

Research Article

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Reparation, Taken to the Extreme

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Abstract: The aim of my paper is not to criticise reparation, but to take it to the extreme, to stress the concept in order to understand whether it still stands up to scrutiny. To this end, we will attempt to answer two questions. First question: Are the limits of narration the same limits of reparation? (and vice versa) Second question: Is it possible to repair everything? And is it possible to narrate what cannot be repaired?

Keywords: reparation; narration; justice; promise; history; trauma

1 Foreword

In a time of open wounds – even public ones – and of completely ineffective therapies that are equally public, we must be careful when criticising the art of reparation. We must as well wonder whether this is an era of nostalgia or of performing reparation. However, the consequences of this question are beyond the scope of my argument. Nevertheless, I do not believe that we have the social conditions to justify any urgent criticism of reparative reasoning. On the contrary, I believe that there is an urgent need to reactivate a form of rationality capable of bringing people together rather than further dividing them. Yet the meaning of my argument and the choice of the general theme of this work is very clear: it is not a matter of criticising reparation, but of taking this category to the limit. It is a matter of stressing out the concept to understand if it still resists fatigue. When the limits of reparation become apparent, what can we do? After all, for almost a century, philosophy has been concerned (or should be concerned) with nothing other than answering this question. It has been concerned with the unforgivable, with thinking after Auschwitz. It has not applied reparation to every mundane event, but has recognised that its categorical potential is precisely connected to its event-related problematisation. If we think about it, repairing a small wound is not so difficult. The real challenge is repairing denied humanity (which, as we shall see, is also that of narration).

Before briefly addressing a few issues, please allow me to make two preliminary remarks.

The first consideration is that one of the challenges – at least for me – of this project is to make the paradigm of reparation independent from the practice of reparative justice. This is not because I have something against reparative justice. I simply believe that reparation indicates an ontological rhythm that belongs to human life, which changes according to the existence and removal of the wound and the suture; of the trauma and its processing. In short, it is starting from this universal human principle that we can conceive the public space of reparative justice, not vice versa. Some would probably object: isn't reparation always an act of justice? As a matter of fact, reparation can only be achieved according to justice. Otherwise, the scar remains. This may be true in the following sense: reparation is a form of action on the negative that can be accomplished either *quickly* – in the form of *grace*, as we will see in a moment – or *slowly* – in the form of justice. The tool used to act on the negative varies depending on the path taken. Reparation in the form of grace uses the tool of forgetfulness, while reparation as justice relies on the help of words and narration.

The second consideration is that we must always bear in mind that reparation is a *concrete utopia*, in the sense that its present manifestations are always an approximation of reparation as a completed act. Repairing is

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an *extreme* gesture. It does not mean consoling, overcoming, or accepting. The act of repairing always contains a challenge to the existing situation by those who perform it. Its utopian character lies in the fact that it does not assume to be a statement (nor a challenge), but rather a *revision* of the *ordo essendi*.

Reparation allows to mysteriously go back to what happened, and then move forward. On closer inspection, we are looking at the Nietzschean theme par excellence: how can we exercise our power against the past? The answers found by Nietzsche seem to go in the opposite direction of reparative narration. However, it is worth recalling them because they still have a hegemonic hold on contemporary society; an aspect that allows to understand why reparation belongs to the realm of concrete utopia and not to social realism.

I am referring in particular to Nietzsche's most famous response, contained in the work *Untimely Meditations*, where the German philosopher dismisses both narration and reparation in one fell swoop: «happiness becomes happiness in the same way: through forgetting or, to express the matter in a more scholarly fashion, through the capacity, for as long as the happiness lasts, to sense things *unhistorically*.»¹ Forgetfulness is what allows us to move forward, while reparation is the opposite action: it is a sort of return – almost a fixation – to the painful event of the past. Reparation relies on the active role of memory just as much as Nietzsche's happiness relies on the active role of forgetting or repression. But there is more: what is the meaning of repression, what is the work of forgetfulness? Banning any historical implication and, in this way, removing the experience of human time from the grip of narrative. As the philosopher writes, happiness is an *unhistorical* experience, therefore it is non-narrative, non-reparative, and depends solely on the act of forgetting. It implies moving forward by leaving behind what is left behind.

