

The Experience of Being Injured: An Otherwise Perspective

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Abstract: Through myth, history and memory we strive to represent to ourselves humanity's traumatic sufferings. Myth, history and memory, personal and societal, are the storehouses for accounts of traumatic injury and its aftermath, and our efforts at redress and retribution through or outside of culturally determined juridico-political systems. Thus stories are made that perpetuate and comply with established cultural norms, and our experiences of injury, retribution and forgiveness are contained within established frameworks, both secular and religious

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In this paper I would like to suggest an otherwise framing of accounts of traumatic injury, following Judith Butler's identification of '...the moral predicament that emerges as a consequence of being injured' (2003: 59). The moral predicament common to anyone who has ever been injured is the quite natural desire for redress and retribution, and the conflicting moral need, often unrecognised, to avoid exchanging the role of victim for that of perpetrator by acting on that retributive desire. As Butler observes, the desire for retribution can be overwhelming, and thoroughly understandable, however, as the Mahatma also observed, an eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind. Another way of dealing with the consequences of harm must be found if the cycle of injury is to be broken.

Perhaps our most powerful stories, the stories that are most frequently recorded and remembered by humanity, are stories of injury of some kind, and its consequences, individually, collectively and generationally. In this paper I would like to start a conversation about the perhaps unacknowledged and often only partially recognised circumstances in and from which myth, history and memory are constructed, circumstances that have a powerful influence upon the content of our rememberings, and our understanding and interpretation of them.

Butler's moral predicament, then, is the tension and conflict between resentment and the desire for commensurate retribution on the one hand, and the moral need not to become a perpetrator of injury on the other. To accomplish revenge, the victim has no choice but to view the perpetrator as a means to an end, the end in this case being the satisfaction of the desire for revenge. This reduction of a human being to merely a means to an end is what has allowed the original injury to be inflicted. It is very difficult, as philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum and Emmanuel Levinas have frequently observed, to inflict injury on the other if we recognise the common vulnerability and humanity we share as

embodied beings. Butler's moral predicament reveals itself to be complex and challenging for a victim. As well as being harmed in the first place, the victim now has these ethical and moral matters to consider if an on-going cycle of violence is to be avoided. Myth, history, and memory are bulging with sagas of on-going, cyclical violence in which the recognition of the humanity of the other is continually suspended, or entirely absent, in order that what is felt as justified revenge can be enacted.

The urge to act and the urge to refrain from acting create a disturbing conflict between opposing desires. This tension creates a site of great intensity. It is the site Butler calls 'the region of the un-willed' (2003: 58). That is, injury has come upon me against my own volition. Through injury, I have been thrust into this region of the un-willed. It is from just this traumatic and unpromising site that Butler argues '...a model of ethical capaciousness...' (2003: 60) might emerge. This model of ethical capaciousness, she continues: '...understands the pull of the claim, and resists the pull at the same time, providing a certain ambivalent gesture as the action of ethics itself' (ibid: 60). That is, on the one hand we are experiencing the suffering that comes as a consequence of being harmed, and on the other, we are experiencing the tension of holding the opposing demands of revenge, and deciding not to act on that desire for revenge.

The ensuing ambivalence is a signifier of the presence of the abject, for ambivalence is one of abjection's characteristics. It is interesting to note that Butler speaks of the *ambivalent* gesture being *the action of ethics itself*, and that ambivalence is one of the characteristics of Kristeva's theories of the abject. I will briefly explore this at first blush, unlikely connection between abjection and ethics.

The experience of injury is always traumatic to some degree. It is an experience that catapults one out of the everyday, an experience that indeed ruptures the every day, breaking boundaries that have, up to the point of the trauma, been assumed to be inviolable, if indeed they have ever considered at all. '...the incandescent states of a boundary-subjectivity that I have called abjection, is the crying-out theme of suffering-horror,' Kristeva writes (1982: 141). The abject is the place where meaning collapses, the abject '...disturbs identity, system and order...it does not respect borders, positions, rules...' she explains (ibid: 5). The abject is experiential: it resists mediation. The abject, it can be argued, is untranslatable: one can know it only through feeling, physical and emotional. Attempts at representation must always fall short.

