

Beyond the Boundaries of Legal Justice: A Country Called Memory

Don't forget to forget the forgetting. Juan Gelman

In 1977 I left Argentina in a hurry, as if an earthquake had taken place. I had to run away without the possibility of looking back at the remaining ruins. I was about to travel to Israel for a year when the military burst into my house. My suitcase was ready for my voyage, but they forced me into a different trip than the one I had planned: a trip for which I did not need a suitcase; a trip where my belongings and my belonging were to be left behind. They ransacked my house. In a matter of seconds, I stopped having a name. I became a letter, a number, a *desaparecida*. When they let me go, less than a week had passed. Within a few days, my life had been shattered, my brother and cousins were missing, there was no home to return to. At the very moment in which, from the plane window, my country turned into a distant shadow, a territory to be imagined, I became an inhabitant of memory. I was now a survivor, and I attempted to recover from catastrophe in exile, collecting scratches of the past in letters and copybooks – the companions of my wanderings, and wonderings. Through time, I managed to give a voice to my intimate desolation and at the same time to my joyful survival. But it was not enough. I needed the company of other voices – genocide and its legacy is a collective tragedy, not solely my own. Mine was only one register in a choir of voices that I yearned to hear.

Therefore in the 90s, during the post-dictatorship, I chose to return to Argentina in order to collect the oral testimonies of other survivors. During the next few months, I traveled from Buenos Aires to Córdoba, from Córdoba to Tucumán, approaching those who had been affected by terror with my attentive listening. It was a trip into what Langer calls “disruptive memories.” I was the facilitator, the one who allowed these stories to be spelled out, to become experiences through the process of recollection and transmission. The narrators shared their stories around a

table or on a couch, while drinking mate, coffee, or red wine, letting tears flow as well as laughter. Disaster is a relative of utmost absurdity and both belong in the realm of tragedy and black humor, depending on the distance established by the process of memory that is always rooted in the present. These testimonies needed to be voiced to an empathic, non-judgmental listener within an informal atmosphere. Survivors are often treated with distance and suspicion; “the others” manage to celebrate but are also uncomfortable with our return. The question posed, often in silence, is: What did you do in order to survive? My question in return then is: Can a society face such subtle and long lasting matters merely in court?

Public trials of the three Military Juntas were carried out in Argentina in 1985 and new trials of the torturers are still carried out today; they are essential for the recovery of the community and the reestablishment of an ethical framework for society. But testimony provided in court lacks a subjective quality; it actually has to become “objective” through an editing process. Memories of traumatic experiences are not accurate, and witnesses in this case have to accommodate the flux of memory to the requirements of the law, a process which demands precision (Forster, 2000). When I had to give testimony for my political asylum claim in Canada, for instance, I had to conduct some research and figure out dates as well as situate places and names for my statement to become believable. How could they trust me if I simply confessed that I could not recall how many days I had been kidnapped? The truth is that time in a death camp becomes one long night so that the prisoner loses track of the calendar. The truth is that prisoners prefer to forget names so that they will not denounce under torture. The truth is that detainees often try to forget even the voices and faces of their dear ones, because otherwise the pain of being removed from human existence becomes unbearable. How can we understand the relation between memory and forgetting in a court that expects witnesses to supply proof?

These issues have to be dealt with in the realm of human dialogue, of shared recollection. “The need and the urgency of forgetting situations, of forgetting partners, of forgetting faces was such, that I really did forget them,” declares Luis Alberto Acuña (Author’s interviews, 1992). Another former prisoner, Pedro Cerviño, states after nine years in jail: “I don’t remember the number of my cell, or the prisoner number they gave me, or what the cell itself was like.... The only thing I do recall is a window, but not whether the beds were made of metal or wood... However, I do remember a spider and a line of verse that said ‘loneliness falls from the ceiling like an immense spider.’ I remember very little else.” (Author’s interviews, 1992).

These exchanges with survivors taught me that traumatic recollection had to be integrated into cultural memory. Resisting the open wounds of our history – working through pain even if these wounds will never heal since we cannot find out how each of the *desaparecidos* was assassinated – is achieved mainly through weaving threads of memory, and act that needs at least two human beings –survivor and listener. Their exchange “sets in motion the emergence of narrative” (Mieke Bal, 1999), which can be integrated, resignified, weaved into cultural memory.

The world we inhabit has turned into a place where the line of demarcation that separates the saved from the drowned becomes a confession, a story told to delay death. Survivors of such a sinister scenario insist on telling their stories. But what type of story do we tell? Is it an historical narrative about a silenced truth? Is it an autobiography focusing on memory? Is it a reenactment? Is it a fiction? In any of these cases, should we trust what witnesses are telling about their experiences?

I wrote my literary testimony, *A Single Numberless Death*, not in order to provide data but rather meaning. Genocide is not about the killing of a group of people but rather a planned attempt to erase “the other” (who can be defined in numerous ways). Genocide is always more

than the addition of elements that are present when it comes about; there is the addition of evil that can never be explained or reduced to historical terms. What can be said in the face of horror? But still, how can we survive without turning horror into meaning? I was determined to put what had happened into words.

