a complicated idea, but it seems to introduce into ‘ordinary’ life something that is more often seen as confined to the experience of trauma. *Traumatic* experiences are held to be too overpowering to be grasped as they occur, so instead they are somehow ‘gone through’ without being properly processed, ‘becoming significant’, as Baraitser puts it, only later on if it becomes possible to think about them in a calmer way, with more perspective or distance. The existence of such experiences seems undeniable. Freud’s (1920) post-World War One examination of traumatic dreams showed how they represent a continued return to the scene of suffering, maybe as a way of trying to deal with it – to master it in important ways or even (considering that we are talking about bad dreams) to wake up from it. Faced with suffering that we cannot fully understand, we either shut ourselves off from it (denial and forgetting of troubling occurrences being prevalent in everyday life), or we keep worrying away at it until it begins to make some sense. What Baraitser suggests, however, is that this is a psychoanalytic *norm*: everything happens later than it should. The actual experience is missed yet still remains, not as a ‘memory’ but as some kind of an ‘event.’

Unhappy Memories

The account just given goes some way towards 'normalising' trauma by suggesting that much ordinary memory is a matter of recovering the traces of unprocessed experience from the past – whether our own or that of our forebears – and somehow making them more manageable, 'binding' them into a meaningful encounter or narrative structure. If it is the case that the routine experience of all children is to be subjected to the 'excessive' messages coming from the adult world around, as Jean Laplanche (1999) suggests, then it is also true that every human subject will have implanted in her or him the unconscious echoes of the parental unconscious, back through time to many previous generations. In this, there looms the issue of how to deal with the shadowy 'memories' passed on by those who have come before us – including in this for the moment unconscious sensations and echoes of a past that was not our own. What should one do with those memories, especially when they are disturbing or unsettling? The tendency is to think that when we are haunted by ghostly figures and events from the past, the 'shadows' to which Hoffman refers, it is because the issues that they raise – mostly of maltreatment, violence, untimeliness and trauma – have not been resolved and continue to fester, becoming a kind of poison in the bloodstream of the present. What haunts us psychically is, in this rendering, something which has not been dealt with rightly and so is best interpreted as an *injustice*. This places responsibility for dealing with these ghosts not on the individuals who are possessed by them, but on the circumstances – let us call them the 'social conditions' – that impede their laying to rest. It is to be found in the fabric of history and culture, embedded in the symbolic structures of society that maintain the liveliness of some memories whilst marginalising others. Sometimes what haunts us is a hurt we have suffered, or one we have caused others; sometimes it comes from elsewhere, as in the example of a previous generation; very often it is some kind of unmourned loss. In many respects it is always a message or voice, or something that feels embodied and that worries away at us until we can no longer ignore it or deny its existence.

The attitude we take towards such 'remains' is crucial. It is connected to the psychoanalytic idea that there is a kind of 'ethics of truth' that recognises that there are things we do not want to know about, many things that are too hard to bear; but that however understandable it is that we should be tempted to look away, we need nevertheless to try to see honestly and clearly what is really there. The world is difficult, psychic life is difficult, there is no easy route through this typically psychoanalytic tragic vision; yet we are called upon to witness it, in others and in ourselves. Without such witnessing, which for the moment we can code as a mode of remembering, reality slips away 'into the shadows', marked out by social as well as personal processes of denial. Injustice follows from this, as experiences of suffering are obscured and the individual and society are infected with a culture of lying. This is why, for instance, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi stresses the issue of remembrance, although with some ambivalence, at the end of *Zachor*, his book on Jewish history and memory. Even though he recognises the danger of remembering too much, too bitterly, so that one becomes mired in a position that refuses to allow things to move on ('I will never forget what you did to me!'), he regards the danger of forgetting as much greater. 'If this be the choice,' he writes (Yerushalmi, 1989, pp.116-7), 'I will take my stand on the side of "too much" rather than "too little," for my terror of forgetting is greater than my terror of having too much to remember.' He then asks, poignantly and relevantly, 'Is it possible that the antonym of "forgetting" is not "remembering," but *justice*?' This makes memory an ethical issue, which surely it is, even if this

claim should be mitigated by awareness that the *kind* of memory (bitter, sensitive, reflective, sanctifying) might matter.

