

"Acting-Out" And "Working-Through" Trauma

Excerpt from interview with professor Dominick LaCapra

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Interviewer: Amos Goldberg

Q- In all your writings on the Holocaust, you distinguish between two forms of remembering trauma (and historical writings on it). The first, which you consider the desirable one, results in the process of "working-through"; the other is based on denial and results in "acting-out." Can you characterize these two different kinds of memory ?

L- I'm obviously trying to take the concepts of "acting-out" and "working-through" from Freud and from psychoanalysis, and then developing them in a way that makes them especially interesting for use in historical studies. This means that I don't try to be orthodox as a psychoanalyst, but really aim to develop the concepts in a manner that engages significant historical problems -- and for me, the Holocaust is one of the most important of these problems .

This kind of approach has applications elsewhere, but it's especially important with respect to events (or a series of events), that are heavily charged with emotion and value, and that always bring out an implication of the observer in the observed. This is what I start talking about as transference -- trying to understand it in a very broad sense, but in a way that is also faithful to Freud. The basic sense of transference in Freud is a process of repetition: literally, the repetition of the Oedipal scene in later life, the relationship between parent and child in situations such as that of teacher/student, or analyst/patient, in ways that may seem inappropriate .

So for me, transference means a form of repetition, both in relations among researchers (for example, graduate students/instructors), and perhaps more interestingly -- because less developed -- in the relationship to the object of

study. When you study something, at some level you always have a tendency to repeat the problems you were studying. This is related to your implication in the research. Something like transference (or one's implication in the material and tendency to repeat) always occurs .

There are two very broad ways of coming to terms with transference, or with one's transference implication in the object of study: acting-out; and working-through. Acting-out is related to repetition, and even the repetition-compulsion -- the tendency to repeat something compulsively. This is very clear in the case of people who undergo a trauma. They have a tendency to relive the past, to exist in the present as if they were still fully in the past, with no distance from it. They tend to relive occurrences, or at least find that those occurrences intrude on their present existence, for example, in flashbacks; or in nightmares; or in words that are compulsively repeated, and that don't seem to have their ordinary meaning, because they're taking on different connotations from another situation, in another place .

I think that in Freud, if there's any broad meaning of the death drive that is not mystifying, it's the death drive as the tendency to repeat traumatic scenes in a way that is somehow destructive and self-destructive. Yet, I also believe that for people who have been severely traumatized, it may be impossible to fully transcend acting-out the past. In any case, acting-out should not be seen as a different kind of memory from working-through -- they are intimately related parts of a process. Acting-out, on some level, may very well be necessary, even for secondary witnesses or historians. On a certain level, there's that tendency to repeat .

I see working-through as a kind of countervailing force (not a totally different process, not even something leading to a cure), because I tend to disavow, or take my distance from, therapeutic conceptions of psychoanalysis, and try to take psychoanalysis in more ethical and political directions. In the working-through, the person tries to gain critical distance on a problem, to be able to distinguish between past, present and future. For the victim, this means his

ability to say to himself, "Yes, that happened to me back then. It was distressing, overwhelming, perhaps I can't entirely disengage myself from it, but I'm existing here and now, and this is different from back then." There may be other possibilities, but it's via the working-through that one acquires the possibility of being an ethical agent .

The other general thing I would add is this: It's interesting that the acting-out/working-through distinction -- and it's a distinction, not a separation into different kinds or totally different categories, but a distinction between interacting processes -- is one way of trying to get back to the problem of the relationship between theory and practice. This, I think, we have almost tended to leave behind, or leave in abeyance. And this is perhaps something we can get back to .

