

EMPLOTTING FORGIVENESS: NARRATIVE, FORGETTING AND MEMORY

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Abstract

Miroslav Volf has provocatively argued that redemption necessitates forgetting (1996, 2006). Yet, Volf's claims insufficiently consider the narrational configuration of memory. This essay utilises Paul Ricoeur's work on mimesis in order to challenge Volf's case for forgetting. The author advances Ricoeur's philosophical description of forgiveness toward a theological account of divine forgiveness as re-narration, gift-giving funded by trinitarian abundance.

IN *The Things They Carried* Tim O'Brien writes, 'What stories can do, I guess, is make things present.'¹ O'Brien reflects on war memories that endure as burdens and blessings, past things *carried* in the present: 'By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened, like that night in the shit field, and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain.'² In this essay, I explore the salvific powers of stories, what O'Brien describes as 'saving life with a story', and suggest that divine forgiveness entails re-inscribing stories of sin within God's story of forgiveness. I initially consider Miroslav Volf's compelling case for forgetting. I then turn to Paul Ricoeur's contention that emplotment offers concordance out of discordance by way of the storyteller's *phronetic* use of narrative. My account of forgiveness continues through Ricoeur's analysis of fault and forgiveness and concludes with a trinitarian account of God's forgiveness as intimated by O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*.

I. THE CASE FOR FORGETTING

Miroslav Volf's *The End of Memory* makes a forceful case for forgetting.³ For Volf, memory acts as both 'shield' and 'sword' as it re-presents, making things present again.⁴ In his earlier *Exclusion and Embrace*, Volf portends forgetting because 'the memory of exclusion is another form of exclusion'.⁵

An eternity of worship without forgetting would open up an eternity of hellacious memories. For Volf the embrace of infinite beauty requires the exclusion of that which has excluded beauty. In *The End of Memory*, Volf clarifies what he *does not* and *does* mean by forgetting. Volf does not mean forgetting as evasion of suffering. Justice requires memory which cannot be dispensed in order to evade reckoning. And yet, the injunction to remember carries within itself an allowance for forgetting: ‘Remember, yes; but for *how long?*’⁶ Rather than shackling time to infinite repetition, Volf extols ‘how to remember rightly’ so that memory, having impelled forgiveness and reconciliation, might go beyond itself, and having finished its dirty work, might rest in an ‘after’ memory:

After Christ has completed the work of salvation . . . *after* the wrongdoers and the wronged have entered that world which cannot be undone . . . *after* the Last Judgment . . . *after* the perpetrators have been accused and victims vindicated, after they have embraced . . . *after* all these occurrences—the memories of wrongs suffered will be released.⁷

Much memory will be redeemed, according to Volf, but not everything can or should be redeemed. That which cannot be redeemed will be forgotten. Volf refers to two things here. First the commencement of eternal worship will turn attention away from—‘not coming to mind’—the memory of suffering. Volf makes a careful distinction: ‘We will not “forget” so as to be able to rejoice: we will rejoice and therefore let those memories slip out of our minds.’⁸ Second, Volf means God’s casting away of memory, the return of evil to its nothingness, the completion of disordered being in the darkness of non-being.⁹ Rather than harmonised, evil and suffering will be ‘driven out’ once justice has been restored. For Volf, memory acts like a placeholder for justice so that once justice has been served and history drawn into God’s joy, creation no longer needs to remember and will finally be allowed to forget.