However, I'm not entirely sure that this is Nietzsche's final word. As a matter of fact, his idea is to rely on the slyness of the will to power, whose maximum extension lies precisely in transforming the inevitability of the past into an act of will. It means neither accepting nor forgetting what happened, but *wanting* it, thus exercising the will to power even with regard to the past, giving rise to the circularity of eternal return. Also in this case, the point is that he leaves no room for the work of narration and the courage to make amends. Isn't this "wanting what happened" also a way of closing the traumatic issue while leaving it intact? Without this backward movement, isn't the act of going forward just an escape route?

Please allow me another digression, this time a literary one. If there is an author who perfectly understood how the concrete utopia of reparation should untangle the main knot of the aporetic nature of memory, that one is Borges. I would like to mention two famous stories.

In the first one, which is contained in his work *Fictions*, Borges depicts a man whose life is made unbearable by his prodigious memory. His name is *Funes the Memorious*. His fiction is a relentless philosophical provocation, because it forces us to think of memory without filters; therefore, without any intrinsic relationship with oblivion. He is the personification of pure memory and also the representation of how such condition would literally be unliveable. Resolving the aporia of memory in its relationship with oblivion means distorting reality, which is the opposite of the utopia of reparation. Living *in* the past literally means giving up on the present. Because the past that becomes memory is like a city with uncertain boundaries and twisting roads. It is still our home, but we are imprisoned in it. We don't know how to get out or how to find our way around. Pure memory is like a siege that makes us unable to stay where we are. This suggests that the utopia of reparation cannot be identified with the transparency of memory. I believe that this is already a very concrete indication: the ability to repair is an ethical virtue entrusted to Aristotle's criterion of moderation. We are always on the threshold and we cannot repair without the right measure – first and foremost of memory.

The second story narrates the famous encounter between Cain and Abel after the *incident*. As a matter of fact, the intention behind the story is the same as the one behind the act of reparation: putting the trauma, therefore a negative experience, back at centre stage. The two brothers cannot pretend nothing happened and are forced to talk about the trauma. However, their discussion resolves itself into the need not to talk about it yet, but rather to entrust the possibility of forgiveness – here we cannot dwell on the similarities and differences between

¹ Nietzsche, *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*, 4.

forgiveness and reparation – to the silence of oblivion, «because forgetting is forgiving.»² Some might say that we are following in Nietzsche's footsteps. Yet there is a fundamental difference: for the German philosopher, the act of forgetting plays an active role in allowing us to move forward without looking back. In Borges, the semantics of forgiveness make this argument much more subtle. If forgetting is forgiving, then it is not simply a matter of distancing oneself from the trauma, but rather of looking at it without seeing anything. Is this reparation? It is a reparation in the form of annihilation, one might say. Alternatively, to use another philosophically useful image, Borges' reparation can only take place under the guise of grace, as opposed to justice. There is no reparative justice on Abel's part, only reparative grace.

These are all counterfactual examples, negative approximations that allow to clarify the narrow definition of reparation as a concrete utopia, which I would like to focus on.

Let us return to the presumption of reparation to come to terms with the *ordo essendi*. Such presumption can only exist for one reason, which is actually missing in all the examples I just mentioned: the fact that the only tool that makes reparation a concrete utopia is the human language. The interplay between reparation and narration guarantees the ontological radicality of reparation, which means gambling on the reparative power of words. How can we go back to a trauma without repeating it? The generous response of reparation is: by rewriting it through words. By telling the story again and again.

When confronted with what has already happened and cannot be avoided, what remains is not our will, but the words. Just as narration contains silence within itself, in the same way memory must contain a few grams of oblivion in order to be concrete. Perhaps this is the limit that allows the pursuit of reparation not to be confused with a form of relentless persecution. It is not the fiction of the narrative or the pure desire to forget, but the ability of words to *amend* the essence of the event. This is exactly where I would like to start.

2 First Question: Are the Limits of Narration the Same Limits of Reparation? (and Vice Versa)

The first question is essentially a preamble to today's proceedings. My thesis is the one I just mentioned: that justice and will (to power) are replaced by narration as an intentional correlate of reparation. Is this an arbitrary thesis? Of course not, as we all know. Here I will limit myself to giving just one example that I believe can support this argument.

Let us go back to Borges (it is just one example, there are many others). Some of his poems are simply a list of things, actions, or feelings. What is a list? We could define a list as a succession of words that has renounced narration.

