Trauma, Tragedy, Therapy

The Arts and Human Suffering

Stephen K. Levine

Foreword by Shaun McNiff

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For Paolo Knill: *il miglior fabbro*

There is nothing stable in the world;
uproar's your only music

– John Keats

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I would like to thank my colleagues and students at York University, ISIS-Canada and the European Graduate School, who have stimulated my thinking and continually challenged me to go further, particularly Paul Antze, with whom I have pursued the topic of trauma repeatedly in all these contexts. I owe a special debt to Gabriel Levine, who helped me to find the framework for the book and also edited the manuscript for publication.

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Part III: Poiesis *after Post-Modernism*

Foreword

Trauma, Tragedy, Therapy is a bold, brilliant, and imaginative re-visioning of the nature of emotional trauma and its therapeutic treatment. It is a book like no other that I have read in psychology. Stephen K. Levine embraces the darkest elements of experience as the basis of dramatic enactments that transform difficulties into affirmations of human existence. He does nothing less than recast the mission and operation of the whole psychotherapeutic enterprise and the contemporary notions of morality upon which it is based.

As a philosopher, artist, psychologist, therapist, and professor of social science, Stephen K. Levine has spent his life preparing for this book. He is uniquely able to create a text that uses immediate experiences in art and therapy as the basis for a sweeping historical critique of contemporary thought and life. It is a tribute to the expressive arts therapy discipline that our gathering of people from different domains, all committed to caring for the soul and addressing pain and suffering through creative expression, has provided a home for Levine's integrative *poiesis* ('our capacity to shape experience through imagination') over the past two decades.

In this book, Levine takes the relation between trauma and tragedy as his central focus in a presentation that includes other essential themes and issues related to the theory and practice of expressive arts therapy, as well as to his life-long commitment to understanding and furthering human experience through the arts. In addition to his chapters on trauma and the process of *poiesis* as the basis of expressive arts therapy, Levine includes a number of pieces in the form of interviews. Their direct and relaxed dialogical style enables him to state and restate his core positions in a way that complements his more formal writings. The conversational form, paying a certain homage to Plato, enables Levine to convey the legacy of his philosophical influences in colloquial language

while modeling one of the book's core ideas – *mimesis*, repeating with variation – in a way that invites readers into the discourse and helps them grasp the conceptual material.

I have been close to Levine's ongoing encounter with the writings of my mentor Rudolf Arnheim (1904–2007), whose predilection toward order challenged Stephen's more improvisational embrace of disarray. I can imagine Rudi smiling at the latest turn in the conversation in which a more complex order is embraced – one that acknowledges creative aspects of chaos and that holds in itself the vital tensions of the world. Levine's succinct presentation of Arnheim's thinking exemplifies the carefully tended seeds of thought and action that are displayed in this volume, gifts to students and to everyone striving to articulate theoretical underpinnings for the practice of expressive arts therapy.

Among the many concerns that Levine addresses is the damage done by the human tendency to adopt stock methods and superficial explanations for the depths, complexities, wonders, and exasperations of human experience, as exemplified so convincingly here by much of current trauma theory. He challenges students to avoid simplistic formulas and to dig deeper when exploring their own work. It is my hope that future generations will take this individuation of thought, art, and social action, as integrated through one person's life, to heart, and that they will sustain the ideal of what the poet Charles Olson, echoing Heidegger, called:

> a man, carved
> out of himself, so wrought he
> fills his given space, makes
> traceries sufficient to
> others' needs
>
> *(Olson 2001, p.108)*

Contemporary trauma psychology and therapeutic methods have given Stephen K. Levine the material out of which he makes what may be considered his own most defining 'act of *poiesis*,' realizing his dictum of reshaping the world as it is given to us, with all the wounds and suffering we have experienced, and 'making them new.'

