

Research Article

Silvia Pierosara*

From Narrative Redemptions to the Ethical Value of Micrological Reparations

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Abstract: In this article, I intend to critique a particular understanding of reparative narratives that seek, at all costs, to reconcile and move beyond evil and suffering, through a redemptive claim that ideologically aims for coherence, unity and the reconstruction of a totality which fails to give due credit to the fragment and obscures other ethically significant potentialities and meanings inherent in reparative narratives. The article is organised as follows: in the introduction, I distinguish between “restorative” and “reparative” narratives. In the first section, I trace the meaning of ‘restore’ back to a form of repair that I intend to critique. I then bring into light a concept of “reparative narrative”, which has considerable ethical potential. In the second section, I further explore the characteristics that a reparative narrative must possess, distancing myself from both the defeatist view that every narrative is structurally doomed to reconcile at all costs and the idea that narrative can solve all problems. In the final section, I provide examples to illustrate what constitutes a good reparative narrative. Ultimately, it will become clear that effective reparative storytelling helps build resistance by transforming past evil and suffering into new contexts of meaning without erasing them. It enables us to temporarily displace ourselves from the experience of evil by facilitating the sharing of experiences and allowing us to imagine lives free from domination.

Keywords: narrative ethics; narrative repair; micrological reparation; displacement; resistance

1 Introduction

The aim of this contribution is to evaluate the ethical value of narrative practices, with a focus on their hypothetical reparative effect and quality. This can only be achieved if certain terms are clearly defined within the scope of this article. In particular, the meaning of “narrative practices” must be clarified and freed from any ambiguity, and the difference between “reparative” and “restorative” must be explained. Once these terms have been clarified, it will be necessary to explain how these issues concern ethics. In this article, the term ‘narrative practices’ refers to any relational situation in which people recount their experiences in a chronological and logical order, with the aim of conferring meaning to life experiences. Such meaning is usually linked to a sense of entirety, wholeness and integrity, meant as integration of evil into history, in a way that is close to justification.

This capacity is rooted in the human need to make sense of experience. Narratives are sense-making tools in that they link different – even divergent – facts and events as if they were naturally connected, configuring them *ex post* and organising them according to temporal and causal schemes. This gives facts and events order and meaning, justifying and representing them as meaningful, even if they are not finalistically organised.

This minimal definition of narrative practices can be traced back to at least three dimensions:

a. An anthropological need to alleviate anxiety through reassuring patterns of meaning, which could be described as a technique of domesticating the external world; b. An ethical reflection that emerges when considering the inherently relational nature of narrative practices. This takes into account that even the relationship with oneself has narrative characteristics, for example in the form of interior dialogue and confession; c.

*Corresponding author: Silvia Pierosara, University of Macerata, Macerata, 62100, Italy, E-mail: s.pierosara@unimc.it

A social and political consideration related to the capacity of storytelling to represent, care for and transmit meaningful narratives across generations. The main issue here is the relationship between stories and truth. Taken together, these elements suggest that human beings are drawn to narrative explanations because of their reassuring nature, particularly due to their “bonding power.”

Assuming this broad definition of narratives, it becomes clear that they seem to have an inherent capacity to link things together, even if they are not explicitly or automatically related to reparative or restorative dynamics. It is by virtue of this capacity that narrative practices can be used to repair and reconstruct fragmented personal, communitarian, social and political ties. This linking capacity is necessary; it is an enabling – but not sufficient – condition for their reparative use. Narratives repair to the extent that they link and keep different elements together. Before proceeding, it is worth distinguishing between reparation and restoration. The main difference lies in the outcome of the reparative or restorative narrative act: “repair” is future-oriented, it takes place when something is not functioning as usual and needs to be repaired for future use. On the other hand, “restoration” involves returning to the conditions experienced prior to the rupture of what needs to be restored. Therefore, restoration is impossible, as it would involve travelling back in time and making the irreversible reversible. As a matter of fact, to restore often implies to reintegrate, to come back to a pristine whole, be it a personal or a communitarian identity. To repair, on the other hand, means to accept that not everything can be reintegrated, assimilated, reconciled in a whole, as if what happened could be cancelled. It means accepting the fragmented experience and is not necessarily aimed at reconciling, but it is a way of taking care, of letting differences coexist, without keeping toxic bonds alive by restoring them. To repair also means to take care of the irreparability by consoling and healing through a distancing from suffering, a provisional detachment from evil through narrative imagination.

Restorative uses of narratives are characterised by their attempt to recover a lost unity, a state in which the whole – unbroken and unharmed – can once again be regarded as such. In this sense, to narrate means to synthesise and reconcile, to hold everything together, to integrate evil, which is considered solely as a negative element to be inserted into a positive continuum. From this perspective, every relationship must be maintained, healed, and restored for the benefit of the whole. According to this view, the idea of a meaningful ending and a plot that nonetheless has a meaningful outcome contributes to the rise of restorative narratives. Such narratives regard themselves as capable of integrating – if not redeeming – the evil that has been done or that has occurred.

A narrative that instead aims to repair, to make amends, operates on a much smaller scale. It has an impact on everyday life, without claiming to redeem anything, openly criticising the idea of a reintegration that is always possible, which would ultimately normalise evil and injustice. In the face of pain, to repair means to care for, to support the other person, to help them deactivate, albeit temporarily, that harm, precisely through the narrative dimension, which becomes a refuge as well as a form of reparation. In this sense, to make amends means to care without necessarily having to heal or restore a lost unity.