As a first step, then, it might be suggested that in order to achieve justice we have first to remember the hurt that has been suffered. This is very much the thrust of contemporary memorialising, which assumes that by uncovering the traumatic past it might become possible to amend it, or at least to acknowledge it and find a way to apportion responsibility for it. Hiddenness, silence, covering-over; these are not states that allow one to come to terms with suffering. Yet these widespread processes of denial demonstrate the *active* nature of forgetting: it is not that something slips from mind ('Oh dear, I forgot about the Holocaust!'), or at least not when we are talking about significant events. It is rather that events that are hard to bear – perhaps because they are traumatising, but also perhaps because they make us culpable – are often more comfortably set aside than recalled. This is one of the few definite truths uncovered by psychoanalysis. Keeping a ghost at bay is very hard work: you have to keep trying not to notice it, keep pretending that it is not speaking, that the things that move around in the dark are not really there at all. Of course, this also means that the ghost remains dissatisfied; that not only is there no chance of justice, but there is not even a basic act of recognition, something that is fundamental to the essential process of humanising. That is to say: if I forget you, drive you out of my mind; then you no longer exist for me; you and your suffering, and any part I might have in it, are no longer real. Anxiety about this and about what it can do to humanity as a whole fuels a wide variety of contemporary 'Jewish' propositions about recognition of others as a fundamental ethical stance, from the writings of Emmanuel Levinas to Judith Butler, from Primo Levi to all who come after him. Being unrecognised and forgotten is not what most people wish for.

The urgency of the problem of how to learn from the relatively recent past in order not to repeat its devastating effects, a problem that revolves around the ethics of memory and history, has combined with an awareness that later generations of victims and perpetrators – the 'post-' generations – may find themselves inhibited in relation to moving forwards precisely because they are not truly 'post-' at all. Still haunted by what has gone before them, still infused with the shadows of others' experiences, these more contemporary subjects are not in any way free to relinquish their pasts. It is as if they are stained with the experiences of their predecessors, which is passed on in some way through stories and also through selective silences, as well as through the older generation's ways of handling themselves and the personal and cultural representations of their situation. Hoffman (2005) explains the impact of this as something pre-cognitive: the child grows up in the shadow of the traumatic experience, so that it functions not as something to know about, but as something to inhabit. 'We who come after do not have memories of the Holocaust' she writes (p.6). 'Even from the most intimate proximity I could not form "memories" of the Shoah or take my parents' memories as my own. Rather, I took in that first information as a sort of fairy tale deriving not so much from another world as from the centre of the cosmos: an enigmatic but real fable.' The 'centre of the cosmos' is one full of dread and suffering, but that is simply how it is; that is the nature of the reality imbibed, to a greater or lesser degree (we do not know how much variation there is, and must remain cautiously empirical about this) by the following generation. Hoffman goes on (p.13): 'the early awareness of suffering created an unconscious, or preconscious, ethics, and ... in this system, just as war was the ground of being, so pain was the ground of personhood. The presence of suffering was powerful enough so that it had to be absorbed; but there was also an imperative to remain loyal to it, to make up for it, to provide solace.' This is a

duly complex assertion. The 'ethics' Hoffman refers to seems to be one based in a necessary response to suffering, recognising it (remaining 'loyal to it') and somehow making recompense for it – a phenomenally demanding set of tasks, especially, as many second generation memoirs attest, for a child. But the founding statement is just as interesting: war as the ground of being – the war defined everything – making pain the ground of personhood. We should no doubt return to this pain; for the present it is simply worth noting that as 'the ground of personhood' it not only penetrates everything, but it is also related to as that which gives depth to being. Perhaps part of the legacy of trauma is then this: pain continues, from one generation to another, as the defining characteristic of what life is about. Is this a miserabilist legacy, or one that can be confronted? Hoffman herself has some faith in psychoanalysis and the greater psychological-mindedness of the postgeneration; but can psychoanalysis take on so much?