By engaging the Holocaust as the defining trauma of his lifetime, Levine cannot be accused of avoiding pain, evil, and wrong-doing, or of taking a light approach to human suffering. This book does not deny the role of rage and forceful action in responding to harmful human

behavior. Levine's revolutionary move, his transformative *poiesis*, is his recasting of our understanding of trauma and of our response to it. His core position is that by expressing the painful and tragic experience, we release its fixity and negative hold on our lives, refusing the temptation to assume the role of the victim. Levine clearly shows how memory operates, never completely and literally replicating the past. The act of repeated recall carries within itself a creative element that we do not necessarily appreciate.

The time is ripe for a major change. We must move from a society of victimization to one of creative action – without in any way denying, lessening, justifying, or accepting real trauma, the damage it inflicts, the outrage felt in response to it, or the fervor to prevent more of the same. Psychology and the practice of therapy might start by working on themselves, a message that is implicit in every page of Levine's book. His critique is direct and forceful:

> Psychotherapy has been traumatized: it shows all the symptoms of the trauma victim, suffering from thoughts that are intrusive, constrictive and that tend to hyper-vigilance. What has produced this condition, oddly enough, is the discourse of trauma itself. This discourse intrudes upon our theory and practice even when we wish to think or act otherwise; it constricts us by rendering other forms of suffering opaque. We are always on the alert for trauma, seeing it behind every symptom, as if they were all traumas in disguise. (p.54)

Although he speaks in a clear and forceful voice about the need of psychotherapy to transform itself, Levine's preferred method is modest and far from the heroic salvation suggested by Nietzsche (who otherwise takes on a deservedly iconic role within this book). 'We make art,' Levine says, 'not to be saved but to be seen.' Being witnessed in the expression of our suffering is another core principle of his approach to art and healing. Thus the role of the therapist is largely one of being present to other people and their expressions, furthering a notion of beauty where an experience can 'show itself as it is in itself.'

Those of us who have lived through this era in which all ills tend to be reduced to some form of past trauma and victimization have seen how psychotherapeutic culture and training programs have almost universally supported this trend. Future therapists undergo prescribed training based upon various forms of victimized identity. This is the most

recent manifestation of one-dimensional psychological reductionism, replacing and slightly modifying earlier tendencies to attribute emotional difficulties to sexual trauma originating in childhood. The recent era of psychological victimization and identity grievances has achieved an uncanny confluence of moralizing and puritan fundamentalisms on both the left and the right.

Stephen K. Levine's achievement in compassionately turning the tables on trauma psychology can be likened to a startling dream that vividly dramatizes the life we are living and do not see, a 'big dream' that carries a whole complex constellation of emotions and social beliefs. Whether the upheaval of his vision is liberating or disturbing depends on the nature of one's relationship to the prevailing tenets of psychotherapeutic culture of the past two decades.

The process of *poiesis* and the Dionysian forces that inspire Levine call for us to accept the dying of old forms and the loss of soul as prerequisites of renewal. From the ancients we know that things must die in order to be made anew. But the fear of letting go and the unwillingness to be defined in a new way by unexpected and unplanned arrivals is perhaps the core factor that moves people to resist creative expression.

It is quite natural to guard against the crucible of transformation. Human nature tends to flee from encounters with vulnerability and the discomfort of uncertainty. Better to see oneself as a victim, banding together with others in an ever-increasing circle with no limits on the horizon; as Levine says, even the perpetrators are themselves now ultimately seen as victims of abuse. This resistance to creating life anew, to letting go of even the worst things (which play the perverse purpose of maintaining an identity that has a certain usefulness), is so deeply lodged in human experience that it is no wonder that victimization and its accompanying fixations are preferred to creation. Better to hold onto the affliction that defines us than welcome the unknown, and thus possibly lose control over identity. It is not surprising that psychology and therapy are often captured by ideas and social movements that demand less from people, and package reality into trends.

Over my four decades of experience in expressive arts therapy I have learned to welcome these obstacles and sometimes irritating conventions. I have come to see them as my subject matter, the problems that inspire me and help others create. Bad things can be put to good

use; as Stephen K. Levine says, 'Chaos is the mother of all beings.' The disturbance we do not want to face can be a source of creative liberation. It is not the easiest of paths, but the way of creation, of *poiesis*, is the one that survives through the millennia as the most reliable cure for the soul.