As a consequence, the daily act of narrative repairing consists in an exchange of experiences; rather than focusing on one’s own story in search of salvation or redemption. It helps to alleviate the pain, at least temporarily, by inhabiting a shared imaginative realm capable of distracting one from suffering and redirecting the sufferer’s attention towards a different place to be cultivated.

Clearly, this is not the place to refer to restorative justice,¹ which, in any case, to some extent, can fall into the trap of having to restore negative relationships at all costs, or even of establishing new ones between victims and perpetrators, simply because everyone must be integrated into the social fabric, without allowing any form of deviation, in the name of a reconciliation that leaves little room for divergence or the acceptance of an unbridgeable distance. My critique of restorative narratives follows the definition of the term provided by Boym in relation to nostalgia,² whereby restorative nostalgia is nothing more than a desperate attempt to turn back the

1 The author of this article shares the restorative justice perspective insofar as it moves away from a punitive approach. However, certain forms of restorative justice, particularly those that are overly institutionalised, risk imposing a single notion of ‘normality’ and deviance. They also risk viewing the resolution of conflict as always being the more ethical option than distancing oneself from it. This approach can impose certain values as automatically ‘superior’ to others.

2 Cf. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xviii.

clock and restore previous living conditions. On the other hand, reparative narrative manages to keep its distance from the all-encompassing and necessarily reconciliatory temptation. It is a way of making room for divergence, of treating the harm done or suffered as something that cannot be redeemed and which can be faced together in solidarity, by exchanging experiences of resistance, helping one another to temporarily abandon the pain through narrative gestures that help to shift attention, bring about displacement, and re-signify the past – not to erase it, but to deactivate or at least reduce its capacity to cause harm.

Repairing means coming to terms with the rupture and acknowledging that the condition after the reparative intervention will be completely new compared to the pre-rupture condition. What can be ruptured? This question can be rephrased by asking what can be disintegrated. Everything that is living and transient – and nonetheless meaningful to us – is vulnerable to injury and to the threat of disintegration, ruin and the “crisis of presence.”³ This means admitting that everything that makes human beings feel at home in the world is vulnerable and subject to evil, even when it is transformed into a habit. Everything needs a constant repair in order to keep the world alive, its relations, its environment and the buried history of the oppressed.

Therefore, in this article, the concept of “narrative repair” will be preferred, which intervenes when damage is produced “among us,” threatening or disintegrating the possibility of making sense of our experiences and relationships, and relying on them. From this angle, it will be possible to understand what it means to change or redeem the past, rather than asking how, or if, we can return to the moment immediately before the rupture.

2 Assessing the Ethical Implications of Reparation

The distinction between “restorative” and “reparative”, between “restore” and “repair,” will be used in the remainder of this article to distinguish between good and bad practices of narrative repair, associating the latter with restorative practices, for the reasons set out above.

The distinction between different types of reparative narratives has fundamental ethical implications, both from a theoretical and a practical perspective. In particular, a reparative narrative that necessarily aims at reconciliation as a human form of redemption would compel people to integrate evil at all costs, almost justifying or normalising it, and would propose an idea of narrative identity in which coherence becomes a value,⁴ with practical consequences for those who, on the other hand, live differently and had non-linear life experiences. As a consequence, the coherent and linear narrative form becomes a moral yardstick that can inhibit, rather than strengthen, the exchange and narrative sharing of experiences. Furthermore, the underlying conception of identity proves central: in the case of restorative narration, which believes in integration and reconciliation at all costs, it is the “identical” that prevails, in the sense that all stories must be integrated into a single narrative, in which identity is fixed and coherent, so that the past is viewed as a reservoir of identities to which one must conform.

To assess the ethical implications of reparative actions (and in this sense narratives are also actions),⁵ it is useful to trace them back to the dialectic between the instituting and the instituted. If reparative dynamics are immediately institutionalised and fixed in standard procedures, they risk becoming meaningless. The dangers and risks of restorative narratives are related precisely to this aspect, which is sedimented in institutionalized contexts of narrative exchange. This can be seen as a way of overcoming conflicting versions of the same events and of denying the influence of historical contexts and relations on the constitution of subjectivity and practices. Institutionalised practices of reparation, or, we should say, restoration, often use narratives to enable everyone involved in the rupture to express themselves and facilitate recognition, but always with the aim of reconciling and tracing the difference back to an integrated identity. Conversely, there is an instituting sense to reparative practices, which indicates not much the process of institutionalisation of reparation and reparative narratives, but rather recognises or considers the act of reparation as the institution of new modes of relations, social bonds,

3 Cf. De Martino, *Crisis of Presence and Religious Reintegration*, 437.

4 For a thoughtful critique of narrative coherence, cf. Hyvärinen et al., *Beyond Narrative Coherence*.

5 For a psychological focus on ‘narrative repair’, cf. Lindemann-Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*.

spaces and places. This instituting power is fundamental from an ethical standpoint, since it contributes to put into discussion the institutionalised practices of restorative narratives, and helps unmasking the idea that narrative practices can be institutionalised and serve to restore previous bonds, or enforce already existing relational ties.

