

Redemptive Narratives

Excerpt from interview with professor Dominick LaCapra

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Interviewer: Amos Goldberg

Q- What do you really mean by redemptive narrative, and why do you criticize it so much? Can you give examples from the United States, from Germany or from Israel?

L- I agree with something like the necessity for what Benjamin calls “weak messianic values,” and I would see them in terms of ethics and the need to develop a notion of ethics, both in the broader sense and in more specific senses. One of the crucial problems of ethics is the relationship of normative limits and that which transgresses the limits. Then you have to try to see the ways in which that really can be worked out in different areas of life: the relationship between normative limits that you want to affirm and the possibility of transgressing those limits, which is the only way in which you get a newer normativity. So there are some forms of normativity you might want to place in question, some you may want to reform, and others you may want to validate. But the relationship between limits and excess is a crucial problem. Again, one of the difficulties in certain forms of contemporary, postmodern, post-structural thinking is the affirmation of the excess.

Even someone like Saul Friedlander, in his partial affinity with postmodernism, would accept the idea that in the Holocaust there is some excess, which is unrepresentable and difficult to conceptualize. On a certain level, I agree, but one of the techniques of certain forms of post-structural thinking has been to try to counteract excess through excess. This is, in a way, a homeopathic response: You take the “illness” and you counteract it through a proper dosage of the illness itself. I think that that may be necessary. The modern context is, in some sense, a post-Holocaust context, and this has had, usually

in subterranean ways, until the present, an effect on thinking, to destabilize thinking, and to render less feasible certain kinds of redemptive thinking, for example.

This is one reason why traditional religions, Hegelianism, seen in stereotypical ways, and any form of thinking that seems to redeem the past and make it wholly meaningful through present uses, no longer seems plausible. The extent of the crisis, the extent of the unsettlement, were simply too great to make that feasible to people; it just doesn't seem to hang together. It's what Jean-Francois Lyotard calls the incredulity or the disbelief about grand narratives: We no longer seem to take seriously these grand narratives that make sense of everything in the past, which at certain points seem to appeal to people very much.

If you believe in the Biblical story, you do, in a sense, believe in a grand narrative of history, so that everything, even the most disastrous catastrophes, will ultimately make sense to you -- maybe not now, but at some point of illumination in the future. This no longer seems to be feasible to many -- or at least a significant number of -- people.

So I agree that there is something like an excess with which one has to come to terms. And that at certain levels one has to realize that one, oneself, participates in this excess; that there may be certain excessive hyperbolic features of oneself; and that one has to undergo the temptation of excess. Then, though, the question is how one comes to terms with it? One of the things I've written is that in certain thinkers there is, at times, the tendency to overdose on the antidote. This is to say, to participate too fully in the excess and to affirm the excess, with almost an oblivion of the problem of how to relate excess to legitimate limits, which is the ethical problem. If you affirm excess only, I think that's a transcendence or an undercutting of ethics towards, often, an aesthetic of the sublime.

There's a relationship between excess and the sublime: The sublime is, in some sense, an excess, an excess that overwhelms the self, almost brings it to the point of death, but then leads to elation when the self escapes the threat of death. In recent thinking, there's an incredible fascination with an aesthetic of the sublime. Again, this is in some sense necessary, but one should also try to situate it. The one way in which one tries to situate it, is to try to distinguish among possibilities of the sublime, not simply, for example, to see the Holocaust as sublime in its excess. There is a tendency at times to envision the Holocaust homogeneously as some overwhelming, sublime event. This can perhaps be found at times in Lyotard, in Hayden White, and it's somewhat questionable. There you really need to have a much more modulated self-critical response. But what this emphasis on the excess of the Holocaust does, is to insist upon a certain unsettlement in its aftermath, and to place in radical jeopardy any facile notion of redemption or harmonization -- and I agree with this.