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1

Introduction

When I was a child, I would lie in bed at night imagining that I could go back in history to assassinate Hitler. I had no trouble traveling through time, but whenever I tried to carry out my plot, something intervened: either Hitler had a double or the gun misfired. Somehow I could not imagine changing the past. No matter what I did, I could not alter history.

My parents never mentioned the Holocaust. We lived in a house marked by a traumatic event that could not be spoken of. Its presence could only be detected in a general feeling of anxiety: the world was a dangerous place, something bad might happen, and we had to be careful interacting with the *goyim* – they could not be trusted. At the same time, my mother and father did all they could to eliminate any signs of their ancestry without explicitly denying it: giving up the dietary rules, belonging to a synagogue (now called a 'temple') that seemed more Protestant than Jewish, encouraging their children to adapt to the world of others. My sister had a 'nose job' – plastic surgery to remove any trace of *Yiddishkeit* (Jewishness) – and my mother suggested that I might want one too. She also told me that if I wanted to change my last name when I grew up, she would understand. We all went to exclusive private preparatory schools; in mine, I had to dress for chapel and sing Protestant hymns three times a week (the Jewish kids mumbled whenever the name of Jesus came up).

Some of this behavior can be understood as a response to the then-dominant American ethos. To be ethnically distinct was frowned upon; the ideal at the time was the WASP, the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant who behaved properly and spoke genteelly. (In fact, there seemed to be an equation between 'genteel' and 'gentile.') At the same time, the historical predicament of the Jews exaggerated their need to conform: centuries of anti-Semitism culminating in the unspeakable atrocities of

the Holocaust resulted in a sense that to stand out as a Jew was to be in danger. Survival could be obtained only by denying one's identity and blending in.

We all react differently to the circumstances of our origins. My brother, seven years older, tried to follow the path of adaptation. He went, by his own choice, to a military academy for preparatory school, then to business school, the army and finally the business world itself. He married a Protestant woman (whose family had converted from Judaism and become Episcopalians) in a secular ceremony and had his wedding party at the St Regis Hotel in New York – at that time a prestigious and distinctly non-Jewish setting. He dressed in Brooks Brothers suits (the Protestant uniform) and prepared me for university by outfitting me in a similar way. Somehow, in the end, it all went wrong. His business career faltered, his marriages failed and his children were taken away (and ultimately raised as Protestants in deep-South Mississippi). He took to drinking and using drugs and died alone in an apartment in Miami. After his death, his daughters found seven guns in the apartment and rooms filled with old newspapers.

I responded in a different way. As a child, my favorite radio program was *The Shadow*, a daily serial preceded by a deep-voiced announcer intoning, 'Who knows what evil dwells in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows.' I identified with the Shadow and wanted to know the things that were being kept hidden, the painful and horrible events that were never – and perhaps could never be – spoken of. No wonder that I later became obsessed with the Holocaust and devoured the literature and film devoted to it. To me, the horror of the Holocaust revealed the ultimate evil dwelling in the hearts of men; I wanted to know about it and to try to understand it. What was not spoken of became the one thing I had to keep in mind at all times.

This is in part a book about understanding trauma, the shattering event that marks a life. It is also a book about the ways that different people respond to such events, in particular the different ways by which they try to find adequate means to come to terms with what has happened to them and to others, to find ways to understand and to be able to live with the memory of what has occurred. Any book about trauma has also to be a book about memory, about how we live with the pain of the past. At the same time, it has to be about the future; our past changes as we re-imagine it in terms of new possibilities for the life ahead of us. Trauma, memory and imagination are united in our

understanding and in our way of being. The way we remember the past and imagine the future affects the way we live in the present. Therefore it is essential for us to understand what has happened and to come to terms with it so as to be able to go on living.

