(IM)POSSIBILITY OF WITNESS AND EMPATHY

Menachem S. age 4

"This essay will be based on this enigma of one child’s memory of trauma."

Outline

1. Introduction: Testimony
2. No witness
3. Testimony as an intersubjective process
4. Different positions of empathy
5. Next week: The God of Small Things
Testimony

Shoshana Felman

- 1) a literary critic
- 2) associated with deconstructionists at Yale
- 3) Chap 1: crisis in the classroom – the teacher’s task: recontextualize the crisis

Dori Laub

- 1) a psychoanalyst and Holocaust survivor
- 2) he, Menachem S., suppressed his memory until he treated some wounded war soldiers who were Holocaust survivors
- 3) At school, he remember the “camp” he went to as a summer camp.
Testimony & Bearing Witness in solitude

1) in artistic, literary, autobiographical, historical and psychoanalytic work

2) p. 3 “To bear witness is to bear the 'solitude of a responsibility, and to bear the responsibility precisely, of that solitude.'

“The witness,” writes Levinas, “testifies to what has been said through him. Because the witness has said, “here I am before the other.” By virtue of the fact that the testimony is addressed to others, the witness, from within the solitude of his own stance, is the vehicle of an occurrence, a reality, a stance or a dimension beyond himself” (3)
Testimony as performative speech act

- Not offering a completed statement
- In testimony, language is in process and in trial (5)
- A discursive practice, testimony “addresses what in history is action that exceeds any substantialized significance” (5)
- e.g. Kafka’s correspondences, Camus, Freud’s Irma dream, “the story of a trial: a trial symbolized by the dramatic anecdotal way in which Freud sees himself, within the dream, both tried and judged by his colleagues” (17)
Bearing Witness

or the Vicissitudes of Listening

• Listening (as a witness) means participating in the event and co-possess it, partially experiencing the trauma oneself.

• E.g. the woman that does not know the source of her gifts (from the dead)

• -- to respect, not to upset or to trespass, the subtle balance between what the interviewee knows and not knows. (61)

• E.g. the woman that claimed that there were 4 chimneys

• -- she bears testimony to the breakage of her frame of reference
Silence

- Silence – “Silence is for them a fated exile, yet also a home, a destination, and a binding oath. To not return from this silence is rule rather an exception” (58)
- Breaking the silence – in fragments, painful and delayed.

[example of a woman’s getting the number of chimney wrong]
Testimonial Process

- Password (63) → Black hole → return of trauma (in “the 2nd Holocaust” → externalizing and re-experiencing the event
- → lifting the entrapment, rebuilding one’s life
- The listener/interviewer: help develop it, without pushing too much. The absence of an addressable listener …annihilates the story. (68)
The Importance of Listener and Interviewer

**Listener:**

- The listener, therefore, is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time” (57).
- The listener to trauma: “a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event” (57)....
- The listener, therefore, has to be at the same time a witness to the trauma witness and a witness to himself” (58)
- Respects the constraints and boundaries of silence (61)

**Interviewer:**

- “Paradoxically enough, the interviewer has to be, thus, both unobtrusive, nondirective, and yet imminently present, active, in the lead” (71)
The Hazards of Listening as Participation

1. Building defenses
   a. A sense of total paralysis
   b. A sense of outrage and anger
   c. A sense of total withdrawal and numbness
   d. A sense of awe and fear
   e. Fact-finding; “I know it all.”
   f. Hyperemotional (superficially so)

→ cultural transvaluation = the victims, “as asserters of life out of the very disintegration and deflation of the old culture, unwittingly embody a cultural shock value that has not yet been assimilated… (74) “Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening.”
No Witness?