On the question of examples of redemptive narratives, if you take the conventional narrative structure itself -- with a beginning, a middle and an end, whereby the end recapitulates the beginning after the trials of the middle, and gives you (at least on the level of insight), some realization of what it was all about -- there's a sense in which the conventional narrative is redemptive. Various people, including Northrop Frye and M.H. Abrams, have argued that conventional narratives are displacements of the Biblical structure of Paradise, Fall, History -- as a period of trial and tribulation, and then redemption. So that in the conventional narrative itself, there is a kind of displacement of a Biblical structure, which is a redemptive structure.

Frank Kermode is another who has also written about this in his book *The Sense of an Ending*. He calls the conventional narrative "apocalyptic," in that the end resonates with the beginning on a higher level of meaning and significance. He has a rather amusing example of the way we listen to, and perceive the ticking of, a clock: "tick-tock, tick-tock." He sees the "tick" as a

humble genesis, and the “tock” as a feeble apocalypse, so that all of time is coded in terms of “tick-tock,” that's developmental and progressive.

A specific example is Schindler's List. This is a very interesting movie for the first three-quarters or so (at least as a film), where you have the ambiguities of the Schindler character brought out. The fact that he is a Nazi trying to help Jews is retained in its tension, for you have a Nazi who is also an impresario, self-interested, self-indulgent, but nonetheless trying to help other people -- in that, you have a certain interesting tension. Towards the end, you have the resolution of all the tensions as Schindler emerges as a martyr and a hero. His associate becomes a sort of Gandhi figure, leading the people across the horizon towards some unimaginable new beginning -- you don't know where they're going; you think they may be going to a land of redemption. And then there is also the final ritual, which is really a kind of redemptive ritual, rather than a form of mourning that is tensely bound up with the problems of the past. Instead you almost have a “Yellow Brick Road” along which the survivors come, and in some sense redeem their past.

Another example of redemptive narrative is a certain kind of Zionist narrative. Here it's rather curious that a certain kind of Zionist narrative has almost a Biblical model of some past Eden, when there was a state and a people, Diaspora related to a fall. The Holocaust is in some sense the necessary culmination of Diaspora, showing the error of the ways of erring, during the Diaspora, and then the foundation of the State of Israel as the redemptive moment. This is a very simplistic Zionist narrative, and not all people who call themselves Zionists have this narrative. But it had a certain force in Israeli history -- related to why, for such a long time, survivors were not understood in terms of their experiences, might not even be listened to, and that the point of the survivor was to undergo transformation into a new Israeli citizen, and that has problematic implications for people in the way they relate to one another. In Israel itself, it is only in the last 10 years or so that people have been willing to listen to survivors.

There are many reasons for survivor videos: first, the obvious sense that soon people will no longer be alive and they'll no longer be available to listen to; second, an audience. As many people have pointed out, right after the events there was a rush of memoirs and diaries, and then it all sort of died down for a fairly long period of time. One of the reasons is that survivors found -- in different countries, for different reasons -- that they didn't have an audience, they didn't have people who wanted to listen to them.

In Israel, they didn't want to listen to them basically because they were trying, for understandable reasons, to construct a different kind of state with a different kind of political agent. So, in a way, the aim was to go from victim to agent, without passing through working-through. It was like a desire to jump from victim to agent without having that intervening process, just sort of transcending it. This just doesn't work; it can only create difficulties, at least in human relations, and often politically.

In the United States, the survivors didn't have an audience in the general public either. It was almost like going from Auschwitz to Disney World -- and in Disney World, people don't want to hear about Auschwitz. It's a very different context.

Different things can also be said about different countries. In France, for example, why was there the notion of the de'porte' that was used as a kind of homogenizing device to amalgamate victims, Jews, who were deported, and political prisoners? It's rather amazing that, for a rather long time, the prototypical survivor account was that of Robert Antelme -- very interesting, very important, but a political prisoner. This is the figure about whom Maurice Blanchot and others wrote, and took as the prototypical survivor. Again, this tended to mask certain things, such as the specific problems of Jews as survivors, and as victims under Vichy and under the Nazis. There are many, many redemptive forms of narrative.



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