Postmemory

It is the idea of 'post-ness' that begins to resonate here. Hoffman uses the term to refer to the generation after, articulating the perception that the postgeneration has a different experience of events than the 'adult' one. The adults, she suggests, will ask, 'what happened?' and then try to work out its meaning; but the children imbibing the foundational pain through their intense relations with their parents will have a deep sense of meaning ('pain') and then have to find what it is that gives rise to it. This complicates the question of memory, for what is being remembered is not the event but the feeling or sensation: the unknowable 'something' that is communicated through the parent's enigmatic message is primary, its translation into recognisable events and experiences lagging very much after, and subject to many vagaries and distortions. This means that the 'post-' of the later generation is more than a statement of chronology; it defines a different way of being in the world, in which what is perceived first is the realisation of something lurking, a threat or loss or deep injury. This complexity of experience can be seen fully present in the area of 'postmemory' studies, which is concerned with understanding how it can be that a person might feel inhabited by memories that come from somewhere or someone else – notably, from the traumatised generation. One of the founders of this field of study, Marianne Hirsch, realises this complexity all too well.

'Postmemory' describes the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection and creation. To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present. (Hirsch, 2012, p.5)

'Postmemory' is a paradoxical term because, as Hirsch fully realises, both the idea of 'post-' and its coding as a form of 'memory' might be controversial. It is hard to think of something as 'post' if it continues, though notions like 'postmodernism' and 'poststructuralism' show that this can be

done, and 'postcolonialism' is perhaps only the most tellingly relevant instance of a 'post' that is still submerged in its historical circumstances: Hirsch notes (Ibid.) that it 'does not mean the end of the colonial but its troubling continuity.' She goes on, 'We certainly are, still, in the era of "posts", which – for better or worse – continue to proliferate.' The idea of 'posttraumatic' fits in here as well: the problem in determining 'post-trauma', whether or not in the official diagnostic field of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, is that the after-effects of trauma are often such that in one way or another it continues, so that there is no real 'post' at all.

Nevertheless, the 'post' appellation has considerable appeal in contemporary times, suggesting a general culture of melancholy that sees the important things as being in the past, with everything new being defined in terms of that 'shadow'. This is certainly consistent with both Hoffman's and Hirsch's descriptions of the penetration of the post-generation's consciousness by the overwhelming experiences of the past. Hoffman explains this clearly in relation to the struggles of the second generation to feel that their own concerns could have any importance in comparison with the enormity of their parents' suffering.

The overwhelming power, the incontrovertible significance of survivors' histories – the epics and the odysseys – installed in many of their children (this is a staple of second-generation testimony) a dogged sense of their own insignificance, a conviction that the ordinary problems and incidents of their own lives could not possibly matter, that their small hurts and fears were so trivial as to be hardly worth mentioning, or indeed feeling. (Hoffman, 2005, p. 69)

Defining oneself and one's era only in relation to what has gone before ('post') risks evacuating the present of meaning; yet this is how things seem to feel, not just personally, but culturally too in relation to a growing sense of the thinness of experience. Perhaps this is one reason for the emergence of a particular facet of what has come to be called 'trauma culture' (Luckhurst, 2008), which is that having been in some way traumatised can become under some conditions a claim to testimonial status, as if only those who have had direct access to suffering can speak properly of it. This extends the argument about witnessing mentioned above (Levi's 'we are not the true witnesses') and also has parallels with other situations where experience is seen to have greater evidential value than symbolic representation – for example, when psychoanalysts claim that what they encounter in the consulting room cannot be adequately expressed and also cannot be challenged, in a kind of 'that's all very well, but I know from my experience' vein of argument. These retreats into a discourse of direct understanding derived solely from experience seem regressive and antagonistic to processes of thoughtfulness that are also characteristic of psychoanalysis and indeed warn *against* experience as the defining feature of insight. We know from psychoanalysis that experience cannot be trusted; or more precisely, that our capacity to read meaning into experience is limited, battered on all sides by our emotional states, our wishes and fears, and also by the nature of the experience itself. If something is 'traumatic' it is precisely because of that that it is difficult to speak of or understand, and needs drawing out through the work of thought and interlocution. To be clear, this is not, of course, an argument against the reality of experience or of trauma, but rather an attempt to read the fascination with the 'post' symptomatically, as having to do with the *power* of that experience and the related sensation that contemporary life is drained of significance. As Hirsch (2012, p.5) notes in the quotation given earlier, 'To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that

preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors.'

Similarly, there is a question of what is meant by 'memory' in 'postmemory', when what is being pointed to is not necessarily a memory at all, but a representation (or gap in representation) that emerges from the actual or blocked memories of others, possibly even those so far back that there has been no contact between them and the supposedly 'postmemorising' subject. The idea that 'remembering' is 'only by means of the stories, images and behaviors among which they grew up' and is 'mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection and creation' suggests a constructive process of invention – which is true to some degree of all memory, but is nevertheless different from what is usually meant when we say 'I remember this or that.' It is possible to argue from here that the phenomena of postmemory have called into question our ordinary notion of memory itself as something based on our direct experience, however much it might also be constructed and worked on by the various cognitive and unconscious processes with which we are familiar. Perhaps memory is not such a private thing after all, but is always socially mediated, a cultural affair; or maybe the affective immanence of 'memories' that belong to other people is one common experience that deserves the appellation 'memory' because it is felt as such, it is owned by the subject as if the experience were her or his. But it is also arguable that it is worth maintaining a distinction between memory and other types of communication of experiences, so that what is passed down from one generation to another is understood to be distinct – albeit not necessarily any less powerful – from what one has gone through oneself.

Hirsch herself emphasises the difference between postmemory and memory in relation to issues of embodiment, enactment and recollection; but she also wants to retain the terminology to distinguish memory from history, as something more personally *felt*. 'Postmemory is not identical to memory,' she writes (2005, p.31); 'it is "post"; but, at the same time, I argue, it approximates memory in its affective force and its psychic effects.' She makes a series of careful conceptual discriminations that are worth holding onto. Memory is distinct from history because of its affective charge; postmemory is different from memory itself because it is not formed through a process of recall but through actively constructive processes, and whilst these are components of all memories, postmemory is *first and foremost* an 'imaginative' process, an act of identification and creative response. What interests Hirsch most, however, is perhaps not postmemory itself but what she calls 'postmemorial work,' which she distinguishes from the 'rememory' that she associates with traumatic repetition in which what is visible is a kind of stuckness that makes the past dominant over present life. For Hirsch, postmemorial work is creative, attempting to find a way to absorb postmemory and make it anew. The differentiating move seems to be between the kind of repetition that invites a 'retraumatising' experience and the kind that moves things on by actively reworking the material that returns. Here is Hirsch's elaborated account of this distinction, framed in the context of some well-known Holocaust photographs that through their 'obsessive repetition, constitute a similar screen of unchanging fragments, congealed in a memory with unchanging content' (Hirsch, 2005, p.121). She writes about this:

In repeatedly exposing themselves to the same pictures, postmemorial viewers can produce in themselves the effects of traumatic repetition that plague the victims of trauma, even as they attempt to mobilize the protective power of the homeopathic shield. As the images repeat the trauma of looking, they disable, in themselves, any restorative attempts. It is only when they

are redeployed, in new texts and new contexts, that they regain a capacity to enable a postmemorial working through. The aesthetic strategies of postmemory are specifically about such an attempted, and yet an always postponed, repositioning and reintegration. (Hirsch, 2005, p.122)