What is the proper way to understand trauma? We have to distinguish between the event itself and the categories we employ to think about it. 'Trauma' is not trauma; the concept is different from the experience. In this book, I critically re-examine the concepts by which contemporary thinking has attempted to understand traumatic experience and its aftermath by seeing what assumptions about human experience underlie them and what is the image of human existence that they imply. I also try to develop new ways of understanding trauma that are more adequate to the experience of shattering and fragmentation which is characteristic of this kind of experience. In doing so, I am led to a different conception of human existence than the one that the dominant tradition has given us.

Many of the prevailing conceptions of trauma in psychology and the social sciences seem to me to be inappropriate for understanding human suffering. Paradoxically, the very concepts by means of which contemporary thinking in the human sciences (especially in psychology) have tried to understand trauma have resulted in making it unintelligible. Consequently, practice based on this kind of thinking prohibits people from making sense of their lives in ways that enable them to live productively.

How can we understand trauma in a meaningful way? It seems to me that trauma cannot be properly grasped in a purely cognitive manner. The experience of fragmentation which traumatic suffering entails resists any approach which assumes that experience can be mastered and known through rational discourse. Such a discourse, which is fundamental for our conception of science, is based on the assumption that the subject is capable of mastering existence through knowledge. Reason thus aims for a totality of understanding in which the elements of a field are connected through their mutual significance. Trauma, on the other hand, fragments experience and prevents any totalization into a whole. In so doing, it robs suffering of its meaning. Trauma doesn't mean anything, it just *is*.

How then can we do justice to trauma? How can we represent this kind of experience without giving it a meaning that would integrate it into a systematic whole and thus rob it of its essential character?

I believe that the experience of trauma demands a new conception of the human being, one that is not based on thinking of humans as subjects capable of the mastery of existence through knowledge. We are powerless before trauma; it overwhelms us and plunges us into chaos. And we cannot master it retrospectively through the kind of knowledge that seeks to give it meaning within the totality of experience.

The premise of this book is that only an artistic approach based on what we might call the 'traumatic imagination' is adequate for comprehending the essence of trauma. Artistic expression has always been a fundamental way in which human beings have tried to discover meaning in their lives. The arts are ways of shaping experience, of finding forms that make sense of life through imaginative transformation. However, the arts themselves have primarily been understood within a perspective that is based on systematic knowledge. Aesthetic theory has comprehended art as providing meaning by showing the harmony and unity that can be found within disparate experiences. In this way, art is imagined as capable of reconciling us with life.

The traumatic imagination, on the other hand, rejects the notion of art as providing meaning in extreme suffering. The Holocaust does not mean anything within a universal pattern of history; nor can it be validated as something that has contributed to our capacity to achieve our goals. Such an attribution of meaning and value verges on the obscene. It robs trauma of its essentially tragic character and turns it into melodrama, a superficial experience that leaves the viewer with a feeling of well-being.

To re-imagine trauma means to find ways of representation that are true to its chaotic and meaningless character. It also means to reject the concept of beauty as the presentation of a harmonious totality and to re-figure it within the horizon of terror. In my view, certain artists, such as Samuel Beckett, have been successful in doing so. They have found new forms for the representation of trauma, forms that call into question the prevailing understanding of both trauma and art.

The traumatic imagination is pre-figured in certain artistic forms of the past as well, especially in that of Greek tragedy. If we can understand trauma within the perspective of tragedy, we will see that far from eliminating the pity and the terror of experience, tragedy helps us purify them of their sentimental degradation and face them full on. Tragedy employs what has been called a 'Dionysiac poetics' (Segal 1997), an artistic form that is based on the experience of fragmentation

characteristic of the mythical depiction of a god whose essence is to be torn apart and scattered, as seeds are sown in the springtime before their fruits can be gathered in the fall.

The traumatic imagination is also at work spontaneously in the art of those who suffer from mental disorders. So-called 'outsider art,' even when it is appropriated by the dominant discourse of the art world, challenges the aesthetic canon. Its chaotic disorder suits the experience of those who make it and shows us that Dionysian *poiesis* is alive on a naive as well as a sophisticated level.

