

TRAUMA

Explorations in Memory

Edited, with Introductions, by

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INTRODUCTION

CATHY CARUTH

At the heart of this volume is the encounter with a peculiar kind of historical phenomenon—what has come to be called “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” (PTSD)—in which the overwhelming events of the past repeatedly possess, in intrusive images and thoughts, the one who has lived through them. This singular *possession by the past*, as we have seen in Part I, extends beyond the bounds of a marginal pathology and has become a central characteristic of the survivor experience of our time. Yet what is particularly striking in this singular experience is that its insistent reenactments of the past do not simply serve as testimony to an event, but may also, paradoxically enough, bear witness to a past that was never fully experienced as it occurred. Trauma, that is, does not simply serve as record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned. The essays in Part II examine the implications of this paradoxical experience for the ways we represent and communicate historical experience. The phenomenon of trauma, as they suggest, both urgently demands historical awareness and yet denies our usual modes of access to it. How is it possible, they thus ask, to gain access to a traumatic history?

Perhaps the most striking feature of traumatic recollection is the fact that it is not a simple memory. Beginning with the earliest work on trauma, a perplexing contradiction has formed the basis of its many definitions and descriptions: while the images of traumatic reenactment remain absolutely accurate and precise, they are largely inaccessible to conscious recall and control. It is this curious phenomenon that challenged Freud in his confrontation with the “war neuroses” stemming from the First World War. The

traumatic reliving, like the nightmares of the accident victim, seemed like a waking memory, yet returned, repeatedly, only in the form of a dream:

[People] think the fact that the traumatic experience is forcing itself upon the patient is a proof of the strength of the experience: the patient is, as one might say, fixated to his trauma. . . . I am not aware, however, that patients suffering from traumatic neurosis are much occupied in their waking lives with memories of their accident. Perhaps they are more concerned with *not* thinking of it. (Freud, 1920, 13)

The traumatic nightmare, undistorted by repression or unconscious wish, seems to point directly to an event, and yet, as Freud suggests, it occupies a space to which willed access is denied. Indeed, the vivid and precise return of the event appears, as modern researchers point out, to be accompanied by an *amnesia* for the past, a fact striking enough to be referred to by several major writers as a *paradox*:

There are a number of *temporal paradoxes* that occur in patients with PTSD. . . . [One is that] recall of the actual trauma may often be impaired, whereas patients may reexperience aspects of the trauma in the form of intrusive thoughts, nightmares, or flashbacks. (John Krystal, 1990, 6; emphasis added)

Pathologies of memory are characteristic features of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These range from amnesia for part, or all, of the traumatic events to frank dissociation, in which large realms of experience or aspects of one's identity are disowned. Such failures of recall can *paradoxically coexist* with the opposite: intruding memories and unbidden repetitive images of traumatic events. (Greenberg and van der Kolk, 1987, 191; emphasis added)

The flashback, it seems, provides a form of recall that survives at the cost of willed memory or of the very continuity of conscious thought. While the traumatized are called upon to see and to relive the insistent reality of the past, they recover a past that encounters consciousness only through the very denial of active recollection.

The ability to recover the past is thus closely and paradoxically tied up, in trauma, with the inability to have access to it. And this suggests that what returns in the flashback is not simply an overwhelming experience that has been obstructed by a later repression or amnesia, but an event that is itself constituted, in part, by its lack of integration into consciousness. Indeed, the literal registration of an event—the capacity to continually, in the flashback,

reproduce it in exact detail—appears to be connected, in traumatic experience, precisely with the way it *escapes* full consciousness as it occurs. Modern neurobiologists have in fact suggested that the unerring “engraving” on the mind, the “etching into the brain” of an event in trauma may be associated with its elision of its normal encoding in memory. This strange connection—between the *elision* of memory and the *precision* of recall—was already central to Freud's work, and was even earlier, as van der Kolk and van der Hart suggest in this volume, an important focus in the writing of Pierre Janet. He proposed that traumatic recall remains insistent and unchanged to the precise extent that it has never, from the beginning, been fully integrated into understanding. The trauma is the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge—that cannot, as George Bataille says, become a matter of “intelligence”—and thus continually returns, in its exactness, at a later time. Not having been fully integrated as it occurred, the event cannot become, as Janet says, a “narrative memory” that is integrated into a completed story of the past. The history that a flashback tells—as psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and neurobiology equally suggest—is, therefore, a history that literally *has no place*, neither in the past, in which it was not fully experienced, nor in the present, in which its precise images and enactments are not fully understood. In its repeated imposition as both image and amnesia, the trauma thus seems to evoke the difficult truth of a history that is constituted by the very incomprehensibility of its occurrence.

For the survivor of trauma, then, the truth of the event may reside not only in its brutal facts, but also in the way that their occurrence defies simple comprehension. The flashback or traumatic reenactment conveys, that is, both *the truth of an event*, and *the truth of its incomprehensibility*. But this creates a dilemma for historical understanding. For on the one hand, as van der Kolk and van der Hart suggest, the amnesiac reenactment is a story that is difficult to tell and to hear: “it is not addressed to anybody, the patient does not respond to anybody: it is a solitary activity.” The trauma thus requires integration, both for the sake of testimony and for the sake of cure. But on the other hand, the transformation of the trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one's own, and others', knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall. Thus in the story of Janet's patient Irène, her cure is characterized by the fact that she can tell a “slightly different story” to different people: the capacity to remember is also

the capacity to elide or distort, and in other cases, as van der Kolk and van der Hart show, may mean the capacity simply to forget. Yet beyond the loss of precision there is another, more profound, disappearance: the loss, precisely, of the event's essential incomprehensibility, the force of its *affront to understanding*. It is this dilemma that underlies many survivors' reluctance to translate their experience into speech:

People have said that only survivors themselves understand what happened. I'll go a step further. We don't. . . . I know I don't. . . .