Without the synthesis of heterogeneity condensed by the presence of *verbal expression*, narrative, in a list, can only be evoked, suggested, or recalled. I am certain that in everyday experience – a necessary subject of philosophical inquiry despite its lack of scientific evidence – the use of lists serves almost as a *narrative reference* (a *substantive* that evokes a succession of actions and events that have already occurred or are yet to take place, which are recomposed under the banner of a story). But it is *the list as a literary style* that I am referring to in this case. Its use – the reference to Borges is just one of many – seems precisely like an attempt to transgress the verbal limits of narration. Bringing together in succession what could not be held together in a narrative. In this sense, the list does not renounce narrative because it dispenses with association or plot. Rather, it seeks to poetically represent an association that cannot be empirically synthesized either in the form of a single action or in the form of a single narrative. That is why what defines a list is the *extrinsic life*, to borrow a term from Bonaventura and Leopardi.

Every life, if we take it from the animal point of view, is always an extrinsic life: an incessant succession of the fulfilment of the *conatus essendi*, but without the burden of being oneself, without the annoyance of the subject.

2 «“Was it you that killed me, or did I kill you?” Abel answered. “I don’t remember anymore; here we are, together, like before.” “Now I know that you have truly forgiven me,” Cain said, “because forgetting is forgiving. I, too, will try to forget.” “Yes,” said Abel slowly. “So long as remorse lasts, guilt lasts.”» Borges, *Collected Fictions*, 503.

The essentiality of a list is the essentiality of a life reduced to itself, like the lilies of the field or the birds in the sky. So, what is extrinsic life missing? More precisely, why does a list allow me to contemplate my life as if I were a stranger? It is not difficult: the list reduces life to a succession of *singular* events, not to a *sum* of all the events. It is a life without verbs, and that is why there is no need to recognise myself as the subject. This allows to recover (or contest) a classic ontological truth: entities cannot be held together without the verbal nature of being. The list is so fascinating for this reason. Because we can recognise our lives as a succession of events, thus relinquishing the effort of synthesising heterogeneity. *We are not a synthesis of heterogeneity; we are heterogeneous*. As a consequence, our desirable life is the extrinsic life par excellence. A fascinating perspective; but I'm afraid it is untenable. Such perspective has been presented to us, among others, by Felice Cimatti. He immediately puts in a relationship of tension the mysticism of extrinsic life and the condemnation of words. As beings of words, humans cannot reduce their lives to a simple list: they cannot simply enjoy life as it is, as «life and nothing but life.»³

Why have I introduced the perspective of extrinsic life? Because it highlights two strategies of self-governance that involve different uses of reparation.

In the first case – the extrinsic life, the list – reparation is not expected. It is somehow constitutionally inhibited for at least three reasons:

1. Because the list does not involve a synthesis, therefore there is no overthinking, no permanent pain, no trauma, no mourning. The list just mentions pain as such and nothing more: *Sufficit diei malitia sua*. Time is not specified as a duration.
2. Because the list goes beyond narration in the sense that we indicated earlier. From this point of view, it is true that the list is an exercise that belongs to mysticism, as it implies a use of words that goes beyond the rules and codes of narration. In the list, the word is definitively separated from narration, thus resolving the question of the relationship between narration and reparation at its root. By giving up the first, there is no room for the second.
3. Because reparation in itself is a historic event. Just as one cannot be punished for an act that has not yet been committed, in the same way one cannot repair anything that has not gone through the negative. Repairing is always a work on the negative that takes place under the conditions of time and language.

This brings us right back to the heart of the matter: if there can be no reparation without narration, the limits of the former must necessarily coincide with the limits of the latter. And also, what are the limits of narration that might compromise the work on the negative of reparation? I will mention at least two of them, both of which originate from the temptation to domesticate. The example of extrinsic life is once again appropriate. The birds in the sky have no need to feel at home in the world. Obviously, they build nests and burrows to protect themselves from bad weather. However, their life does not include domestication. Conversely, humans use constant strategies to domesticate the world, with language being the transcendental strategy of this domestication process. Narration as a form of reparation is first and foremost a strategy for domesticating the unfamiliar, the negative.

Therefore, the first limit is that of being a *false promise*. There are two types of false promises. First, a promise can be false in its premise – when the promised content is unrealistic. In this specific case, narration may promise a reparation that cannot be achieved due to a series of circumstances (objective, subjective, intersubjective, ontological, social, linguistic, etc.). It is worth noting that this first type of false promise not only concerns the possibility of reparation, but also falsifies narration itself. By promising what it cannot deliver, narration is deprived of the ability to be convincing. This aspect actually presents us with another problem: does narration have to be credible? (After reading Queneau's potential literature, one would say no, for example.) In general terms, we could summarise as follows: a narrative that normatively presumes to hit the target of reparation is destined to fail. Reparation is not supposed to happen; at most, it is the effect of an act of freedom. The second type of false promise is the one that does not deliver on what it promises, even though it has every opportunity to do so. Therefore, it is a narrative that betrays its intention. The issue here is not the betrayal, but the circumstances that make it relevant. In the case of reparation, I believe that the most threatening circumstance is a form of narrative impatience. It is pretty much the same impatience that we feel when we are sick and stuck at home, dying to get

³ Cimatti, *La vita estrinseca*, 195.

out. Sometimes narration is a form of impatience: we rely on words to hasten the end. In this way, the end does not coincide with healing but, more likely, with a relapse.