Volf appreciates forgetting’s usefulness and invokes Nietzsche’s ‘uses’ of history where the philosopher argues that without forgetting, one might bleed to death from a scratch.¹⁰ As Amos Oz asks, ‘Apart from the obligation to remember, is there also a right to forget?’¹¹ Volf seeks to articulate *why* erasure is needed and *how* it takes place. Hence, Volf’s ‘conviction that memory can be redeemed, at least partially’ admonishes forgetting utterly those things that cannot be redeemed completely.¹²

Yet Volf’s case for forgetting begs what he means by redemption. If we agree with Volf that scripture and tradition advocate ‘forgetting’ then what exactly does forgetting entail? I concur with Volf regarding the dangers of memory, the desire to forget, and something of a Christian allowance for forgetting. However, I digress when Volf extols forgetting the unredeemable

and challenge the notion that reconciliation involves such a distinction, as if forgetting marks the limits of redemption. Rather than dividing memory between the redeemable and forgettable, I want to suggest that forgiveness comes as a gift of re-narration, the engrafting of memories of horror into God's redemption of *all* things. Here I mean a type of recapitulation, where human history, and its manifold memories, is drawn into God's life of love, which needs not forget.

II. FROM PARADOX TO MIMESIS

By demonstrating the configured nature of representation Paul Ricoeur elides the historiographic duality between fiction and history.¹³ Both, he shows, operate within the 'narrative field'.¹⁴ The past comes to the present through shared stories communities call 'memories'.¹⁵ Whatever the originary event-in-itself is, or whether it *is* at all, matters less than how it gets carried forward through memory. In this sense, speaking of the past 'as past' gets ahead of itself since prior to memorisation it subsists inchoate and fragmented. Stories organise meaning from the bits and pieces that comprise pre-narrated memory.¹⁶

Ricoeur looks to Aristotle's *poiēsis* as 'the triumph of concordance over discordance'. Concordance obtains through the activity of *muthos* which orders a story's various parts under the priority of action, most critically emphasising the 'what' (plot, character, thought) above the 'by which' (language and melody) then positioning character and theme subordinate to plot. As such, plot appears as the 'first principle' or the purpose of the story. Ricoeur writes, 'Artisans who work with words produce not things but quasi-things, they invent the as-if.'¹⁷ Emplotment as the 'organization of events' means mimesis does not involve imitation as *recollection* of a numinous universal but rather 'mimetic activity inasmuch as it produces something'.¹⁸

Concordance arises by way of wholeness, magnitude and coherence. An order of events comes about by wholeness whereby respective moments are situated as beginning, middle and end, which find their meaning *as* beginning, middle and end. It is not that the beginning simply lacks antecedent, but more so that as storied, it is not necessary. The end, following the logic of the story, has a necessary conclusion as related to its succession from the middle. 'To understand the story is to understand how and why the successive episodes (actions, events, etc.) led to this conclusion.'¹⁹ The plot is logical not chronological.²⁰ Plot is primarily about praxis, 'neighboring on *phronesis*, which is the intelligent use of action'.²¹ The priority of praxis means that the plot has a universal feature by its own internal logic. Narrative imagines its own world taken as given without question as a good story has the ability to create the world. In stories, plots are valid not because they correspond to external facts but more so because they make sense in their own worlds and events are

organised not as 'one thing after another' but rather 'one thing because of another'. Because nothing is accidental, from the ad hoc springs the intelligible, from the singular the universal, the necessary from the episodic.

III. FROM MIMESIS TO FORGIVENESS

At the conclusion of *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricoeur completes his phenomenological analysis of memory with an epilogue on forgiveness.²² Ricoeur considers forgiveness in 'the tone of an eschatology of the representation of the past'.²³ For him, forgiveness does not arise logically within the economy of human action, where it is most needed, and indeed he remains uncertain how it exists at all. Rather, forgiveness hovers as a kind of promise over human being, floating amorphously like a dream over the world of time, 'the spirit of forgiveness'.

Forgiveness unfolds as a problematic in Ricoeur's analysis. Though fault may be held as a given, forgiveness, even its very possibility, cannot be presumed. Forgiveness does not make sense, especially within the claims of justice such that its conveyance arrives as an amoral imposition.²⁴ Hence, the ubiquity of guilt appears in a world devoid of even the possibility of forgiveness. The world desperately needs forgiveness but does not have it. The more the world demands it, the more forgiveness, refusing to have its presence taken for granted, retreats.