So there is a dilemma. What do we do? Do we not talk about it? Elie Wiesel has said many times that silence is the only proper response but then most of us, including him, feel that not to speak is impossible.

To speak is impossible, and not to speak is impossible. (Schreiber Weitz, 1990)

The danger of speech, of integration into the narration of memory, may lie not in what it cannot understand, but in that it understands too much. Speech seems to offer only, as Kevin Newmark says, the attempt "to move away from the experience of shock by reintegrating it into a stable understanding of it." The possibility of integration into memory and the consciousness of history thus raises the question, van der Kolk and van der Hart ultimately observe, "whether it is not a sacrilege of the traumatic experience to play with the reality of the past?"

The impossibility of a comprehensible story, however, does not necessarily mean the denial of a transmissible truth. "I have precisely begun with the impossibility of telling this story," Claude Lanzmann writes of his film of Holocaust testimonies, *Shoah*. "I have made this very impossibility my point of departure" (Lanzmann, 1990b, 295). How does one precisely *begin* with impossibility? Challenging our usual expectations of what it means to tell, to listen, and to gain access to the past, Lanzmann suggests that historical truth may be transmitted in some cases through the refusal of a certain framework of understanding, a refusal that is also a creative act of listening. In her introduction to Lanzmann's address before the Western New England Institute for Psychoanalysis that appears in this issue, Shoshana Felman quotes his own eloquent statement of this refusal:

It is enough to formulate the question in simplistic terms—Why have the Jews been killed?—for the question to reveal right away its obscenity. There is an absolute obscenity in the very project of understanding. Not

to understand was my iron law during all the eleven years of the production of *Shoah*. I had clung to this refusal of understanding as the only possible ethical and at the same time the only possible operative attitude. (Lanzmann, 1990a, 279)

The making of *Shoah*, Lanzmann suggests, proceeds, precisely, from what it does not understand. The act of refusal, here, is therefore not a denial of a knowledge of the past, but rather a way of gaining access to a knowledge that has not yet attained the form of "narrative memory." In its active resistance to the platitudes of knowledge, this refusal opens up the space for a testimony that can speak beyond what is already understood. Indeed, *Shoah*, Lanzmann suggests, was created not simply through the positive and straightforward acquisition of facts—although the details of each person's story do indeed form its very core—but also through the process of discovering the ways in which understanding breaks down:

I was like someone who is not very gifted in dancing, who takes lessons as I did 20 years ago, and then tries and doesn't succeed. There was an absolute discrepancy between the book-knowledge that I had acquired and what these people told me. I didn't understand anything anymore. (Lanzmann, 1990b, 294)

The refusal of understanding, then, is also a fundamentally creative act: "this blindness was for me," Lanzmann writes, "the vital condition of creation" (Lanzmann 1990a, 279). What is created does not grow out of a knowledge already accumulated but, as Lanzmann suggests, is intricately bound up with the act of listening itself. In his appearance before the Western New England Institute for Psychoanalysis, Lanzmann enacts a kind of refusal and creation by turning what was intended to have been the discussion of a film on a Nazi's inner development into the event of his own refusal to watch the film and his explanation of why such a refusal took place. It is precisely in the struggle to make sense of this refusal that the possibility of a truly pedagogical encounter emerges, an encounter that, by breaking with traditional modes of understanding, creates new ways of gaining access to a historical catastrophe for those who attempt to witness it from afar.

Lanzmann thus provides, in *Shoah* and somewhat differently in his own appearance before the psychoanalysts, the possibility of a speech that is not simply the vehicle of understanding, but also the locus of what cannot yet be understood. It is, as Shoshana Felman says of Celan's poetry in her essay in Part I, "the event of creating an address for the specificity of a historical

experience that annihilated any possibility of address." It is thus also, in itself, a project that discovers the paradoxical foundation of address as the transmission of a gap:

Between all these conditions [unemployment in Germany, the Nazi soul, and so on] and the gassing of three-thousand persons, men, women, children, in a gas chamber, all together, there is an unbreachable discrepancy. It is simply not possible to engender one out of the other. There is no solution of continuity between the two; there is rather a gap, an *abyss*, and this abyss will never be bridged. ("The Obscenity of Understanding")

It is ultimately in the ways in which it exceeds simple understanding that the eventful speech of this address—an address that takes place in all the struggles to communicate traumatic experience—opens up the possibility of what could be called a truly historical transmission.

The attempt to gain access to a traumatic history, then, is also the project of listening beyond the pathology of individual suffering, to the reality of a history that in its crises can only be perceived in unassimilable forms. This history may speak through the individual or through the community, which in its own suffering, as Kai Erikson makes clear, may not only be the site of its disruption but the locus of a "wisdom all its own." Each of the essays in this volume engages, from different perspectives, in the difficult task of this historical listening. And they help us to recognize that this task may take place not only in relation to a traumatic past not yet acknowledged, but, as Gregg Bordowitz, Douglas Crimp and Laura Pinsky forcefully remind us, in relation to an address that attempts to speak out from a crisis that is not yet over.

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