We should also note something else: ultimately, reparation is always a matter of mediation. Not only when it is intended to deal with an intersubjective or public trauma (we will see this soon), but also when we deal with ourselves. Actually, it seems to me that nowadays this capacity for mediation – which ultimately means sticking to the symbolic register – is one of the great repressions of contemporary narratives. Also in this case, I would like to present a literary example (which I chose – I confess – solely on the basis of my personal preference). If we examine some of Philip Roth's most famous novels, we find a narrative style that has long been practised by philosophy: confession. As surprising as it may seem, Roth is not so different from Augustine. What sets them apart? The fact that in Augustine's case the confession stems from a need for reparation. After all, there would have been no confessions without the stolen pears. This is an apologetic narration: its function is to traverse all the symbolic mediations necessary to move from a point in life to another that amends, corrects, and repairs the previous one. Augustine questions himself because he wants to become a better person.

On the contrary, in Roth there is no reparative intent, no apologetics for the authentic self. Roth decides to confess in order to recognise himself for who he is. He indulges in his wounds, he literally enjoys them. He even enjoys telling them to his therapist (I am thinking in particular to his masterpiece *Portnoy's Complaint*). This is a decisive element in our discussion, because – as we will see shortly – the analysis by a therapist is nothing more than the ultimate reparative narrative. In Roth, however, even the analysis is not a work, but an immediate exhibition of the authentic self. More precisely: it is not a work of reparation, it is a work of truth. It deals with finally having the courage to face the truth, without the possibility to amend, correct, or repair this truth about oneself. From this point of view, there is no mediation work between narration and truth, but rather the immediacy of the performance. It is not about technique, it is about courage. There is no mystery about ourselves to be explored through narration, but rather an evidence that we must find the courage to openly display. This narrative impatience is an aspect that links Roth to any influencer. In both cases, narration is not a moral tale, but an aesthetic one. This does not mean that they are the same, as one is rather the opposite of the other. In the performance of an influencer, there is neither the work of reparation nor that of truth, but rather the opposite. Differently, in Roth, renouncing the work of reparation is a condition of despair. From his point of view, it is the only way to seriously try to tell the truth about ourselves. If I cannot do anything to be different than what I am, then all I can do is to tell who I am.⁴ I will not go into further detail on this matter, as it would take us too far from the initial question, albeit into areas that are undoubtedly valuable. To give just one last example, Roth's distinction between the work of truth and the work of reparation concerns the sphere of desire in a particularly significant way. We might say that nothing less than desire can be repaired. Desire absolves itself by its very nature. Once again, there are no moral narratives that can be applied to desire; they can only start from it. This is the famous anti-Kantian imperative proposed by Lacan: «Did you act according to the desire that resides in you?»⁵ All of Roth's confessions are nothing more but an attempt to respond to this imperative. Precisely for this reason, they are as extraterritorial to reparation as desires themselves.

To sum up, if narration carries with it the limit of being a false promise, there are two possibilities: either a hasty reparation, or a (voluntary or involuntary) lack of reparation.

The second limit is that of having a false consciousness. There is nothing new about the fact that narration can be ideological. Any narration contains a certain degree of consciousness: who narrates will always be conscientious, but that does not necessarily mean that such person is not a hypocrite. After all, even a superficial contact with kids is enough to understand how the first experience of narration is always about telling “your own story.”⁶ To quote Engels, it can often (though fortunately *not always*) be said that narration is also a «process accomplished by

⁴ Essentially, Roth perfectly applies the Foucaultian *parrhesia*.

⁵ Lacan Jacques, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 98.