This instituting power is ethically fundamental because it works with fragments, objects and stories from the past that already exist somewhere, reinterpreting them in a new light and giving new meaning to the same pieces of a mosaic. The ethical importance of reparation does not merely lie in repairing a damaged reality or relationship, which may not always be worth maintaining or repairing, but rather in tracing actions and events back to their social, economic, political and cultural context, and in recognising their reciprocal influence. This allows us to better understand the past and to give past events the possibility of redemption through their new function and their relationship with the other elements of a narrative. What is new can be instituted through the “use” of ancient pieces of history, identity, injustices and damages produced and reproduced. This power is closely linked to the dynamics of recognition: each recognition necessarily implies a misrecognition, particularly when the ‘objective correlate’ of recognition is a set of features ascribed to the subject and considered unchangeable. Insisting on establishing the truth once and for all by appealing to the facts can indeed become a trap, since each fact is always already implicated in a web of relations and cannot be simplistically ascribed to the responsibility of a single subject in relation to others and history. If the truth of a rupture is to be found – and the causes and consequences are to be clearly identified – this identification process is not always defensible, because it allocates responsibilities and necessitates an avowal or at least an admission.

It is crucial to overcome rigid distinctions by reconsidering the objectivity of facts. This is not to lend credence to relativism, but to foster a dialogic model of truth. This model assumes that the idea of facts and data being completely objective and independent of context and interactions is a dangerous illusion. Repairing this would require the use of a recognitional model that does not function as an identification tool. Ultimately, this tool aims to “capture” and hierarchise, splitting people into “good” and “bad,” “victim” and “executioner,” and putting the latter in a position of waiting and asking to be forgiven. This approach to reparation only works with the dark side of recognition. It presupposes that repairing something means restoring “normality,” and accepting that the values by which actions are assessed and punished often centre on an exclusively individualistic standpoint on responsibility.

However, if it is never possible to restore, it is not always possible or fair to repair relationships, since some of them are harmful and dangerous, and may even threaten the physical integrity of those involved. Reparation is not an end in itself; it becomes valuable when relationships are worth repairing, when past events remain unaccounted for and silenced, and when the need to establish facts does not automatically preclude the possibility of reinterpreting them. Repair cannot be confined to institutionalised dynamics managed from above, as if the willingness to reopen the past were an obligation and the transparency of truth were a given. On the contrary, good reparation respects opacity and is a patient and constant process of discernment.

In fact, reparation through narratives starts by asking which relationships are worth repairing and which are not, and then explores ways of repairing that resemble the patient work of sewing, discovering affinities, taking care and leaving room without avoiding conflict, disagreement and distance. Using things, facts, events and actions to create new configurations implies admitting that repairing is an act of both bonding and unbonding. In order to reweave a fabric, first it is necessary to recognise the importance of unraveling toxic connections, or facts, from their contexts and to transpose them in other, totally different environments, unleashing their capacity to signify differently. Such a process can be disturbing. Things and events do not simply pass by; they can always be revisited.

Pre-imposed and institutionalised models of narrative repair do not allow for the informal and bottom-up capacity of human beings to interact, encounter, disagree and live within ambiguity, which blurs the contours of identities and fosters the emergence of liminal spaces, places and times. These spaces, places and times can develop new ways of repairing that are far removed from institutionalised practices and from the spontaneity of rhetoric appealing to immediate human feelings. Unbonding means repairing and sometimes requires disruption as a radical new beginning. Considered in this way, repairing is an inherently ethical process that gives meaning

to forms of life together. In fact, repairing means reusing things instead of producing something new; it requires patience and the courage to tell and listen to the truth without fiction, shortcuts or self-deception.

Repair is a response to – and a way of contrasting – the devastation of progress (an antidote to its automatism). Repair is a microscopic act, opposed to the triumphant history of rubble. In this sense, repair has an “ecological” value: feeling what is alive in the world and maintaining it as such. Once again, here repair seems to institute the new by using old materials, damaged threads and discarded fabrics, allowing them to emerge as holders of new meanings for themselves and their past. Things and objects carry a history of how they were produced and used at that time. From old objects, one can derive new ways of production, utilisation and creation.

Understood in this way, repair does not impose oblivion or forgiveness. It does not trigger the debt/credit dynamic again. It does not sacrifice or force experiences of disclosure or the exchange of intimate memories. It means exercising criticism towards the unavoidability of progress and the programmed obsolescence of things and relationships. By mending, one can also create. Therefore, repairing can be interpreted as a regenerative practice that contrasts the violence of progress, which always produces victims, waste and the multiplication and dispersion of entities and meaning rather than their intensification. Several authors have suggested that care can be defined as a series of practices aimed at maintaining and repairing rather than at throwing away and replacing.

In this sense, ethically good reparative practices are inherently ecological, as they save time and materials while breathing new life into things, objects, relationships, and heritage. This reference to ecology is closely linked to a firm critique of history as a triumphant path towards the future, regardless of the ruins left by progress. To invert this forward-running attitude, it is necessary to slow down, come to terms with imperfection and unaccomplishment, and be able to recognise value, promote it, and create it through pieces of the past left alone, detached, silenced, hidden. This re-emergence can help to understand the exact meaning of the things that have gone by.

This is the meaning of repair promoted in this paper. It serves to criticise, compare and contrast with another meaning of repair, which signifies a standardised, institutionalised, forced and constrained process, embedded in a sacrificial dynamic that only works if the victim and perpetrator are clearly identifiable. Furthermore, it becomes yet another automatism that exists in isolation, a protocol to follow without much enthusiasm, based on a misguided perception of the truth. This in turn implies blaming those who do not know how to start again, forgive and embrace the gift of a “second chance.”