The arts therapies themselves must be re-imagined in order to make room for this kind of work. We need a therapy of the imagination, one that respects it not as a means toward cognitive understanding but as valuable in its own right. In order to do so, art therapy must be based on a new conception of aesthetics, one in which the traumatic imagination is at the center. One goal of this book is to provide a framework in which to situate a therapy based on the arts. My contention is that in order to do so, we must also re-imagine both art and therapy in ways that take account of the fragmentation that trauma brings. We need to understand the workings of the traumatic imagination and the Dionysian forms to which it gives rise. A meaningful conception of trauma must make room for the imagination; otherwise, we will remain stuck in the past. The imagination takes us forward into the future. If it is rooted in what has actually happened and is not pure fantasy, the imagination can find new artistic forms to represent human suffering.

Not all art is about trauma and human suffering by any means; the arts celebrate the joy that life brings as much as they mourn the losses that mark it. Celebration and mourning are both part of human existence; they have found expression in song, dance, drama, visual art and poetry since human beings have existed on this earth. *Poiesis*, the capacity to shape our experience through the imagination, must take account of both dimensions of our lives. In this book, however, I will focus on the ways in which the arts can come to terms with human suffering. What is the art of trauma? Is *poiesis* capable of responding adequately to suffering? What forms must it develop to do so? Can trauma be represented? In what way? All experience resists representation, trauma perhaps most of all. How can we possibly find a way to represent the unrepresentable, to place an experience that overwhelms us into a delimited form? How, above all, to transform terror into beauty, since all art strives after beauty? What we need is a new way of thinking

about trauma that incorporates the imagination, moving away from the view of trauma as the pure repetition of the past. We need to re-imagine trauma in order to understand the role that the imagination plays in the experience of human suffering. In order to do so, we must deconstruct 'trauma' to see how the concept blocks imagination and artistic transformation. But we cannot stop there – we must also look at successful ways of shaping traumatic experience imaginatively. We must study the art of trauma. And we must, as well, look at those modes of practice, both psychological and artistic, that bring an imaginative perspective to bear. We must not only criticize the past; we must also look forward to a possible future.

In a way, this book is an impossible project. It attempts to speak about the unspeakable, and so must necessarily fail in this attempt. Suffering cannot be mastered through understanding; nor, for that matter, can joy. But awareness of our ultimate inability to subject existence to thought does not relieve us of the obligation to think, to attempt to come as close as we can to understanding our experience. Failure to do so means that we will continue to think in unexamined ways, limiting our practice and perhaps even harming those we hope to help.

The book is an essay – in the sense of an attempt, a trial. It is not a scholarly work that tries to do justice to the vast literature on trauma today. Nor is the book a work based primarily on clinical practice. Rather it is a philosophical attempt to think about that which defies understanding.

The kind of thinking which the comprehension of trauma requires must itself incorporate the experience of chaos and fragmentation. It cannot therefore take the form of a system of knowledge but rather must consist of a series of inquiries linked by an underlying concern, inquiries that proceed circuitously along different pathways but nevertheless attempt to arrive at the same destination. The disparate writings contained herein are focused on certain key concepts that recur again and again in different contexts, particularly the concepts of *poiesis* (making, especially art-making) and *mimesis* (imitation or representation). This repetition is apropos: trauma repeats itself, and a discourse that attempts to come to terms with trauma will have to find a form of representation in which repetition can coincide with difference. Such a form can be found only in the poetic (or 'poietic') shaping that can encompass the chaos and fragmentation of traumatic experience without promising any harmonious overcoming of contradiction. To

understand this kind of *poiesis* requires a new conception not only of aesthetics but also of human existence itself. If I have not succeeded in this goal, I hope at least to have been 'on the way' to it.

Finally, I hope that readers will find this kind of thinking challenging enough to motivate them to engage in a similar quest for understanding, a quest which can, perhaps, give rise to new forms of imaginative practice, both therapeutic and artistic, that are adequate to our experience of the suffering which is part of human life.