⁶ Winnicott, *The Collected Works*, 233.

the so-called thinker consciously, it is true, but with a false consciousness.»⁷ If we try to apply this definition to both narration and reparation, we reach a decisive turning point: they can sometimes turn into a form of ideology. Narration in the form of false storytelling or avoidance of the truth; reparation in the form of a moral duty to provide a *happy ending*. However, at this point I do not want to focus on the ideological temptation, but rather on another aspect that could be defined by using the difference between *denial* and *disavowal*. A difference that intersects both narration and reparation precisely with regard to the work on the negative. When faced with trauma, how does the false consciousness act and why does it represent a *shelter* rather than a *reparation*?

There is a classic narrative strategy, named the state of denial (see Cohen 2000). The dialectical power of denying the negative is extremely strong in human terms and should not be underestimated. Denying the empty chair, telling ourselves that what happened or could happen has never happened and will never happen: “you cannot die, I cannot die.” As we know, the power of denial is intrinsic to the principle of reality. If we were not practising this power on a daily basis, we would not be able to move forward. In this sense, a narration that avoids or denies trauma (who knows if Borges’ list and Roth’s parrhesia also fall into this category) is extremely powerful and is not just high literature, but also low existence. As a matter of fact, it provides shelter. This shelter, however, by intervening preliminarily on the trauma, precludes any possibility of reparation. Its ideological content – its false consciousness – manifests itself in the form of erasure or substitution. Incidentally, this false consciousness that may (though it is not certain to) play a role in the narrative and that inhibits power of reparation is one of the fundamental cognitive structures of consumer society. In the past, things that were out of tune used to be repaired, while nowadays imperfect or worn goods are discarded or replaced. Consumerism is a slow but persistent learning process that teaches us how to deny imperfection and remove the power of reparation. The obsolescence of things is like a symbolic ban on the art of reparation.

However, from our point of view, the strategy of denial appears rather weak. First of all, it lacks narrative, because denying trauma does not mean processing it through a narrative strategy, but rather putting it aside. It means not surrounding the trauma with words, but leaving it abandoned even by words. It also lacks reparative effectiveness, as we already noted when we underlined that denial is a shelter that does not allow for reparation. Another strategy appears much more interesting, that of *disavowal*. The most practical and ironic example of this strategy is the epitaph found on Duchamp’s tomb: «D’ailluers c’est toujours les autres qui meurent (besides, it’s always other people who die).» Freud proposes the most scientifically supported thematisation of this concept. In order to illustrate his thesis that we never truly believe in our own death, he recounts a joke made by one of his patients: «“If one of us dies,” the husband told his wife, “I shall move to Paris.”»⁸

What is the difference between denial and disavowal, assuming that they are both strategies of a false narrative consciousness? While in the first case the shelter is provided by not knowing, in the case of disavowal, knowledge prevails. Disavowing is a form of knowing and, as such, it does not diminish either the power of narration or that of reparation. The man *knows* he must die and does not deny it at all. However, the story of his death suddenly diverts, becoming the story of his wife’s death. Octave Mannoni gives this definition of the work of disavowal: «I know well, but all the same...» (Mannoni 2003).

I see disavowal as a curious case in which the belief that a situation can be repaired, even if it starts with knowledge, ends up causing an act of false consciousness: «Disavowal is different from denial; it does not deny the facts, but claims to know everything about them and then carries on as if nothing had happened.»⁹ Obviously, the man knows they could both die, but he is the one moving to Paris: this is an authentic “delirium of interpretation”, which nevertheless has public resonance, at least in our society. I must give credit to Alenka Zupancic – who dedicated a short but valuable booklet to this topic – for two reflections that in my opinion bring the issue of disavowal closer to the topic of the limits of narration and reparation. Firstly, the author suggests that disavowal has now become a social phenomenon rather than a private one:

⁷ Marx – Engels, *Correspondence*, 109.

⁸ Freud, *The interpretation of dreams*, 387.

⁹ Zupancic, *Disavowal*, 8.

«that (perverse) disavowal, which sustains some belief by means of ardently proclaiming the knowledge of the opposite, is becoming a predominant feature of our social and political life and goes well beyond personal psychology. «that (perverse) disavowal, which sustains some belief by means of ardently proclaiming the knowledge of the opposite, is becoming a predominant feature of our social and political life and goes well beyond personal psychology. We often find ourselves wondering how it is possible that a project born out of enlightened rationalism could end up allowing obscurantism to triumph – that is, giving rise to all manner of strange beliefs, mistrust in science, and populism based on rational arguments... Lacanian psychoanalysis offers us an answer: this does not happen because dark forces and hidden impulses have stronger reasons and prevail over knowledge and its evidence, but because reason and knowledge are never devoid of their own dark and “irrational” side. The contemporary social mode of denial is a perverse form of reason, of self-knowledge, and not a return of some archaic and dark drive.»¹⁰