Even in this case, repair is linked to recognition, as it works with rigid identities that are initially defined by fixed and unchangeable characteristics or actions. Such reparation is too similar to restoration and is dangerously close to imagined identities, forced assimilation, extorted confessions and an ethically problematic plea for culpability and sacrifice. Reparation is good when it is an instituting praxis, which risks deteriorating when it is institutionally organised, managed and imposed. Such instituting praxis needs to be anchored in a deeply ecological sensitivity, not only towards places, but also towards times and epochs.

As previously argued, here the term narrative is used in the sense of a compositional technique that presents events and actions as if they were closely linked from a chronological and logical viewpoint. Narratives can bond different elements, situations and times together. In this sense, they are similar to sewing, which joins different – or even opposing – fabrics together regardless of their differences.

This bonding feature has long been recognised by authors such as Ricoeur, who referred to narratives as capable of synthesising the “heterogeneous,”⁶ and extensively discussed three types of mimesis – prefiguration, refiguration and configuration⁷ – to demonstrate this compositional capacity with regard to the past, present and future.

This quasi-natural feature of narratives poses a significant challenge to their use as reparative practice: a seemingly overly automated process that cannot be viewed as an established, imposed and rigid practice. Firstly, it adheres to a reconciliatory paradigm that assumes synthesis and unification as ethically superior to dispersion, disagreement, distance and difference. Secondly, narrative repair appears to necessitate the obligation to tell the

⁶ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* vol. I, ix.

⁷ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* vol. I., 52–87.

truth or, worse, to possess comprehensive knowledge of what transpired, who is at fault, who is the victim, and who is to be condemned. Parties must confess their identity, their position within the relationship, as well as their responsibility for the rupture that occurred. Therefore, such a refusal of reparation presupposes the ascertainment of the truth and implies that facts are considered to be univocally understandable and detached from the relational, social and historical context in which they occurred.

From the perspective of practical ethics, this implies that there is no room for difference, for change, for uncertainty, or for non-conformity to certain standards. One remains fixated on an unrealistic notion of consistency. Furthermore, remaining on a practical level, it may happen that toxic relationships are considered, in any case, worthy of being repaired and reintegrated into the individual's life, since reconciliation must always prevail over separation, and this can have serious consequences for the psychological and even physical integrity of those involved. Finally, on a macro level, narrative reconciliation, especially when it involves the need to establish the truth, forces people to adhere to a single, unambiguous version of events, even when these overlook important narrative threads that might challenge mainstream narratives. In practical terms, this means imposing a truth and, once again, forcing people to overcome trauma and come to terms with the past in the only way deemed correct.

On the other hand, a good reparative narrative does not force anyone to tell their story; it encourages fragmentation and does not regard it as a problem. It does not normalise harm, but allows the narrative dimension to act as a form of distancing, healing the pain by comforting rather than erasing or redeeming. It does not regard coherent identity as an absolute value, but allows difference to emerge, interpreting it also as deferring, stepping outside oneself, distracting oneself, and taking a break from the all-encompassing immediacy of pain. Good reparative narrative is open to the future and helps to untangle relationships that may jeopardise a person's dignity and integrity. It favours – rather than criticises – non-linearity, since this indicates a complex relationship with temporality, one that is not necessarily progressive.

Finally, from the perspective of public ethics and memory, reparative narrative acts collectively towards the past by pluralising it, not redeeming it but keeping it “present,” that is, by transforming it into something else without making it possible to forget it – not so much to redeem it – but to carry it along, knowing that it may always return but also avoiding its re-emergence in the future. To repair means to dismantle, break into pieces, even before reconstructing something completely new from those very pieces, something that bears the mark of a past freed from its own capacity to cause harm once more.

3 Finding the Way Through Different Modes of Narrative Repair

The distinction that has been made so far requires further examination with regard to the status of narratives, particularly with respect to their “quasi-natural” tendency towards resolution and reconciliation due to some structural features of the plots. Exploring their characteristics, albeit not from a strictly narratological perspective, is useful for situating reparative narratives within this complex landscape.⁸ On the one hand, narratives can be considered the quintessence of storytelling, since they impose order on disorder, reconciliation on disagreement, and attempt to modify the past by denying its real development and substituting it with something more acceptable, less disturbing and “normal.” Therefore, anyone who sees narratives just as stories – which can also mean lies – thinks that each narrative is too closely linked to some imposed frameworks of meaning, which are themselves imposed on reality. In this way, reality does not make any sense in itself. Affabulation involves the improvement and erasure of the world's brutality and the violence of relationships, favouring a conciliatory, concordist and normalising approach to rupture, damage and evil. As a consequence, if this interpretation of narratives is taken to the extreme, it implies blind faith in the objectivity of facts, which do not require any ameliorative interpretation and must be presented in all their brutality.

⁸ Just to mention a few examples, beyond the famous Strawson, “Against Narrativity,” cf. Gotschall, *The Story Paradox*; Rasch, *Against Storytelling*; on the other side, cf. Fletcher, *Storythinking*.

Similarly pernicious is the blind faith in the ability of narratives to accurately depict events and simply allow what is already there to emerge. Narratives and their reparative quality are overlooked when oscillating between these two alternatives: radical skepticism and blind faith. Either narratives are a total invention because evil is overwhelming, or they faithfully reflect a positive reality. Between radical pessimism and naïve optimism, a completely different way of interpreting reparative narratives is missed. Subsequently, any ecological and ethical reparation is precluded.