The balance that has to be struck here is between identifying so strongly with the image that the viewer is traumatised her or himself; and repudiating the image so that it is seen as stale and unmoving. In the broader context of witnessing, this is a very familiar and central issue: how to balance the response to testimony so as not to 'colonise' the testifier's account, reducing it to something the witness already knows; or to over-identify with it and so become useless to the testifier; or to distance oneself from it in a repudiating way. For Hirsch, the task is to use the testimony in a process of creative reinvention, building on the characteristic of postmemory as imagination but offering 'new contexts' for the reproduced image (in this photographic case) or the memory itself. This has a strong psychoanalytic resonance. As Freud (1920) made clear in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, psychoanalysis can be understood as a practice of repetition and a practice of *confronting* repetition. The past repeats in the form of the 'return of the repressed', and if that is all that happens then little can change. The task of psychoanalysis is therefore to allow and recognise this repetition, but to find a way of reimagining it – the process that Freud calls 'working through'. It is the repetitive psychoanalytic confrontation with the repetitive emergence of repressed material that allows the patient to do more than simply repeat; and this entails precisely the action of reimagining in a way that gives the 'haunting' material its due, whilst also allowing something new to begin to occur. Hirsch argues that artistic work can do this too; but it is a challenge for it to do so, just as it is in the space of analysis.

Working Through

Although the notion and terminology of postmemory is worth taking seriously, my own preference is for the even more widespread vocabulary of 'haunting' and ghostliness. This is because the notion of haunting embraces the sense of being occupied by something that has come from some other place or time and is usually not willed by the subject, but somehow *possesses* the subject against its own conscious intentions. It leaves open the question of how this happens (through speaking and silence, but also through 'occult' means of connection with what has gone before, hidden cultural resonances perhaps, or mediated histories or processes of psychological and sociological 'contagion') and it focuses especially on the consequences of loss. It is also peculiarly *psychoanalytic* in its resonances, both because of the occult themes in early psychoanalysis (an interest in telepathy and 'doubles' in particular – Frosh, 2013) and because of the centrality of processes of transmission in psychoanalysis to this day. For instance, at important moments from his paper on 'Little Hans' onwards, Freud uses the vocabulary of haunting to convey something of the task and practice of psychoanalysis. 'In an analysis,' he writes (Freud, 1909, p.123), 'a thing which has not been understood inevitably reappears; like an unlaidd ghost, it cannot rest until the mystery has been solved and the spell broken.' For psychoanalysis, haunting is a central trope, eventually becoming formally codified as the 'return of the repressed' indexed above (Freud, 1920), but visible in all its theorising and in its practice, in the ever-present repetitions and iterative processes that take place as the patient speaks of her or his concerns, under the pressure of unconscious ideas. Examining how one is troubled by one's own past is the commonplace field of

psychoanalytic encounter; but being troubled by *others'* experiences, and specifically by one's relationship to, and possible responsibility for, them is equally central. Both these elements are relevant to the exploration of postmemory and haunting, as 'personal' experiences come to be understood as saturated by relationships with others and by the social, cultural and historical contexts out of which they arise.

If it is possible to consider a whole culture as 'haunted', as some contemporary theorists do, then perhaps we can think of the many ghostly returns with which we are confronted – symbolic returns of myth, memory and identity; material returns of violence and of intimacy and care – as uncanny moments that reflect the dynamics of both personal and social life. Remembering in the active way Hirsch identifies, which means doing postmemorial work rather than being stuck in postmemory, then becomes an assertively political and emancipatory procedure as well as an aspect of psychoanalytic 'working-through.' As Freud (1914) clearly articulated, remembering is one thing; repeating another; working through is necessary to escape them both. 'This working-through of the resistances may in practice turn out to be an arduous task for the subject of the analysis and a trial of patience for the analyst,' wrote Freud (p.155-6). 'Nevertheless it is a part of the work which effects the greatest changes in the patient and which distinguishes analytic treatment from any kind of treatment by suggestion.' What this means is that remembering something is only the beginning of a process of living freely; and postmemorialising is similarly 'an arduous task.'