In recent criticism (with which I agree), there has perhaps been too much of a tendency to become fixated on acting-out, on the repetition-compulsion, to see it as a way of preventing closure, harmonization, any facile notion of cure. But also, by the same token, to eliminate any other possibility of working-through, or simply to identify all working-through as closure, totalization, full cure, full mastery, so that there's a kind of all-or-nothing logic in which one is in a double bind: either the totalization or the closure you resist; or acting-out the repetition-compulsion, with almost no other possibilities. And often politics, being a question of a kind of blank hope in the future, a blank utopia about which you can say nothing. And this very often links up with a kind of apocalyptic politics .

Q- Where does it affect the historian ?

L- It affects the historian in secondary ways: As the historian studies certain processes, there are tendencies towards identification, towards negative identification, total denial. In a sense, there are two extreme possibilities for the historian: the first is the extreme of full identification with participants. In a case such as that of the Holocaust, the figures with whom the historian has

identified have generally been bystanders, because the identification with the bystander is closest to the other possibility for the historian -- that is, the idea of full objectivity, neutrality, not being a player, not being a participant. But there's also the possibility that the historian (or any other observer), might go to the extreme of full identification, that there is something in the experience of the victim that has almost a compulsive power and should elicit our empathy. This empathy may go to the point of a kind of extreme identification, wherein one becomes a kind of surrogate victim oneself .

I've written that I think this happens to some extent to Claude Lanzmann in his film Shoah : There is almost the desire to identify with the experience of the victim because he himself has not been a victim, yet somehow feels that he should have been a victim, that he should have been part of this process. On one level, this is very moving, but it can also lead to a very intrusive kind of questioning in the actual encounter with the victim. So the way that it applies to the historian is in terms of this process of, at some level, transferentially being implicated in the problems you study, and having to have some kind of response to them .

I agree with a very important dimension of historical research -- gathering information, and making sure that it is accurate as possible; checking facts; and trying to arrive at a reconstruction of the past that is as validated and as substantiated as possible. This is absolutely necessary to historical understanding, but it's not all of it. There are other dimensions, including one's implication in the object of study, effective or emotional response, and how one comes to terms with that response. Again, the two extremes in trying to come to terms with emotional response are this: full identification, whereby you try to relive the experience of the other, or find yourself unintentionally reliving it; and pure objectification, which is the denial of transference, the blockage of affect as it influences research, and simply trying to be as objectifying and neutral an observer as possible .

The alternative to this is trying to work out some very delicate relationship

between empathy and critical distance. This is very much the problem of trying to relate acting-out to working-through itself: In acting-out, one relives as if one were the other, including oneself as another in the past; and in working-through, one tries to acquire some critical distance that allows one to engage in life in the present, to assume responsibility -- but that doesn't mean that you utterly transcend the past .

Q- You said that acting-out and working-through are not opposites, but a distinction. But you also stress the process. Now, isn't the word "process" already taken from the sphere of working-through, and not from that of acting-out? That means that you actually see acting-out through the eyes of working-through, and they're not balanced in your theory ?

L- Acting-out is a process, but a repetitive one. It's a process whereby the past, or the experience of the other, is repeated as if it were fully enacted, fully literalized .

Q- Correct me if I'm mistaken, but that's not the original, or the accepted, meaning of the word "process" -- to proceed from one place to another .

L- Though I think that binary oppositions are very important in thinking, one of the fruitful contributions of deconstruction (the work of Jacques Derrida, for example), has been to show the instability of binary oppositions and the way in which binary oppositions may be dubious. I think the binary opposition is very closely related to the scapegoat mechanism, and that part of the process of scapegoating is trying to generate pure binary oppositions between self and other, so that the other (let's say in the context of the Holocaust, the Jew, or the other victim of Nazi oppression), becomes totally different from the Nazi, and everything that causes anxiety in the Nazi is projected onto the other, so you have a pure divide: Aryan/Jew -- absolutely nothing in common. And then you can show that this extreme binarization is actually a way of concealing anxiety, and the ways in which the seemingly pure opposites also share certain things .