This third meaning is quite distant from linearity, coherence and progressivity. It refers to narratives not only in their affabulatory and troubling features, but also considers them as fragmentary and respectful of silence. In other words, some narratives privilege fragmentation rather than integrity; incoherence rather than coherence; immediate disclosure rather than respect of silences and uncertainties; humility rather than the conviction to hold the truth. They are not hermeneutically violent and are not attached to rigid identity, action and interpretation schemas. This is possible if one starts to have less trust in the mere existence of facts, as if they were not enmeshed in a web of meanings, practices and difficulties. On the other hand, one must come to terms with the idea that facts do not exist, since narratives create and modify them at will. Entrapped between the Scylla of affabulation and the Charybdis of hyper-narrativity, narratives are therefore misunderstood and dismissed, since they are considered either ideological or always true, even though the truth does not exist.

The main question is as follows: can one renounce all narratives simply because of their bad reputation as affabulations, which not only enriches, but also counterfactualises reality? And, as a corollary, can one use narratives at will simply because they can adjust reality without taking it into account? In order to identify the criteria that distinguish good narrative reparations from bad ones, this point is crucial. If they are considered only as instruments of self-deception, as affabulatory practices used to embellish a cruel and meaningless reality, it is clear that their reparative trait serves this embellishment. In this case, it is reasonable to discard them as ideological tools. Many narratives are certainly based on lies, bad interpretations and bad faith, and tend to embellish reality to make it more palatable. However, it is also true that narratives can be a way of sharing experiences, exploring new ways of life and coping with suffering. This involves acknowledging ruptures, disagreements and losses without erasing or ignoring them, but rather making room for them in our lives and neutralising their destructive power.

However, considering narratives only as affabulatory tools is as dangerous as considering them the only way to grasp and communicate meaning and reality. In this case, there would be no facts, only stories that do not just configure them, but allow them to emerge. Conversely, considering narratives as the only reality graspable by humans is akin to being trapped in a cage. This ambivalent trait of the use of narratives can be traced back to the multiple ways of narrating, as will be shown in the next section.

Nowadays, both tendencies are equally pernicious. While the risks of the latter have long been analysed and criticised as a postmodernist proliferation of micro-bubbles of narrative truth, the risks of the former attitude are far more prevalent. They correspond to the ideology of objectivity and facts, and to the “fair and right” way of thinking and learning, as if there were only one way to think and find truth. Beyond its philosophical implications, this assumption is misleading, since it does not consider the interrelation between knowledge and credence. More dangerously, it overlooks the risks of ‘objective’ methodologies of knowledge, which all too often become instruments that justify and perpetuate credence and ‘fabula,’ rather than instruments that facilitate the collective construction and discovery of truth, as Zupančič recently observed. She writes: “What the disavowal is about could, rather, be defined as follows: I exercise my cognitive abilities, and abundantly so, in order not to *think*. I’m smarter than to think. I know better than to think.”⁹ Knowledge is always intertwined with credence and can often be used to avoid thinking.

Narration can repair relationships, ties and bonds, especially when it does not explicitly intend to re-establish a unique truth, to restore a whole, and, to the same extent, when it distances itself from the automatism of a teleologically oriented meaning. This is because narratives have the capacity to connect events, actions and interpretations of facts in unexpected ways, reconfiguring the meaning of an event by including it in totally new and unexplored constellations. This occurs when narrative repair does not take itself too seriously, abandoning

⁹ Zupančič, *Disavowal*, 70.

the notion of reparation as redemption. Indeed, repair can be considered as the human and inherent way to redeem painful or traumatic experiences, because it provides a second chance and illuminates different forms of life. In this sense, repair has a prefigurative capacity as well as a refigurative one, even when this is entirely counterfactual. Narration can repair by transferring past events or ruptures to totally different horizons, backgrounds, meanings and interpretative claims. Therefore, it repairs by giving new life to old experiences rather than cancelling them out. Narration can repair things when it does not synthesise, when it projects a possible elsewhere onto the background, or when it becomes a “deliberate practice of the disparate.” This expression was formulated by Michel Foucault in his dense contribution, “Self-Writing,” and indicates the process of constructing the self – or “subjectivation” – through the practice of becoming a subject by means of stories, examples and good practices that contribute to shaping our identity through the act of writing. The *hypomnemata* are the ancestors of the notebook and serve to record external experiences and events in order to emulate them. Foucault defines this practice as follows: “While it also enables one to counteract dispersal, the writing of the *hypomnemata* is also (and must remain) a regular and deliberate practice of the disparate.”¹⁰ This Foucauldian idea, which he finds in Latin authors such as Seneca, suggests that identities can be constructed, remodelled and composed through fragments found outside the self. Narrative repair involves assembling different pieces in new configurations that become part of us through practice. The movement here is from the outside to the inside, not vice versa: narratives do not reveal something pre-existing, but rather help to configure and build something new.

The reference to the disparate and the attempt to manage it through a regulated practice is the only freedom that humans can achieve. Michel de Certeau formulated similar ideas, as he linked narration to a tactical approach practised by those who cannot manage overall strategies and must create meaning through stories and the exchange of experiences to generate alternative meaning. This “practical science of the singular”¹¹ must be taken into account if we want to understand the nature of reparative narratives without reducing them to an immediately reconciliatory tool designed to absorb evil through forgiveness and self-sacrifice.