The dynamics of memory participate in this set of issues too. In his examination of *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, Dominick LaCapra (1998) develops a sensitive account of the relationship between memory and trauma that relies heavily on the Freudian notion of 'working through' and that also attempts to face the complexities of responsibility – the question of who can be memorialised and under what circumstances, and what the limits of memorialising might be. In a manner resonant of Ferenczi's (1949) famous description of the out-of-body experiences of the abused child, LaCapra acknowledges that during a trauma the *imagination* might act in a protective way, lifting the person out of the experience; but afterwards, he notes, 'the imagination may be overwhelmed by hallucinations, flashbacks, and other traumatic residues that resist the potentially healing role of memory-work' (p. 181). This means that 'memory-work' may require a *diminishing* of imagination, and this might be especially so for those of the 'post' generation for whom it is particularly difficult to test the imaginative realm against direct memories of one's own, presumably because of the shadowing effect that Hoffman described. LaCapra comments,

Notably for those born later, these events may, through a kind of posttraumatic effect, prompt a generalized hyperbolic or exorbitant style that at times becomes indiscriminate and verges on paradoxically bland sensationalism, which may undermine critical judgment and obscure, or provide too one-sided a resolution of, the problem of the actual and desirable relations between excess and normative limits. (LaCapra, 1998, p. 181)

Without belittling the impact of trauma on either first or later generations – and he is far from doing this – LaCapra is working with a kind of rationalist but psychoanalytically imbued framework for understanding that emphasises the importance of placing a limit on the imaginative, identificatory processes that particularly infect the postgeneration. This rationalism is in the service of coming to terms with the past, and is called 'working through' precisely because it is not intended as a dismissal or turning away from trauma, but rather as a confrontation with it that

aims to place it in a *historical* rather than a universalist frame. One problem with the trauma discourse is the generalisation of trauma so that it encompasses all experience: everyone is traumatised by the nature of the human condition (broken from one's past; deprived of one's desires; abandoned, confused...); or conversely, the nature of trauma is so impossible to symbolise that one can never speak of it except as a kind of awe-inspiring, sublime object. Once again, this is not to dismiss it. LaCapra (1998, p.182) notes that 'the question of memory may come to the forefront of attention or even be exaggerated precisely because of the difficulty of remembering events that defy the imagination and are not fully encompassed by conventional methods of representation,' showing clear awareness of just how overwhelming the experience of trauma might be. Nevertheless, the task of memory is a real one: to inch towards a way of thinking about trauma, whether for oneself or one's predecessors, that somehow puts it in its place, at least to the extent that this is possible, replacing the re-enactment of trauma with the possibility of thought. 'The challenge,' he writes (p.183), taking issue with some of the more romanticised evocations of trauma to be found in the literature, 'is not to dwell obsessively on trauma as an unclaimed experience that occasions the paradoxical witnessing of the breakdown of witnessing but rather to elaborate a mutually informative, critically questioning relation between memory and reconstruction that keeps one sensitive to the problematics of trauma.'

The point is that historical trauma is always singular: this happened; this horror was perpetrated; this was done *to* someone *by* someone. Universalising trauma has poetic value and helps in evoking the potential for responding to testimonies; but mourning is over *particular* losses and needs to be granted this specificity if it is to allow the loss to have its full significance. Mourning something means being able to see what has been lost, not to universalise the loss so that everything loses meaning. 'Indeed,' writes LaCapra (2001, p. 65), 'specific phantoms that possess the self or the community can be laid to rest through mourning only when they are specified and named as historically lost others.' Memorialising means putting something in its place without reducing or belittling it. *Of course* the Holocaust and other genocides have universal significance, raising issues that need to be dealt with at the deepest theological, philosophical, sociopolitical and psychological levels; but they are also particular acts, and memory of the singularity they involve – the destruction of actual people and places – is essential if they are to be given the respect they are due.