If we integrate these considerations into our question, we could summarise it as follows: disavowal is the prevailing public form of narration as false consciousness. As a matter of fact, the act of disavowal can only be narrative, as they share some fundamental traits: on the one hand, rational consistency; on the other, the creation of a belief. Therefore, a cultural (and modern, Western, etc.) limit of narration lies in its relationship with the Enlightenment. Those who rely on narration believe in the clarifying power of *logos* that has become the landing place of modern secularisation. If we are looking for a limit of narration, it is neither the fact that it re-hypostatizes a supernatural or metaphysical power that would have been deconstructed by the Enlightenment, nor that it resorts to a world of instincts that annihilates the world of knowledge. Instead, the limit of narration as false consciousness is an *excess of modernity*.

Grand narratives replace metaphysics; when they decay, small narratives remain. In any case, *the paradigm of narration is a product of modernity, not of its crisis*. The point here is that in the moment of disavowal narration fails to reflect the truth of reality, thus becoming the linguistic representation of a perverse form of reason.

On the other hand, however, this abnormal use of knowledge falls within the realm of belief. Here the connection with the temptation to repair becomes clear. If I can die like everyone else, but I will survive and move to Paris, what I am putting into practice is a *unique* form of reparative narration. I am not willing to deny the (potential) trauma, but I use narrative strategies that allow me to imagine myself as safe. Zupancic notes that this delusional trait applied to narration in the form of disavowal is typical of conspiracy theories.¹¹ Why do so many people prefer to believe in conspiracies? Not because they lack rationality, but because they overdo and pervert the use they make of it. The fundamental motive for falsifying the consciousness of narration is that we must “save the phenomena.” We must find hypotheses and descriptions of the world that allow ourselves to repair everything by arranging every phenomenon within a meaning. No matter if this arrangement becomes a form of paranoia and is based precisely on the idea that evil – as a trauma that disrupts and upsets the rational order of the world and its stories – cannot exist. As a consequence, this moral assumption will ultimately become a self-fulfilling belief.

At this point, let us try to sum up. If the first issue was understanding whether the limits of narration coincide with those of reparation, we can provisionally answer that the limits of reparation probably exceed those of narration. However, they include them and are not immune to them. It is by no means certain that “good” narration will necessarily lead to a healthy reparation. Nevertheless, it is certain that “bad” narration cannot have a genuine reparation as its effect.

In particular, when narration takes the path of a false promise, it gets caught up in an iconoclastic fury towards reparation, with the result that it arrives either too late or, more likely, too soon. On the contrary, when narration is the representation of a false consciousness, even reparation – the aim obsessively sought-after by the

¹⁰ Zupancic, *Disavowal*, 9.

¹¹ «Related to the preceding is also a specific ‘delirium of interpretation’ at work in conspiracy theories. [...] In this respect, conspiracy theories resemble what is known from the history of science (particularly astronomy) as ‘saving the phenomena’ – with the oscillation between the Ptolemaic system and the heliocentric model as the most famous example. [...] Conspiracy theories often strike one as similar in this practice of ‘saving the phenomena’: they introduce additional hypotheses and much more complicated explanations of the same events in order to justify their version of reality, which they believe in and take as their starting point.» (Zupancic, *Disavowal*, 112).

false consciousness – becomes pure ideology, turning into a form of derealisation that serves to justify the world as it should be, not to recognise it for what it is.

3 Second Question: Is it Possible to Repair Everything? And is it Possible to Narrate what Cannot be Repaired?

After all, recognising the world for what it really is sometimes means ceasing to know it. Sometimes, it also means ceasing to repair it. If there is a reason why the paradigm of reparation is so radically anthropological, it is precisely because it applies to the limits of humanity and human experience. Repairing a defect in a dress is a very useful experience for many of us, but it is not particularly philosophical in nature. On the other hand, repairing what cannot be repaired is something different. This is completely established by the limits of reparation. There is no reparation unless there is something negative that precedes it – something that makes reparation a gesture transcending the finite human condition: if repairing is a human gesture, the negative is a human experience (subjective genitive) – and there is no reparation that does not end up encountering a trauma that cannot be easily fixed. The nature and depth of the trauma – understood in a particular sense that I will explain in a moment – certainly affect and modify the possibility and method of reparation.