This reference proves that the mechanisms of bad faith, self-deception and the ideological and intentional cancellation of truth are not exclusively attributable to narratives and narrative thinking. Even if this aspect presents risks, this is because sometimes it seems to be inherent to thinking itself, which appears to have a, quasi-natural self-deceiving quality. Knowledge, in its Western and European form, can also be an instrument of deceit and is, at least partly, constituted by a dynamic or dialectic between avowal and disavowal, as the above-mentioned work by Zupančič proved the same tools that make one believe in something are used to make one ignore what has been discovered or learned. Therefore, distinguishing between ‘objective knowledge’ and narrative is insufficient to defend knowledge and truth. Conversely, it seems that investing in presumed objectivity to eradicate the falsehoods and deceptions inherent in narratives is a way of disavowing once again the inherently intermingled, situated, dialectical nature of knowledge. Often, the opposite is true: drawing on everyday narratives that arise from a deep need to share experiences helps to undermine the presumed “objectivity” of facts and data. In this sense, micro-narratives can have a significant emancipatory value. An example of this “tactical” use of narratives, to use an expression dear to Michel De Certeau, could be the practice of resistance and of creating different ideas of future and life in common. Narratives can become a practice of resistance and in this sense they have a reparative quality. De Certeau writes: “The formality of everyday practices indicated in these tales, which frequently reverse the relationships of power, and, like the stories of miracles, ensure the victory of the unfortunate in a fabulous, utopian space. This space protects the weapons of the weak against the reality of the established order. It also hides them from the social categories which ‘make history’ because they dominate it. And whereas historiography recounts in the past tense the strategies of instituted powers, these ‘fabulous stories’ offer their audience a repertory of tactics for future use.”¹²

The reparative nature of narration encompasses the “what” and the “how.” Reparation is another term for human redemption, without any transcendent and salvific entity guiding the process. There are narrative models and patterns that inherently possess a reparative quality because of their plea for a meaningful ending. Their

¹⁰ Foucault, “Self-Writing,” 212.

¹¹ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, vol. 2, 251.

¹² Cf. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 23.

linearity and final resolution of ruptures are part of the plot's mechanics. However, when this reparative quality becomes an automatism, it cannot avoid the critique according to which narrative repair is a consolatory form that derives its power from a process that does not allow people to think for themselves and simply leads to an end. Narration should not be reparative by definition: narrative practices can become automatised and habitual, losing their dimension of work, improvisation, eventfulness and concrete gestures of care. This happens when they substitute the "effort of meaning" with shortcuts and "storytelling," which seem able to create meaning by integrating, justifying and composing events into a whole that is automatically considered to be full of meaning.

Nevertheless, repairing and narrating are linked in other ways. Firstly, repairing often involves tedious gestures and rituals, and narration can be an effective antidote to this. According to Benjamin, for example, as it will be shown in the next section, the micrological practice of storytelling is a response to boredom, not an escape. More profoundly, it is a means of emancipating oneself from oppression and domination – albeit an uncertain and unguaranteed one: "meanest and shabbiest."¹³

Not all narratives are, by definition, naïve forms of sense-making that disavow the real conditions of the self and the world. Some narrative forms are very different from this model. There are also other ways of narratively repairing that favour the micrological act of exchanging experiences, living together and fostering solidarity bonds. These narratives do not express a tension towards an end, in the dual sense of aim and conclusion, nor they represent progress, amelioration or resolution. Rather, there is a micrological way of narrating that is attentive to detail and is not necessarily linear or coherent. It is not aimed at overcoming and absorbing the negative; rather, it is closer to a *pervagatio* than to a great construction. These are little, tiny narratives and retold stories which aim to give new life to small, forgotten episodes and stories. They could counteract and contrast the nonlinear path of reparative narratives. In what forms of life does micrologically reparative storytelling reside? In forms of life devoted to decentralisation and forgetting oneself – playfully and temporarily – and in forms of life accustomed to, so to speak, "cultivating the elsewhere." These forms of life do not claim to heal trauma, but rather teach how to live with it through constant, daily exercises in repair. Narrating trauma is an exercise in approximation, in the dual sense of drawing closer and being imprecise.

4 Ethically Good Narrative Reparations: Instead of a Conclusion

As the attentive reader will have noticed, the title of this final section reverses the terms used so far: here, we shall no longer be dealing solely with reparative narratives; rather, in order to explore the ethical implications of "repair" as an act that can be ethically defined and evaluated, we shall also consider the complementary flip-side of reparative narrative, which corresponds to narrative reparation. Such reversal is particularly meaningful if applied to the past, especially when it is painful or traumatic. There are moments in which the past is not the past, it assumes new significance in light of the present and still has many stories to tell. Reparative narratives contrast the unique story, or "monomyth,"¹⁴ as they allow difference and the possibility of disagreement to emerge without losing the power to repair, but rather employing it in completely different ways. Narrating can be reparative, but not when it tries to come to terms with the past in a linear way by considering it as something unavoidably gone that must necessarily be reintegrated and justified within a meaningful path. Therefore, reparative narratives cannot be at the service of progressive history; rather, they are reparative when they revisit lost stories and narratives from the past, disclosing the possibility of allowing them to live on in the present. In this way, they provide a respite from the pressures of progress, which make everything obsolete, interchangeable and destroyable. Narrative repair is therefore disparate and not easily institutionalised; it is a way of taking leave from a present that is reduced to an ordered series of facts. It enables us to de-realise the hyper-realism of resignation to brute, bare facts. Narrative repair dilutes the intensity of pain and allows the only possible form of repair to emerge. Ethically good narrative repair does not mean overcoming evil, but taking a rest, a pause, which is useful to distancing oneself and imagining one's own experiences, ruptures and wounds. Narrating repairs

¹³ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 402.