Memory of this kind is a mode of mourning in the service of laying something to rest. However, it may be impossible to mourn under some circumstances, especially in the absence of acknowledgement of what has been damaged and of the responsibility for what has happened. Some of this is related to the sheer scale of loss, which may not be measurable in purely quantitative terms: the significance of a singular loss can at times enlarge it over the massive nature of collective or genocidal destruction. 'Inconsolable' loss may indeed be inconsolable, not as a function of some neurosis in the griever but because of what hangs on that loss. Psychoanalysts might label this as *melancholic* loss without necessarily pathologising it, a loss that returns without ever being worked through. Yet even here the work of partial mourning is an engagement with life, and perhaps a central aspect of the task of those who are witness to grief – a reason why, for example, memorialisation of irreplaceable loss is worthwhile, and why the postgeneration might seek understanding and some kind of reparation for what has been done, noting the impossibility of ever laying things completely to rest. There is also another important distinction to be made, concerning who deserves remembrance, or perhaps better, the extent to which mourning can be

tolerated when what has sometimes to be mourned is unacceptable in itself. This is particularly an issue for the descendants of perpetrators. LaCapra comments,

With respect to the dead who may not deserve mourning and a proper burial, one might contend that there are other forms of working-through, such as critique involving normative issues and the elaboration of nonfetishistic narratives – narratives that do not deny the trauma that called them into existence. (LaCapra, 1998, p. 205).

LaCapra is again arguing for a mode of facing reality that may be psychologically impossible in its complete form, but nevertheless faces the postgeneration with an ethical demand to acknowledge what has happened ‘in their name’ (however much it was not in reality in their name) and to resist the strong and understandable temptation to back away from it. This temptation can be manifest in forms of denial; or in so identifying with the past as either to repeat it (the resurgence of antisemitism in Europe in recent years may be an example, as may be the nostalgic turn to nationalist authoritarianism) or to adopt a passionate stance of oneness with the victims that can leave insufficient space for difference and realistic acceptance of historical responsibilities.

There is one more complexity that derives from different levels of personal responsibility and links back to the issue of intergenerational connectedness and postmemory. Whereas the receptive witness to trauma testimony might struggle to hear the detailed reality of the subject’s speech because of the complexity and sensitivity of listening required – the almost-impossible balance between identification and non-colonisation of the other’s experience – the *implicated* witness adds to this a more motivated repugnance, a temptation towards casting off the challenge of the other in order to protect the self. Benjamin (2016, 2017) classes this under the heading of ‘only one may live,’ indexing the fantasy that allowing for the other’s suffering somehow neglects one’s own. She also thinks that this has to do with the *listener’s* adoption of the victim position, something very regularly observed in political situations. Benjamin (2016, p.7) writes, ‘Our identification with the suffering of others can be interfered with by the identity of victimhood, in which a dissociated fear of forfeiting recognition plays a great role.’ If we are ‘victims’ too, it can be very hard to acknowledge others’ hurt, especially that hurt to which we have contributed, or are currently contributing. This is related to, but not the same as, the universalising tendency: if everyone suffers from trauma, then your suffering is no different in kind from mine, even if we might allow for quantitative variations. I can always translate what you say into what I have experienced, which in some ways allows for empathy, but in others is a colonising act that removes the singularity necessary for real witnessing to do its work in promoting the possibility of helping gain access to mourning. This is all a real danger, but the additional issue here is that the implicated witness who insists on her or his own suffering – for example, the suffering of the German people at the end of the Second World War, which was real and widespread – can be used to obscure the possibility of witnessing itself. The identity of victimhood can be a consciously or unconsciously competitive one, in which denigration of the other’s claims to suffering may be seen as necessary to bolstering one’s own. The defensive nature of this process is obvious, and so is its perniciously versatile usefulness: if I have suffered, then who are you to demand of me that I take responsibility for the hurt done to you? And yet, despite its transparency, competitive victimhood is precisely what seems to happen, whether in the micropolitics of interpersonal and familial relationships (I have been mistreated therefore mistreat you) or in many of the conflicts in which groups and socialities, even nations, find themselves embroiled. In this regard, postmemory, with its embodied identifications and

repetitions, needs to be deconstructed by active memorial work of a kind that allows these repetitions to be turned into processes of recovery and working through. Otherwise, not only will the ghosts remain unlaidd, but new ones will keep on being created in their image.

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