I am not sure that the same conditioning can be applied to narration. Exactly as it happened with thinking, also narration changed after Auschwitz. Also narration – whether literary or biographical, ontological or ontic – is subject to the same aporia as reparation: one can only narrate what cannot be narrated. However, if compared to reparation, perhaps narration has a broader application to humanity. Perhaps what cannot be repaired can still be narrated. This would mean that the limits of narration are broader than the limits of reparation.

Such question will remain unanswered, as I will not attempt to resolve it. Instead, the last issue I would like to penetrate concerns the relationship between narration, reparation, and trauma. Trauma will not be intended in a general sense. I am interested in investigating the relationship with that specific experience of trauma that we usually refer to as “frustration.” A word that is so common in everyday life as much as it is ignored by philosophical literature. I would like to examine this word starting from the quotation by a philosopher, Ernst Bloch, who briefly mentioned the concept. In some pages of *The Spirit of Utopia*, which are dedicated to explaining the relationship between Kant and Hegel, he directs a Kierkegaardian critique at the Hegelian system:

«Certainly suffering does not already need to be invoked everywhere, or from below. Many simple things already show themselves to be complete and, so to speak, capable of analysis, without it concerning them. The situation is quite different, however, when suffering, as the danger of frustration even in every higher real context, is denied. In Hegel the deed is lacking, the sorrow or despair that even within the totality of history and culture calls a person to action. That is why, where the concept overestimates its reality, suffering adds savour, and the squalor, the adversity of life becomes a harmless ceremony.»¹²

Regardless of the specific reference to Hegel, Bloch’s line of argument is very interesting. The subject of the question is “suffering from below.” Not the tragic, historically situated suffering, but the kind of pain that hurts imperceptibly, that remains outside schoolbooks. There is no need to emphasise this pain from below or to think of it as transcendental. Bloch’s advice is for us to remember that there are simple things happening without pain, and that we can learn a fundamental lesson from this: most narratives have nothing to do with pain. Therefore, they have nothing to do with reparation either. We should cherish this lesson, especially in times when it seems that there is no narration without victimisation. Nowadays, the “misinterpretation of the victim” seems to be the condition that makes private and public narratives possible. There are no perfect actions to narrate, except for those originating from a pain from below, which always coincides with “the narrator’s point of view.” However, a world exclusively inhabited by victims would be a falsified world, in at least two senses. Firstly, because if everyone is a victim, it is clear that even the perpetrators would feel justified in seeing themselves as victims.

¹² Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 183.

Secondly, because this undue extension of the “suffering from below” as the deuteragonist of our stories ends up exercising a sort of moral pedagogy. If there is no possibility of narrating life without the presence of evil, then it would not even be possible to experience the fact that “many little things show themselves to be complete.”

At this point, someone might rightly object: if there are so many minor stories that do not necessarily involve the victim’s experience of frustration or misinterpretation – and that have nothing to do with pain – it is absolutely not true that the negative is a transcendental aspect of humanity. Bloch helps resolve this objection by introducing a fundamental distinction between “simple things” and “higher contexts.”

We can actualise this by recognising that both the negative and our work on it, which we call reparation, become transcendental from the point of view of the higher contexts. My daily narratives can avoid mentioning the suffering from below. However, when narrating my whole life, I won’t be able to escape it. When narration challenges history, it is even less so. That particular criticism of Hegel starts precisely here. He ignores the need for a link between “suffering from below” and “higher contexts.” Hegel is only interested in the negative that has already been ennobled, amended from its baseness, and elevated to the nobility of the moment of the Spirit. In other words: Hegel does not admit frustration. Therefore, his model of reparation is reconciliation, that is, reparation without a final limit: «Hegel wants to balance himself out, without there remaining the least sting in anything that seems to him essential about the world, anything that the cold, lucid, dispassionate concept might discover on the side of the objectively existent. Thinking oneself too good for the world, says Hegel in a characteristic phrase, only means understanding the world better than others.»¹³

This wonderful provocation made by Bloch probably relates much more to our discourse than to Hegel’s: it is easy to repair something negative that is immediately granted the privilege of being repaired. It is easy to narrate something negative that is immediately granted the privilege of being discussed. However, what about the suffering from below, the frustration? And also, what is the experience of frustration, if not precisely the occurrence of something negative that can no longer be reconciled or repaired? Something that we are often ashamed to narrate. At this point, we might say that frustration is a limit of reparation as much as shame is a limit of narration. This allows us, in conclusion, to suggest three further lines of research.