¹⁴ Cf. Campbell, *The Hero with Thousand Faces*, 1.

because it obscures things. It provides shelter, building dwellings, shells and nests of words and silences; it makes the world of fiction tangible and blurs its boundaries of “facts” and “data.” It is not the contrary to objectivity; rather, it is a way of seeing things in all their potential and in their narrow actuality.

This is the most we can do as humans. We cannot conceive of total absence; at best, we can visualise and materialise it. Similarly, human beings cannot conceive of an unavoidably gone past, since they constantly recreate it by repeating rupture and trauma. The past can return, especially the unknown past, in the search for human redemption and a second meaning that frees it from its wrongful use and suffering. Narrating does not save, it soothes. To completely reverse the sense of a good narrative reparation, three examples will be provided below: Walter Benjamin’s short novel, *The Handkerchief*, and his essay, *The Storyteller*; Ernst Bloch’s *Traces*; and a short reflection on Max Ernst’s graphic novel, “A Week of Kindness,” since the exact nature of reparation emerges in the latter through the recombination of materials that were previously included in false stories and exchanged for true ones.

In itself, narrating repairs, not eminently with respect to one’s own experience, which is called into question to the extent that others can contribute to alleviating the pain entailed in it. Moreover, narrating can help not to focus exclusively on the self by re-opening wounds. If it is intended to be too conciliatory, narrative repair can be more dangerous than resolute, because it creates and perpetuates illusions and falsehoods. However, narrative repair can also take other forms and have other meanings that do not confirm the existing reality, but instead imagine and prefigure completely different interpretations of the past. This also applies at the individual level, even though narrative repair is an ongoing activity rather than a one-time achievement. In his short novel, *The Handkerchief*, Benjamin associates the art of storytelling with repetitive activities that were boring and done together with others, thus providing an opportunity to exchange stories.

A good narrative repair is a gesture that is not aimed at redeeming with a healing claim, but rather at reinforcing the capacity to distance oneself, to stay with the trouble, to live with it and to stay in disagreement, rather than forcefully repairing things before taking the differences into account. Narrative repair is an ongoing gesture of caring for bonds, ties and communities. If a community is constantly committed to small and micrological repair, it may be less likely to experience major ruptures. It is a preventive activity rather than one carried out *ex post facto*. The author is a producer,¹⁵ and this also applies to the narration of experiences, not just literary ones. Furthermore, it is necessary to repeat gestures and feel bored in order to free the imagination. This means that narrative repair requires time and patience and can also be seen as a form of emancipation from constraints: the need and right to narrate are forms of reciprocal care.

Walter Benjamin’s micrological approach is not so far removed from Adorno’s call to recognise the ethical and political significance of the small and the microscopic. Firstly, it is in the particular, in the detail, that one can find the refutation of the triumphant and progressive narrative; it is in the remnants, the remains, the objects that preserve intact the past of pain, toil and suffering. Secondly, it is precisely from the minute and the everyday experience that one can begin to critique the existing order, of which they contain a significant trace. Applying this approach to narratives, a fragment is worthy of being told and heard: small stories are even more worthy than large ones, because they contain within themselves the pain of the defeated, the toil of daily life and the divergence that abandons the identical. Furthermore, micrology also allows for a recombinatory approach, insofar as it is always possible to reassemble the pieces of a mosaic to build something new and give new meaning to objects. The ethical value of micrology is also found in the way it repairs through narration, because it is precisely the small that requires constant care, just as the fragile and the vulnerable, and can be cared for through the word that evokes, draws near and pushes away, weaves relationships and builds bridges, and places the past into new configurations.

The micrological gaze and practices, therefore, help to repair the everyday facts, acts, and events, nurturing it through the narrative exchange of experiences, which repairs the world by enabling us to resist evil through bonds of solidarity. The micrological act of repair is wary of strong identities that appeal to a triumphant vision of history, which piles up rubble, only to then invoke the need to integrate evil at any cost, in order to aspire to wholeness. The micrological gaze itself is attentive to the divergent, to those who refuse to be assimilated or

¹⁵ Cf. Benjamin, “The Author as Producer.”

integrated, who do not fear conflict and are wary of any discourse that normalises suffering, demanding of those who experience it the effort to subordinate it to a hypothetical final reconciliation. Exchanging experiences means building resistance, imagining justice, engaging in an exercise of digression that is not merely aesthetic, but also ethical.

In his short novel, *The Handkerchief*, Benjamin highlights that in order to narrate people must be together. It is a form of life that accompanies humble work and jobs, as well as a way to resist pressure and poverty without resignation. He makes the protagonist of the story say: “It also realized: anyone who has never been bored cannot be a storyteller. Boredom, however, no longer has a place in our lives. The activities that were secretly and intimately connected with boredom are dying out. And hence a second reason the gift of storytelling is disappearing: people no longer weave or spin, make handicrafts or do woodwork while listening to stories. In short: there must be work, order, and subordination for stories to flourish.”¹⁶ A second reason, then, for the decline of storytelling is that people have ceased to weave and spin, tinker and scrape, while listening to stories. In short, if stories are to thrive, there must be work, order, and subordination.

Furthermore, narrating is the opposite of providing a precise account of events or informing people, because it always leaves open the possibility of reversing time and pain. Narrating repairs communities because this constant work of care and repair carried out through the exchange of experiences prevents us from delving into rupture. A good narrative repair is a corporeal gesture and also implies the cooperation of the body. It is so because the need to share experiences, practices and ways of life often emerges in contexts where one repeats gestures and experiences boredom, or even oppression and servitude. At first glance, narration appears to be an escape from monotony and a means of emancipation, but this is only possible if bodily activities are repetitive and do not require energy, which is saved for other activities that allow one to think differently.