1. The reality of the situation; lack of by-standers
2. The lack of **insiders** capable of responding with another frame of reference
   - “Massive trauma precludes its registration; the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out, malfunction” (Laub 57).
   - “…it was not only the reality of the situation and **the lack of responsiveness of by-standers** or the world that accounts for the fact that history was taking place without witness: it was also the very circumstance of **being inside the event** that made unthinkable the very notion that a witness could exist, that is, **someone who could step outside of the coercively totalitarian and dehumanizing frame of reference in which the event was taking place**, and provide an independent frame of reference through which the event could be observed” (Laub 81)
And indeed, against all odds, attempts at bearing witness did take place; chroniclers of course existed and the struggle to maintain the process of recording and of salvaging and safeguarding evidence was carried on relentlessly. Diaries were written and buried in the ground so as to be historically preserved, pictures were taken in secret, messengers and escapees tried to inform and to warn the world of what was taking place. However, these attempts to inform oneself and to inform others were doomed to fail. The historical imperative to bear witness could essentially not be met during the actual occurrence. The degree to which bearing witness was required, entailed such an outstanding measure of awareness and of comprehension of the event—of its dimensions, consequences, and above all, of its radical otherness to all known frames of reference—that it was beyond the limits of human ability (and willingness) to grasp, to transmit, or to imagine. There was therefore no concurrent “knowing” or assimilation of the history of the occurrence. The event could thus unimpededly proceed as though there were no witnessing whatsoever, no witnessing that could decisively impact on it.\footnote{The experience of observing and in the abundance of the act}
Witness

“An Event without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival”

• Three levels
  • -- the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience
  • -- the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others;
  • -- and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself.

[example of a man’s failure to recognize his mother, who looked very different from the photo he held while escaping from the Nazi regime.]
Laub’s position

- The remembrances of yet another child survivor known to me quite intimately (from having been his later interviewer and friend) and therefore subtly related to my own in the quality of their precociousness, will serve as a connecting, reemerging thread in the latter part of the essay.
The mother’s image as an “internal witness”

- hospital instead of whorehouse (whiteness from the milk)
- reunion → nightmares → no more dreams
The Loss of the Internal Witness

• As an adult, he repressed the memory of himself as a child victim.
• “He finds that he can only address them as Mr. and Mrs., not as Mom and Dad. [Laub reads] this story to mean that in regaining his real mother, he inevitably loses the internal witness he had found in her image. This loss of his internal witness to whom he has addressed his daily prayers caused the boy to fall apart. He begins to have a nightmare that will recur all his life. In it he finds himself on a conveyor belt moving relentlessly toward a metal compactor.” (Laub 88)
• no more dreams
Testimony

- Testimony – promise and realization of truth—broken and kept at the same time.
- The testimony is “an experience of facing loss,
- Involving “a dialogical process and an authentic listener, which allows for a reconciliation with the broken promise, and which makes the resumption of life, in spite of the failed promise, at all possible.”
- “the repetition of the experience of loss and separation, …[allowing] a certain repossesson of it” (91)
TRAUMA CULTURE

E. Ann Kaplan
Trauma Culture—and Viewer Position

- Trauma: responses to catastrophe or family “quiet” trauma, including suffering terror
- **Positions: direct experience of trauma** (victim) → direct observation of trauma (bystanders) → hearing patients’ trauma narratives → vicarious experience of visually mediatized trauma → reading trauma narratives (91-92)
- ”encountering” trauma vicariously
  - Empty empathy—empathy elicited by images of suffering without knowledge of context (93) //voyeur position
  - vicarious or secondary trauma
  - Witnessing trauma
Empty Empathy

Empathy’s potential social impact

- Empty empathy: fleeting, transitory
- Empathy that is ‘empty’ is produced by images that occur in at least two ways. (264)
  - **Succession**: (close-up) images that are received in succession.
  - **Fragmentation**: array of separate images of suffering without any context or background information provided.
  - e.g. news photos of Iraq war
- P. 264 – over-arousal -> denial of affect; passive position, or sense of helplessness

EMPATHY AND TRAUMA CULTURE:
IMAGING CATASTROPHE” 256-57. 264
Examples: Media Coverage of the Iraq War

- Heroism: Jessica Lynch: “Rambo from the hills of West Virginia" (Wiki)
- Marine doctor’s holding a baby – Pieta

Image 15.3  A Marine doctor holds an Iraqi girl whose mother has been killed. With permission of Daniel Sagoli/Reuters.
Witnessing trauma

- P. 122
- Empathic sharing – closeness but may lead to the overidentification of vicarious trauma
- Witnessing has to do with an art work producing a deliberate ethical consciousness, …but with even greater distance.
  - witnessing where there is no witness
  - role demand: feeling responsible for injustice in general.
  - broader understanding
“Role-demand” in vicarious trauma and witnessing (TC p. 122)

- VT: pro-social moral encounter between therapist and patient.
- In “witnessing,” one feels responsible for social injustice

Martin Hoffman implies that, through its very symptoms of discomfort, vicarious trauma may have a socially useful effect (Hoffman, “Empathy and Vicarious Traumatization” 15). Could it be that vicarious trauma can be pro-social in the case of clinicians, because as Hoffman shows “empathy can intensely distress clinicians and increase their motivation to help”? Hoffman concludes, “The clinician-patient relationship may therefore count as an empathy-based pro-social moral encounter.” He states that what makes this moral encounter significant is its “role-demand.”