The first one probably concerns not forgetting the limits of frustration in any reparative narrative. Hegel’s (presumed) mistake is the same that is often repeated: the *presumption* of reparative narration. It is precisely frustration that teaches us not to overindulge with light. It is obviously very important for reparative practices to shed light on areas of darkness, but sometimes we are driven by a real obsession with brightness, which ends up generating too much light. I have always been fascinated by the fact that common sense consoles our experience of darkness by tracing it back to the primacy of light. However, it has difficulty recognising that where there is light, there is shadow.

The role of reparation is not to overcome shadow, but to protect it. Repairing often means living with the negative, preparing a space that is not a simple repetition of the trauma. It means not letting the negative devastate ourselves, despite knowing that it will continue to hurt.

I believe that all of this can also be applied to narration, which is full of both internal and external shadows. The internal shadows are well known, starting with the necessary function of silence, but there are also external shadows that should not be ignored. My fear is that we have entered an age in which narratives closely resemble the structure of Hegelian dialectic, one where shadows and stings are merely narrative devices, wiles of language. To give just one example, when even narration is subjected to the frenetic pace of consumption, which does not allow for breaks or low-key attitudes, it ends up becoming a commodity rather than a form of art. Benjamin had already grasped this, arguing that boredom is a decisive emotional tone for narration: «People who are not bored cannot tell stories. But there is no longer any place for boredom in our lives. The activities that were covertly and inwardly bound up with it are dying out. This is why the gift of telling stories is also dying out: today we no longer weave and spin, tinker and scrape, while listening to them.»¹⁴ In a world that does not allow even a hint of boredom, no reparative narration is permitted.

¹³ Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 177.

¹⁴ Benjamin, *The Storyteller*, 54.

The second line of research concerns the need for reparative narratives to keep in mind the distinction between reparation and reconciliation. There are narratives that repair but do not reconcile. They perpetuate the scars of frustration, and are not used to make them more just, but only more adorned. Where an ethic of reconciliation is no longer possible, an aesthetic of reparation may still persist. To give a very popular example, we should consider the Japanese practice of *Kintsugi*, the art of repairing broken pottery, whose value increases thanks to the imperfections that remain. This presupposes a wisdom of reparation that surrenders when faced with imperfection, without claiming to have a final word that eliminates or summarises the rest. Such final word also contains imperfect words. However, the act of containing does not take the form of a synthesis; rather, it expresses the coexistence of heterogeneity. When faced with the negative, Hegel always takes a *step forward*, while the wisdom of reparation, in some cases, is content to take a *step to the side, to stand by*.

Thanks to this wisdom, we can also go back to the initial aporia between grace and justice, thus recognising that perhaps there is a grace of reparation that goes beyond reparative justice. When the trauma cannot be solved and becomes frustration, continuing to seek justice can mean hindering the healthy processing of grief (as is often the case when the grieving process resists the reality that some events cannot be defined as either just or unjust). The limit of reparation is what cannot be repaired, which is not a philosophical category but a human experience. In that moment, reparation fulfils its aesthetic function and becomes an experience of grace.

The third line of research, which is probably the one I care about the most, concerns the need to also develop a policy of reparative narratives. I am not referring to the ideological meaning of the term, according to which narration becomes nothing more than a secularising device of politics, but rather to the need to think of politics as hauntology, to quote Derrida and Fisher (Derrida 2006; Fischer 2014). A real science of ghosts. Ultimately, every narration and every reparation is a way of dealing with ghosts. Obviously, they are shadows, but they are *animated* shadows: lost futures and traumas that cannot be repaired. They inhabit our lives, *they are with us*. They remain in the background, without having the grace to disappear.

Ghosts are waiting for us at the limit of narration and reparation. They are shadows that cannot be banished in any way. Therefore, what is the public role of reparative narratives? What is a policy of reparative narratives taken to their limit? I believe it should be to shift the focus of reparation from the past to the future. It is not a matter of healing, but of living. Public development allows to transform hauntology into a futurology, the art of reparation into the science of a lost and shared future. Those shadows that cannot be reconciled contain lost futures that never happened (in the same way as *Marx's Ghosts*, according to Derrida). Repairing is not only about coming to terms with what happened and cannot be undone, but also with what has not happened and cannot happen. It means coming to terms with ghosts. They will remain the same, but they still have in them the latency of other possible futures, whose custody is entrusted to those who never cease to see them stirring in the darkness. We must learn to unlearn from history in order to still have a chance to change it. It is also at the limit of reparation and narration that we find the incurable concrete utopia of humanity.

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