A distinction, I would argue, is different. It is not a pure binary opposition, but rather involves a notion of difference, but a difference that's not a pure difference. The problem that deconstruction leaves us with is in the wake of the deconstruction of pure binaries, which I agree with fully: How do we then elaborate desirable distinctions? From my point of view, deconstruction does not blur or undermine all distinctions; it leaves you with a problem of distinctions that are, if anything, more difficult and more necessary to elaborate, given the fact that you cannot rely on simple binaries. Acting-out and working-through, in this sense, are a distinction, in that one may never be totally separate from the other, and the two may always be implicated in each other. But it's very important to see them as countervailing forces, and to recognize that there are possibilities of working-through that do not go to the extreme of total transcendence of acting-out, or total transcendence of the past .

One of the important tendencies in recent thinking has been to eliminate other possibilities of working-through, or at least not to provide any insight into them. And rather to remain within a notion of acting-out, and almost to collapse the distinction between acting-out and working-through, or to blur it entirely. When one comes to certain problems, such as that of mourning -- which can be seen in Freud as one important mode of working-through -- one may never entirely transcend an attachment to a lost other, or even some kind of identification with a lost other, but one may generate countervailing forces so that the person can reengage an interest in life. One sign of this in the process of mourning is the ability to find a new partner, to marry, to have children; and not to be so enmeshed in the grieving that the present doesn't seem to exist for you, and there is no future .

In certain forms of contemporary theorizing, whereby working-through is simply seen in this kind of extreme Pollyana redemptive mode, mourning itself may always seem to come back to an endless melancholy. There may be very little, if any, distinction between mourning and melancholy: The mourning that

is criticized is that which utterly transcends the past, and the mourning that's affirmed is virtually indistinguishable from endless melancholy and a kind of repetition-compulsion .

At times, I wonder whether in someone like Derrida the notion of impossible mourning, as endless grieving, is virtually indistinguishable from endless melancholy. The reason that may arise is that mourning itself seems to become an almost metaphysical process, and the distinction between the metaphysical and the historical may itself be evanescent or very difficult to perceive .

In the case of someone like Walter Benjamin (at least in the early Benjamin), in the origin of German tragic drama, what you seem to have is the notion of the mourning play as a play of endless melancholy. Melancholy cannot be transcended, and Benjamin himself is in some sense against a redemptive notion of mourning. Now again, what I want to argue is this: that I, too, would want to criticize any kind of fully redemptive notion of mourning; and that, especially for the victim, it may be impossible to fully transcend acting-out .

In respect to an event of such incredible dimensions as the Holocaust, it may also be impossible for those born later ever to fully transcend this event and to put it in the past, simply as the past. But it may be possible, and in some sense it has to be possible, if you believe in anything like a viable democratic politics, to enable and further processes of working-through that are not simply therapeutic for the individual, but have political and ethical implications .

The one thing that's a mystery to me is this: If you have an analysis in which mourning is always impossible mourning, that is, in the very closest proximity to melancholy, if not identical with interminable melancholy, how then do you affirm a democratic politics? What are the mechanisms for bringing about agency that would enable people to engage in civil society, in political activity? Doesn't that always remain somehow beneath one's dignity, or beneath one's level of metaphysical interest ?

This is why I think that what very often happens in Walter Benjamin, and in Derrida's rather sympathetic analysis of Benjamin (when he discusses the critique of violence with some caveats), or in someone like Fredric Jameson, or in Hayden White, is that you have an analysis that doesn't seem to enable other forms of working-through; that somehow wants to affirm the necessity of being implicated in trauma, and yet wants the politics. But the politics that comes out is often a blind messianism, apocalyptic politics or what I call the "hope in a blank utopia" -- a utopia which is utterly blank because you can say nothing about it and it has virtually nothing to do with your processes in the present.

This is a kind of paradox: How do you affirm a democratic politics if you don't have some notion of working-through that is not identical to full transcendence, and yet is distinguishable from, and acts as a countervailing force to, endless repetition of the past or being implicated in the trauma, or continually validating the trauma ?

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