

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Narrative Medicine and the Healing Nature of Art

Erna Cooper · Wednesday, January 13th, 2016

New research in psychology and medicine has made references to narratives of illness and trauma and to the role of perception in making an impact on the fate of living cells and overall well-being. The new science of epigenetics argues that cell receptors are more responsible than DNA for cell life and reproduction. Their function is to read information in the outside world and either block or allow beneficial or harmful elements into the cell structure that would determine its fate – the possibility of mutation, self-defense, and life-span. This science has likewise suggested that the mind-body connection is not just a new-age trend or philosophy but more real than imagined. One's state of mind, specifically parasympathetic and chemical responses in the brain, may, in some cases, alter perception to the extent that these factors may, in some instances, completely re-program the immune system. Although initially suspect, this previously esoteric view of the human body has now been adopted by medical schools around the world. Harvard and Columbia medical schools, to name a few, now teach a subject called "narrative medicine" to assist medical students not only with improved bedside manner, but with understanding the healing impact of art and personal expression on the human body and its recovery from illness and trauma. As Dr. Bruce Lipton aptly states, in *The Biology of Belief*, there is now a 'science-based path that would take me from my job as a perennial "victim" [of my environment] to my new position as a "co-creator" of my destiny.'

This belief in the self as a co-creator not only defines new avenues of medical research, but underlies over a thousand years of autobiographical writing, from Augustine's Confessions to the Existentialist Autobiography. In recent years, post-modern literature and art theory have contributed a new chapter on the art of healing – be it healing through the medium of photography, cinéma, painting or literature. In fact, there is a strong tradition amongst twentieth-century French writers to discuss the role art plays in the re-enactment of loss, or in the experience of grief and recovery.

In *Reflections on Photography*, Roland Barthes explores this phenomenological view as a departure from classical art, which, pre-Christian writer, Boethius (who influenced both Chaucer and Shakespeare) referred to as a nurse and healer – as a lost feminine in the shape of an allegorical figure, Poesy, who was to console the tortured man for his crimes, regrets an impending death. In his work, *The Consolation of Philosophy* (written in prison), Poesy proclaims: "Are you the man who was nourished upon the milk of my learning, brought up with my food until you had won your way to the power of a manly soul?" Rather than anthropomorphizing art as a lost feminine or compensatory figure, the last century brought thinkers such as Roland Barthes and the Existentialists out into the open, which held a more active and organic view of artistic media. In his book, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Barthes writes:

[Classical phenomenology, [...] had never, so far as I could remember, spoken of desire or of mourning. [However,] the anticipated essence of the Photograph could not, in my mind, be separated from the “pathos” of which it consists. [Thus, as] Spectator, I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound.]

Camera Lucida is simultaneously an inquiry into the nature and essence of photography and a eulogy to Barthes's mother. It considers the effects of photography on the spectator through a meditation on the lasting emotional effect of certain personal photographs. Barthes thus sees photography as an artistic medium that cannot be reduced to the codes of language or culture, yet acts on the body and the mind. The book specifically develops the joint concepts of studium and punctum: studium referring to the cultural, linguistic, and political interpretation of a photograph, with punctum denoting the visceral experience: the wounding, ‘human’ aspects of the aesthetic, establishing a direct relationship between the object or person within it and the viewer.

Barthes studied the inner, subjective light of the individual in his or her reception of photographic light and its transference of image, feelings and memory. Likewise, ‘60s filmmaker Marguerite Duras (writer of Cannes award-winning film, *Hiroshima mon amour*) explored light and dark as both spectral and organic. She translated into her own experience the dynamics of chiaroscuro – a painting term inherited from Renaissance portraiture, now used in cinematography. It is also a term I have used in the past to describe a female subjective space in Duras's work, one couched in fluctuations of presence and absence, memory and forgetting, one's experience of visibility and invisibility within political and social power structures. It is a term that also describes the contradictory way in which Duras saw her ‘success’ and prominence in artistic circles, and as a woman working before and behind the camera. In *The Lorry* (a film largely shot in ‘chiaroscuro’), she writes entire scenes in a dark room, where both film and truth are exposed and developed (with actor Gérard Depardieu by her side). This room is symbolic for the obscure truth of the unconscious and of the forgotten lives of exiles, refugees, outcasts and the unborn. In *Destroy, She Said*, and elsewhere in her corpus, Duras refers to writing and filmmaking as acts both of remembering and forgetting traumatic events from her life, and as media through which to combat and cope with injustices, displacements and unrealized desires. For her, the camera acts as an all-seeing eye, or confessional “which overarches all these people who are watching each other”. It acts as something higher and beyond the narcissistic world of human engagement (which occupies a great deal of her mind). Although an atheist (and, for a time, anarchist) Duras considered both writing space and the camera lens as fulfilling a God-like subjective space serving as “a last court of appeal” to the frustrated, static and marginalized. It functions as something beyond herself as narrator, and beyond her characters, too (95). It is a watcher, an observer, the sign of hope for change. It represents the possibility that one is seen and acknowledged, that one's loss and grief have been registered somewhere in an otherwise indifferent world. It is to make the invisible matter.

For many writers and artists in history, the camera, the written word and the painter's canvas have served to acknowledge not only the wealthy and prominent, but the unseen and neglected in life, society or memory. They offer an opportunity to register new feelings about the world and experience, and to recall old ones. In addition to death, of course, art is an equalizer of the high and low in society, a medium through which all of us may share the same subjective sphere, linking what was formerly the ‘worthy’ and ‘unworthy’ and erasing the boundaries between us.

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References:

In his work, *The Consolation of Philosophy* (written in prison), Poesy proclaims: ‘Are you the man who was nourished upon the milk of my learning, brought up with my food until you had won your

way to the power of a manly soul?”” See: Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 524-5 AD; trans. 2009 by W. V. Cooper, *Ex-Classics Project* <http://www.exclassics.com/consol/consol.pdf> (p. 9).

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