The appearance of forgiveness amidst fault condescends from nowhere, or more precisely, 'from the heights of love to the depths of fault', and only as such can it be. Forgiveness arrives disproportionately, the unequal, the stranger and the other. The presence of forgiveness is its only mandate. Against the impossibility of forgiveness, Ricoeur proclaims, 'There is forgiveness.'²⁵ By its miraculous 'thereness' forgiveness changes everything. That forgiveness is there at all indicates nothing is unforgivable precisely because while no horror is forgivable, still forgiveness forgives. In this way, forgiveness speaks of love. For Ricoeur, love can forgive since constituted by a different temporality it comes from elsewhere. Like love, or better yet *as* love, the sheer alterity of forgiveness reveals another world, its absurd appearance in time presages hope beyond hope.

Ricoeur characterises forgiveness as a face-to-face encounter of contrasting speech acts: asking for and granting forgiveness. In the event of forgiveness, the distance between the depth of fault and the height of forgiveness *may* now go obscured by the face-to-face exchange. Horizontal proximity, being there with one another, closes the gap between fault and forgiveness by flipping vertical difference on its side. Now the relation is one of proximity and willingness to embrace. The offer of forgiveness, 'I forgive you', performatively does what it says.²⁶

Ricoeur's concept of exchange brings to the fore *reciprocal* gift-giving. He points to the *three* moments of exchange: giving, receiving and giving in return. He anticipates the obvious rejoinder: If there are *three* movements, then there is no difference between fault and forgiveness since both bring gifts. Yet this goes to the heart of Ricoeur's point about the impossibility of forgiveness: forgiveness forgives even when it has not been appropriately sought. It presupposes disequilibrium. Forgiveness acts *as if* one were culprit rather than victim and *as if* the guilty bear gifts. In the terms of *muthos*, it invents the 'as-if'. Gifts can be reciprocally exchanged only because the vertical difference between the height of forgiveness and the depth of fault has been condescended. Victim and perpetrator now share a level playing field. By virtue of exchange both persons give and receive. Giving here connotes both giving gifts as well as giving up, relinquishing vertical distance and its attending power. In figuring forgiveness Ricoeur does not trifle as he unsparingly depicts forgiveness' many vulnerabilities. Unilateral giving can never absolve in the way forgiveness must. It leaves the receiver once again indebted—indeed doubly so!—to the point of precluding freedom, condemning the guilty to endless repetition, eternal recurrence of agency gone awry.

But what is this third movement? What could the forgiver hope to receive in return? Speaking of 'the complete reconstruction of this relation', Ricoeur offers a dangerous proposition: friendship by way of repentance.²⁷ One does not forgive knowing or expecting the other will repent, just as one does not genuinely give just to receive. Rather, the possibility of repentance exists seminally within forgiveness itself. Forgiving and repentance both draw on the 'original predisposition to good' from whence agency gains power. The circle of forgiveness and repentance enacts native potencies that sometimes end in violation but more often spring from and toward goodness.²⁸ Thus, at its heart the exchange of forgiveness and repentance has as its goal the restoration of the self.²⁹ In seeking, receiving and giving repentance, the self comes home to restored possibility:

Under the sign of forgiveness, the guilty person is to be considered capable of something other than his offense and his faults. He is held to be restored to his capacity for acting, and action restored to its capacity for continuing... The formula for this liberating word, reduced to the bareness of its utterance, would be: you are better than your actions.³⁰

IV. TRINITY, FORGIVENESS AND GIFT

Rhetorically Ricoeur arrives at his productive though afflicted image of forgiveness through a series of objections. His description is less proclamation than resignation. Ricoeur is not bearing witness but rather thinking out loud.