There's a general acknowledgement that certain situations are beyond representation, that is, beyond the capacity of language and imagination to contain. How does one adequately represent the horror of mass murder and genocide; how does one adequately represent the terrible suffering of an abused infant? Myth, history and memory are crammed with inadequately represented accounts of suffering and horror, of the abject, of un-willed injuries. The fact that horrors continue in the world, virtually unabated, is testament to our general inability to adequately represent them, and to resist retributive action, whether on the individual or the societal scale.

However, the site of the un-willed and the abject is not the only site to which we gain entry through extraordinary events. The philosopher Kant describes '...the awakening of a feeling of a super-sensible faculty within us...' (2008) that is brought about by tremendous upheaval, by coming face to face with events of such magnitude that our minds cannot fully comprehend them, and our imaginations quail in the face of them.

This, I suggest, is the site of the sublime. It is generally assumed that the abject and the sublime are oppositional, the one having to do with horror, the other with joyous transcendence. But they have in common a quality that is beyond the human capacity for representation. Both are approached through extraordinary, boundary transgressing events, both require of us a super-sensible faculty that is not required by the everyday, a faculty that by its very nature breaks us open to previously unknown experiences, for better or for worse.

Greatness and magnitude are characteristics of the sublime. Great, not in the sense of terrific, or good, as we commonly use the word, but in the sense of being too massive to be contained within language, in the sense of an enormity that exceeds our ability to describe and portray. The sublime is, like the abject, a site of ambivalence and contains within it the conflicting feelings of joy and fear, delight and terror, creating, like the abject, a tension of opposites. Like the abject, the sublime is unknowable. It is a place of previously unimagined and unimaginable possibility. It is the place where known meaning collapses, and as a consequence, the new may emerge, indeed must emerge if the experience is to be survived.

For example, in contemporary myth, history and memory, the events of September 11, which involved the destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York and the loss of thousands of lives, was controversially represented by some commentators as horror pushed to the point of sublime beauty. Karlheinz Stockhausen famously, or infamously was reported in the New York Times as having described 9/11 as

...the greatest work of art there has ever been. That minds could achieve something in one act...there are people who are so concentrated on one performance, and then 5000 people are chased into the after-life...this is the greatest possible work of art in the entire cosmos (cited in Tommasini, 2001).

Stockhausen was clearly approaching the events of 9/11 from an aesthetic, and not an ethical position.

Whether one agrees with, or is outraged by these sentiments that conflate art with terror, their expression can be attributed to the magnitude, the greatness, the enormity, of the event. It was, and remains, incomprehensible. No one has come anywhere near an adequate representation of it in any medium. The spectacle of such shocking and unexpected destruction, of skyscrapers brought to smoking rubble by aircraft flown by fanatical perpetrators exceeded anything thus far known in the American homeland. The magnitude of the event somehow took us beyond horror into a kind of super horror that defied our established boundaries of what we had understood as horror up to that day.

(I wish to note here that I am in no way suggesting that the terrorist attacks on the USA are more tragic or worthy of our horrified response than attacks anywhere else in the world, no matter by whom or on whom they are perpetrated).

It is just such an extremity of horror that can be considered artistically sublime, in the sense of the sublime as exceeding known representation. The sublime as transgressive of all known boundaries. The sublime as that terrifying tipping point when the magnitude of the event leaves us unable to accept the evidence of our senses. There is

an awe-full exhilaration, a terror that rises in us and carries us way beyond the everyday, that is evoked by a spectacle of horror on such a scale. People did attempt to find expression for these feelings: the destruction of the towers was described as visually stunning, awe-inspiring, and so on. There was a terrible beauty in the stark images of steel girders tilting in the smoke-filled air like the broken teeth of fallen giants.

Any representation of those events as beautiful was and remains deeply offensive to many people. The idea of finding beauty in images that signify mass slaughter is difficult to accept. It can be misunderstood as admiration, where decency and ethics demand that there can be none. And beauty is deeply linked with goodness and truth in Western culture. And yet, as I watched over and over again the images from those events through the days and weeks that followed I felt, with a great deal of guilt and shame, shaken each time by their terrible beauty.