In his famous and frequently quoted work, “The Storyteller,” Benjamin further discusses the relationship between soul, body and hand. Furthermore, as is well known, he criticises the excess of information, which is detrimental to narration: “Storytelling as it has long been flourished in the world of manual labor – rural, maritime, then urban – is itself a form of artisanal labor, so to speak. It does not aim to transmit the pure, intrinsic nature of the thing like information or report. It plunges the thing into the life of the teller and draws it out again.”¹⁷ Narration is always a collective gesture that requires patience and does not claim to provide immediate understanding. He traces the crisis of storytelling back to information overload and the ‘loss of experience.’ After all, storytelling is closely linked to the exchange of experiences: the narrator expands the listeners’ experience, while the shared experience is much more tangible than one might expect. It is made up of bodies and voices, and becomes also an experience for the listener.

The second example is taken from Ernst Bloch’s *Traces*, where he refers to the unavoidable and valuable intertwining of thought and narrative by offering a reflection on the relationship between narrative experience and thought. He writes: “In short, it’s good to think in stories too. So much isn’t done when it happens, even where it’s beautifully told. Instead, very strangely, there’s more going on there. The case has something about it; this is what it shows or suggests. Stories of this kind are not just recounted; instead we also count what struck there – or we listen up: What was that? Out of incidents comes a ‘Mark!’ that already is, that takes a little incidents as traces and examples. They point out a ‘less’ or ‘more’ that will have to be thought in the telling, retold in the thinking; that isn’t right in these stories, because things aren’t right with us, or with anything. Some things can be grasped only in such stories, not in a more expansive, elevated style, or then not in the same way. How some such things came to notice will be retold here, and tentatively marked; lovingly, marking in the retelling; by marking, intending the retelling. It’s little strokes and such from life that haven’t been forgotten; our refuse is worth a lot these days. But an older impulse was also there: to hear stories, good ones, poor ones, stories in different tones, from different years, remarkable ones that, when they come to an end, only really come to an end in the stirring.”¹⁸

Bloch highlights the importance of storytelling for cognition and thinking, but not of grand narratives that turn into ideology. Rather, storytelling means paying attention to the insignificant, the overlooked and the tiny.

¹⁶ Benjamin, “The Handkerchief,” 18–19.

¹⁷ Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 56.

¹⁸ Bloch, *Traces*, 6.

Some points are worth pinpointing. First, the event itself is not enough; there is something more that transcends it. For this reason, it is worth narrating it, because it is never completely satisfactory. Brute reality is not enough, and it probably does not exist as such. Secondly, fabrication is fundamental to thought and is not its contrary. Thirdly, recounting seemingly insignificant events in fragments is a way of distracting from the mainstream imperatives of progress, profit and productivity, rather than searching for meaning and recognising its inexhaustibility.

Max Ernst's approach to narrative, which is exemplified in his graphic novel *Une semaine de bonté*,¹⁹ relies on assembling pre-existing images into unexpected juxtapositions. Beyond visual experimentation, this process enacts a form of non-linear narrative repair: it seeks to give true meaning to things, going beyond appearances by drawing on the past and subverting the original sense of the images. In this way, Ernst's collages, whether in painting or printed series, create narratives that are associative, symbolic and revelatory, rather than strictly chronological. In his theoretical writings,²⁰ Ernst reflects on the method of collage, describing it as a way to reconstruct reality through fragments, emphasising the imaginative and poetic potential of juxtaposed images. Walter Benjamin, as author and commentator on Surrealism, illuminates this approach. For him, historical fragments resurfaced in new contexts can overturn conventional understanding, revealing hidden or latent significance. Ernst's collages enact exactly this principle: images are rescued, inverted and recombined, demonstrating that narrative repair is both a reconstruction and a revelation of deeper truths, a way of letting the past speak to the present in profoundly unexpected ways.

In conclusion, narrative repair is ethically sound when it cultivates the elsewhere; when it temporarily forgets the centrality of the self and helps it to look beyond; when it reclaims the word for those who never had it, and at the same time is aware of its limitations. Words will not save or heal, they are a way to dilute, endure, imagine otherwise. One can only recount what has not yet happened; all other modes of narration are consoling and reassuring justifications that tend to sweep the negative under the carpet. However, it is not because it fabricates that storytelling does not work. On the contrary, a certain amount of fabrication is inherent in our mental activity, which refutes the idolatry of facts and data, to the benefit of the reusability of fragments, past events, memories, objects, in order to construct different forms of lived experience. A 'good' reparative narration is the account of the exchange of experiences in order to endure and resist together, not to restore a linearity that swallows up stumbling blocks, which repairs in order to return to production. In this sense, narration is a distraction from the urgency of productivism.

Narration can only be reparative if it becomes an everyday gesture of reciprocal care; it cannot be reparative by restoring things and allowing to go back to how things were before. Rather than overcoming trauma, narrative reparation is only possible if we recognise that the most important feature of reparative narration is not its quasi-automatic linearity, which makes it too similar to an algorithm. This shows how reparation cannot happen without the materiality of experience, far from any automatism of meaning that focuses on the result rather than the process. A good reparative narration creates new forms of experience and resists the so-called reality, which is nothing more than a recollection of data and facts that are wrongly considered unchangeable in meaning and constitution.

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¹⁹ Cf. Ernst, *Une semaine de bonté*.

²⁰ Cf. Ernst et al., *Beyond Painting*.

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