After all his work on forgiveness comes as postscript, an afterthought to his more central concerns of history and memory. This is certainly appropriate given the temerity of his subject matter: memory of horror. Yet considering the astonishing power of his account, both its invitation to friendship and peril to self, one leaves Ricoeur's ruminations humbled yet wanting more. The three texts from which he draws—the Abrahamic tradition, Jesus' commandment to love enemies, and Paul's 'hymn to love'—serve more as literary enigmas to be unraveled and 'symbols' of what could be rather than the boundary-exploding metaphors of his earlier work. In other words, Ricoeur's 'thereness' of forgiveness borders on the vacuous, more 'almost-not-thereness' than concrete expression, an *idea* of an impossible possibility rather than a determinative way of life. As Ricoeur muses 'the spirit of forgiveness', L. Gregory Jones points to practices of forgiveness and the communities that inculcate them. Jones' profession of the triune God's superabundance, a friendship that makes possible impossible friendship—the stated *telos* of Ricoeur's forgiveness—allows him to avow communities and practices of forgiveness. Thus, Jones picks up where Ricoeur abruptly left off: with Jesus' command to love enemies and the eternity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Jones begins, like Volf and Ricoeur, by describing the severe demands of forgiveness, noting specifically the cost of forgiveness, the tendency toward revenge, and the prevalence and egregious nature of violence. Jones also wonders whether some evils exceed the resources of forgiveness.³¹ Yet in his account, exemplification after exemplification makes visible amazing reservoirs for reconciliation. Jones would agree with Ricoeur regarding forgiveness' unremitting strictures as well as its miraculous 'thereness', but he goes beyond Ricoeur. For him, forgiveness is not only 'there' but a specific formation of virtues cultivates the habits and character rudimentary to its actuality. As with Volf and Ricoeur, for Jones human being in a world of multifarious others renders forgiveness nearly impossible *and* indispensable for communion. Volf, Ricoeur and Jones all speak of forgiveness in the midst of a blessed world gone awry, where evil rules on the back of goodness and human flourishing bequeaths innumerable dangers. All three describe creaturely existence as ineluctably social so that those who refuse the impetations of forgiveness forfeit authenticity. Each brings to the fore an unrelenting temporality, where the past—replete with slights, failures, betrayals, murders and atrocities—haunts the present and future as trace remainders. In such a world, forgiveness becomes the practice par excellence of navigating the dangers and joys of existence, the condition *sine qua non* mediating finite lives with infinite finite others, the means of exercising our wills on the dogged imprecations of time and exorcising spectral horrors that curse every future with life sapping repetition. Therefore, in conceiving forgiveness—what it is, how it works, from whence it comes—everything is

at stake. In the midst of sin, forgiveness makes happiness possible. We are saved with stories of forgiveness. Or more precisely, for Jones, creatures are forgiven and made able to forgive by the God who forgives. For Jones, any Christian account of forgiveness must be situated within an account of the forgiving God and God's gathered community. After all, God not only creates all that exists but completes creation's existence. To forgive is to become more like God and to become more like God is in turn to become more fully human. Ricoeur rightly depicts forgiveness as eschatological for in every instance of genuine forgiveness, God proleptically discloses not only God but also creation's consummation.

Figuring an enduring description of forgiveness requires first mapping forgiveness onto a full doctrine of God, locating its immanent 'thereness' within the superabundance of God's trinitarian life. For Jones, the critical ground of forgiveness is 'God lives'. Persons in relation, indeed in love, comprise this living.³² The Trinity's eternality means that the divine persons draw from an infinite source of being, lacking nothing, and are therefore constituted by giving from the overflow of God's life. Gifts between these three overflow as 'pure self-gift'.³³ 'Overflow' should not be thought here as accidental spilling-over. Rather, God's love is such that God *ex convenientia* wills overabundance. God's life as the eternal God is complete, but in terms of time and creation, that completion is more than complete, infinitely more. In the eternal begetting of the Son, the Father gives the gift of being, which the Son receives eternally as the Word of God. The Son returns this gift by his obedience to, glorification and revelation of the Father. Similarly, the Spirit proceeds from Father, gives the gift of life, and like Father and Son is worshipped and glorified.