According to Jewish thought, the act of saying is equivalent to that of doing, and *Davar* is both word and object. Words are real beings that exist in the universe, that change and can affect change. During the “Process of National Reorganization” (as State Terror called itself), I grasped the power contained in this action of naming. Jorge Rafael Videla, the Head of the First Military Junta, invented the word *desaparecidos* to designate people who were systematically kidnapped, tortured and killed by the regime. This word is so unique that it resists translation, and it has been incorporated within some languages in its Spanish form. Through this act of naming, the dictatorship transformed genocide into a mysterious state of being, as Alejandro Kaufman has pointed out. “They are neither dead nor alive,” Videla said, “they are disappeared.” The use of the fantastic as a tool to describe the destiny of political actors, according to Kaufman, became the master scheme framing every discourse produced by power. From this scheme, a whole new vocabulary was born (as Margerite Feilthovitz concluded after her interviews with survivors such as Mario Villani). Concentration camps were called “The Athletic Club,” “The Olympus,” “The Little School;” “singing” meant giving names under torture; “going up,” being killed. This shadow theatre of idioms destined words not to mean what they said, and allowed for the extermination project to be carried out; that is, it produced both the necessary distance and secrecy for the crimes to be committed. With this vocabulary and a public discourse stating “We are human and we are right,” what actually disappeared was the society’s ability to say what was happening to the social body, mutilated in such a way that language became unable to narrate its

own tragedy. The goal of the dictatorship was to cancel history, since the military declared that not only the bodies but also the projects, the ideas, the power of resistance, and the political discourse of the seventies had disappeared (Kaufman,2). Survivor narratives, then, had to defy this erasure, had to rename everything, as if for the first time. And this renaming was to be born in a country called memory.

Since I had survived, I had to break the language that years of this sinister lexicon had established. I had to write a story in which the source of truth was my own word, the word of the witness. I had to shake up sentences in order to let the “unspeakable” speak. I had to invent a form that would somehow translate the shock of horror. I had to revisit that clandestine territory that seemed to me from afar, from the perspective of exile, a bad dream from which I had not yet awakened (Evangelista, 1998). The concentration camp had pushed our lives to such a limit that usual vocabulary seemed impotent to recall it. Representing this upheaval did not agree with a story that has a beginning, middle, and end, nor with well developed characters. I wanted our recollections to scream out on the page, but the scream had to have a shape, an aesthetic and an ethical meaning. The problem that I was facing (and that other writers after disaster had faced before) is that horror resists representation. But there must be ways to tell the impossibility of telling, I thought. This quest is at the core of my rendition of the countless deaths that have marked at least three generations of Argentineans.

As Lea Wernick Fridman argues, the constitutive element of traumatic utterance is the use of “voice.” When words do not suffice, the burden of communication shifts to voice, she says, and this is exactly how I worked through traumatic memory. My literary work is predicated on a choir of voices coming from the realm of the *disappeared*: voices that manage to tell in the very act of avoiding the telling; voices telling through silence; voices empowering themselves in the

process of telling. I often was writing in the first person singular, but wanted the “I” in the book to be a plural self, a “we” born in a time -- the late seventies-- when existence was defined by the first person plural. We were then a multilayered collective in a struggle against a certain cultural and economic system, a “movement” that was erased because it called for resistance. I wanted to preserve this anti-authoritarian “we,” but beyond politics and law, in another realm, in the realm of culture and literature. I wanted, in this space at least, to defeat voices such as that of Admiral Eduardo Massera who proclaimed “History belongs to me.”

According to Deleuze, creation is a way between two impossibilities. Creation takes place in these impasses – or knots – as a line of fugue from a situation in which one is cornered by impossibilities. For me, it was impossible to narrate the story of horror and it was impossible not to tell it. I was afraid of embellishing the experience, and I was afraid of forgetting it. “In an article written immediately after World War II, Theodor Adorno wondered if poetic and artistic creation was possible after the historical experience of Auschwitz...his initial conclusion was that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is an act of barbarism, [but], in his 1962 article “Commitment” he remarks: ‘The abundance of real suffering tolerates no forgetting it is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it.’” (Evangelista, Introduction xix).

This type of art is destined to tell the non-official history of a period in which, as one of the characters in the film *The Official Story* states, there are no proofs, because History is written by the assassins. A collective narration of history comes about in such myriad forms as words, images, performances, and processions¹ that undermine monologic power. A power which asserts

¹ Nathan Englander notes in “This Country of Mothers,” that the circle of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo] is, rather, a procession, “something truly unique. It isn’t protest, really.... They are not demanding answers – as they have them.... It’s not performance art... To me it is so much more than that. It’s quantum mechanics, and metaphysics, and just plain holy. To circle for the rest of their lives is, in a way –in the

itself not only by denying human status to a large sector of the population, but by doing such denial in a clandestine fashion. As Margerite Feitlowitz stresses, our military followed Nazi Germany's Decree of "Night and Fog," according to which "transported prisoners" would "vanish in the night and fog." In other words, genocide was carried out by those who articulated public denial of the crimes. Systematic kidnapping and killing, however, is never implemented in a vacuum. Even if the assassins want to erase traces of such atrocities, populations are never totally unaware of what is going on. Furthermore, genocide cannot be implemented solely by the military – it is always rooted in an array of civilian collaborators (from public servants to business partners, from institutions such as the Church to neighbors who repeat "if they were taken there must be a reason"). Thus both the Holocaust and the Argentinean genocide leave similar legacies that have to be dealt with not only by survivors but by the larger society. The ethical recovery of such a society has to be shaped through the sharing, elaboration, and transmission of the stories that attempt to work through catastrophe. Stories voiced from a country called memory, a land rooted in the present, a truth that expands beyond the realm of legal justice.

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