While witnessing also involves a “role-demand,” it is of a different if related order than that of the therapist. For in bearing witness, in the sense I intend here, one not only provides a witness where no one was there to witness before, but more than that, one feels responsible for injustice in general. Witnessing involves wanting to change the kind of world where injustice, of whatever kind, is common.
Vicarious Trauma vs. Witnessing Trauma

- VT: “intensifying the desire to help an individual in front
- Witnessing: a broader understanding of trauma and its politics
- (TC p. 123)
As Hirsch notes, Sontag’s account [in *On Photography* (1977)] provides a clear example of vicarious image-induced trauma, such as ‘the sense of shock, of numbing, of being forever changed,’ along with references to the ‘belatedness’ characteristic of traumatic reactions (Hirsch (2004): 6).
Vicarious Trauma → **Witnessing:**
e.g. Sontag on images of horror

- the ethical value of an assault by image’
- (Sontag *Regarding the Pain of Others*)
- Image can be critiqued because of its distance from suffering, and the sentimentality it evokes.
- Sontag: “‘There is nothing wrong with standing back and thinking’ (118)”
- If images, as John Leonard notes in a review of *Regarding the Pain of Others*, can be ‘an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalization for mass suffering offered by established powers’ (Leonard (2003): 10), then they are ethical.
Which images invite us to reflect and learn?

- Comparison between **Katrina images** and images of Iraq war – we see

- “One striking difference between the early Iraq photos focused on close-ups of soldiers and these early Katrina images is that here we see individuals as members of groups, not the focus only on individuals as in the early Iraq photos.” (270)

- “The Katrina images permitted a certain level of witnessing to unconscious racism in the U.S. through inviting viewers to move from empathic identification with the individual to the group, the community, the context” (270)
Which images invite us to reflect and learn?

- One outside the superdome, one inside, and the third its context.
CONCLUSION

Witnessing – a process of dialogue and contextualization
1. Monsoon rains
   - fill up the rivers there;
   -- Kill Sophie Mol.
2. Communism
   -- democratically elected
   Communist government
   -- abolish landlordism
“The first Communist government in the world was elected in Kerala in 1957, and from then on it became a big power to contend with. I think in '67 the government returned to power after having been dismissed by Nehru, and so in '69 it was at its peak. And it was as if revolution was really just around the corner.” (Arundhati Roy) + (p.64-65)
The God of Small Things: Race, Gender & Caste

- Ipe
- Papachi anglophile
  - Ammu (divorced)
    - Estha
    - Rahel
    - Sophie Mol
  - Chacko
  - Margaret
  - Paradise Pickles
- Mamachi
- Paravan (the untouchable) Vellya Paapen
- Velutha
The God of Small Things

- **1969** -- communist march; Sophie Mol's (8) visit, death, and funeral; Ammu and Velutha; Velutha's death
- **1973** -- Ammu's death (31, 5)
- **1992** -- the narrative present -- Estha ('the quietness," "re-Returned''); Rahel (divorced, back for the States); Baby Kochamma (satellite TV and diary)
“To understand history,” Chacko said, “we have to go inside and listen to what they’re saying. And look at the books and the pictures on the wall. And smell the smells.”

Estha and Rahel had no doubt that the house Chacko meant was the house on the other side of the river, in the middle of the abandoned rubber estate where they had never been. Kari Saibu’s house. …

“But we can’t go in,” Chacko explained, “because we’ve been locked out. And when we look in through the windows, all we see are shadows. And when we try and listen, all we hear is a whispering. And we cannot understand the whispering, because our minds have been invaded by a war. A war that we have won and lost. The very worst sort of war. A war that captures dreams and re-dreams them. A war that has made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves.”