Forgiveness is necessary in part because gift-giving amongst creatures differs divine gift-giving between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God's eternality contains no distance or gap between giving and receiving just as no rivalry ensues between the divine wills. However, creation is governed by time and its slippages. In time, real questions loom over giving, reception and reciprocity. The confrontation of potentiality and actuality unfolds serially as the *existentielle* of time. Whereas in God's eternal life no temporal delay divides desire and satiation, for creatures bound to time, patience proves the most determinative virtue in order to live between desire and satisfaction. Sin widens 'utterly' the temporal gap between persons. A hunger to possess, compete and dominate all but destroy the desire to give and live together. According to Jones, the regnant image of God infuses creation with harmony. However, as sin mars the *imago dei*, *privatio boni* so distorts communion that the creature abdicates her life with others. Solitude and hoarding become not only the consequence of absconding God's life, but creation's adopted *ultima ratio*. Forsaking the divine image's life of gift-giving, hope in the interstices between

giving and receiving must now be coupled with forgiveness. Here, the gap between persons becomes a chasm and factious myths of scarcity raise the stakes of war to no end. Difference bequeathed by time becomes distention, where time itself becomes menacing, tossing to and fro souls twisted in the strains and inadequacies of gift-giving. Created by gift, creatures long to receive again. Created for giving, they long to give. Yet, detached from God's life as the source of giving and receiving, creatures now fashion gifts with greedy hands, gifts now given with demands and hidden, and not so hidden, agendas. The world gets violently divided between 'mine' and 'yours', a cycle of selfishness enacted by contiguous revolutions of violence. Lack rather than abundance becomes the ethos of our lives with one another and the earth. Forgiveness becomes the only way of return to God's circle of gift-exchange. Since avarice has enervated the resources to give, forgiveness requires once again—or more precisely, again and again—God's giving from the superabundant stores of his own life.

God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ completes the circle of exchange. Dispossessed of the circle of eternal gift-giving, Jesus makes his dwelling in the world's circle of scarcity. Everything sinners voraciously demand, Jesus gives by offering himself. God submits the Son to the brutal smash and grab anti-drama of sinful humanity. The circle of scarcity needs to be fed something. Jesus offers himself: 'This is my body given for you' (Luke 22:19). In refusing to pull back from the mad feeding frenzy, in allowing himself consumed, God gives the world more, abundantly more, than it could ever ask or imagine, even enough to give again.

V. FORGIVENESS AS GIFT-EXCHANGE

Against every expectation, forgiveness makes its dwelling in the world. The 'thereness' of forgiveness, which Ricoeur spoke of as coming from above, is displayed in the 'thereness' of the Word's gathered community. These gifts do not equal God's gift, for no gift can. Nor does God's self-giving require such a gift, for God's gift cannot be anticipated. Rather, God in forgiving, in giving Jesus to the world, simultaneously restores and empowers creation for communion with God. *Within* God's forgiveness subsists the possibility of reciprocity. In forgiving, God through his Spirit renews. The newness of redeemed creation returns to God. According to Ricoeur's depiction of gift-exchange, unilateral gift-giving renders the recipient paralyzed before the gift, devoid of action and therefore personhood. She becomes nothing but her sin. Unable to reverse her actions, the past returns to her endlessly through memory. At this point, Volf admonishes forgetting. For Volf, before memory's relentless repetition, forgetting becomes critical, even attractive and responsible. Accordingly, forgiveness rends personhood: the forgiven and the

sinner—*Simul justus simul peccator*, the former ‘rapt in the enjoyment of God’, the latter cast into ‘the double *nihil* of nonexistence’. In contrast, forgiveness as configured through Ricoeur’s reciprocal exchange allows the sinner to become more than her sin, a sinner who has been forgiven and in that forgiveness becomes more than a sinner. Forgiveness does not beget bifurcated persons—half righteous and worthy of remembrance and half unredeemed and forgettable—but rather a person whose story has been retold. Again, gift-exchange in this vein does not foment equal exchange but relationship akin to worship.