Stockhausen elaborated his perspective as follows: '...some artists also try to cross the boundaries of what could ever be possible or imagined, to wake us up, to open another world for us' (Tommasini, 2001). This observation is perhaps the crux of the matter. In the crossing of forbidden boundaries we gain entry into the country of the abject, and the land of the sublime. Kant's super-sensible faculty is awoken within us through such transgressions, and we enter an unimagined world. There was a sense in which many of us whose lives had so far been free of political terrorism, felt as if the world had been profoundly and irrevocably changed for us by the events of 9/11, and that we had entered an unimagined universe. The 9/11 terrorists thrust us into this other world, where we remain, and now we must dwell in it as best we can because there is no going back. This is how I understand Stockhausen's observations, though I am unable to replace the word terrorist with the word artist.

In such a world, ethics can be and must be revisioned. Butler suggests that '...it may be that the very way we respond to injury offers the chance we have to become human' (2003: 58). That is, it is in the region of un-willed harm that we suffer that we might discover our humanity. Perhaps our humanity resides in how we resolve the moral predicament that faces us as a consequence of being injured. Perhaps in realising the ethical capaciousness that allows us to refuse to become retributive perpetrators, we make this new world into which we have been thrust by injury, a safer world.

The discourses of trauma, which are inevitably abject, and the discourses of the sublime can be seen to intersect in these extreme events. It was not uncommon for those who had suffered injury, or lost loved ones through the events of 9/11 to say, when interviewed, that they did not wish to take revenge against the perpetrators, that the horror must stop. Perhaps in doing so, they validated Butler's theory that the experience of injury can indeed catapult one into an entirely other level of experience from which a new ethical capaciousness may emerge.

This is not to recommend the perpetrating and the suffering of trauma. However it is to observe that in our current evolution, trauma would seem to be a prime entry point into an intensified consciousness. Therefore, how we represent trauma in myth, history and memory, can be seen as crucial to our continuing ethical development. For example, in Australia there is an on-going history war, a battle as to the 'truth' of the circumstances of the first white settlement, or invasion, depending on your position. Significant

histories have long been omitted from these accounts: the oral histories of Indigenous Australians, for example, and the experiences of women in those early days. There is a great deal of myth, history and the recorded memories of some of those who were present, but it is the voices that have been silenced by selective recording that speak most eloquently, most startlingly. In itself, this silencing is an unethical act with serious ramifications. To silence those who have endured traumatic injury is to further abuse and injure them: myth, history and memory all too frequently, in their silences, in their gaps and their avoidances, abuse and injure. The Foucauldian question must always be asked: how did these accounts come to be written? Under what conditions and circumstances were these myths, memories and histories constructed, and by whom? These are profoundly ethical questions about representation and who is making it. What for Stockhausen is a sublime work of art, is for the families and friends who lost loved ones, and everyone who suffered trauma as a result of 9/11, an event that cannot be in any way regarded as sublime. But is Stockhausen's perspective less true? Is there perhaps a great mystery at the heart of his observations, a transgressive mystery that it is important for us to come to grips with in our myths, histories and memories of the events of that day? I only raise these questions: I haven't found the answers.

Cultural studies theorist Joanna Zylińska suggests that

...the discourses of trauma and the sublime...come together in their attempt to describe the difficulty of, or struggle with, representation – a struggle that profoundly transforms the self's experience of itself and opens it to ethics' (2005: 68).

This statement of Zylińska's seems to correspond with Butler's region of the un-willed, of unsought injury, a region where the discourse is necessarily traumatic, and from which can emerge an ethical capaciousness. What both writers seem to be suggesting is that it is from this site of the sublime, and the traumatic/object, an ethics of responsibility to and for other might emerge. Perhaps there is some connection between the awesome beauty Stockhausen saw in the smoking ruins of the World Trade Centre, and the moral and ethical beauty of the emergence from traumatic injury of a kind of forgiveness that ends the cyclical violence that so much of our history, myth and memory consist of and perhaps, in some instances, perpetuate. Such an ethics, if humanity was able to embrace them, might prevent the whole world being blinded.

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