The triadic structure of being-in-time, past–present–future, warrants a triadic structure to gift-giving: Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Resurrection Sunday. The memory of horror stops humanity dead in its tracks: repeating the past, haunting the present and forestalling the future. Likewise, forgiveness revisits the past, forgives in the present, and makes a way forward for the future. If forgiveness mandates only giving and receiving without giving in return, then one can never truly be free from the past, as Volf so astutely observes, and so the future requires forgetting. The Christian vision of forgiveness promises more. And it demands more. It avails the future, makes going on possible, but does not do so by disappearing that which makes going on unattainable. Rather reciprocity opens the door for any kind of exchange. Since forgiveness empowers, the forgiven may wield her reconstituted subjectivity resentfully. This potential always remains and genuine forgiveness does not seek to foreclose it. Dispossession means relinquishing rights to self for the sake of the other, knowing full well that the other has now been armed to respond in kind *or* in violence. Hence, going on may mean little more than a precarious peace. However, such peace may also open onto friendship, foreshadowing futures with God. Between past and future, forgiveness exemplifies human acting in the world, countenancing infinite possibilities. Rather than reversal, repetition and forgetting, Christians receive the past through forgiveness. In empowering the previously guilty, by ‘descending the heights of forgiveness to the depths of fault’, as Ricoeur puts it, forgiveness offers, ‘the prospect of a future not bound by the destructiveness of the past’, as Jones put it.³⁴ Thus, the triadic benediction: ‘You are forgiven. Go in peace, to love God and neighbor, and sin no more.’ As Ricoeur conjectured, forgiveness presages eschatological destiny as it engrafts sinners into the larger story of God’s redemption of *all* things, giving new stories.

VI. THE GIFT OF NEW STORIES

O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* reveals the *lives* of dead people. On O’Brien’s fourth day in America’s bloody war with Vietnam he has his first

encounter with a corpse. Taking sniper fire outside a village, O'Brien's platoon orders an airstrike, which decimates the hamlet. Walking past the ruins, the platoon comes across the lone confirmed kill. There is nothing unique about this dead Vietnamese body—broken limbs, flies and gnats on open flesh—but it is O'Brien's first time and he 'hadn't yet developed a sense of humor'.³⁵ As the other soldiers go about the bizarre ritual of shaking the dead man's hands, O'Brien coils in fear and sickness. As he withdraws into himself, he uncovers a prior memory of a nine year-old girl, Linda, and their first date:

That night, I remember, she wore a new red cap, which seemed to me very stylish and sophisticated, very unusual. It was stocking cap, basically, except the tapered part at the top seemed extra long, almost too long, like a tail growing out of the back of her head. It made me think of the caps that Santa's elves wear, the same shape and color, the same fuzzy white tassel at the tip.

Sitting there in the back seat, I wanted to find some way to let her know how I felt, a compliment of some sort, but all I could manage was a stupid comment about the cap. 'Jeez,' I must've said, 'what a *cap*'.³⁶

O'Brien recounts how after the date things went on as usual, except that Linda continued to wear the red cap to school. As kids mocked and teased her (one boy, Nick Veenhof, repeatedly yanking the cap off and running away as others egged him on), O'Brien remembers, 'Naturally, I wanted to do something about it, but it just wasn't possible. I had my reputation to think about. I had my pride.'³⁷ The teasing continued as did the nine year-old O'Brien's sense of guilt and powerlessness. One day Nick Veenhof again takes off Linda's cap. This time however, the outcome is different:

Somebody must've laughed. I remember a short, tiny echo. I remember Nick Veenhof trying to smile. Somewhere behind me, a girl said, 'Uh,' or a sound like that.

Linda didn't move.

Even now, when I think back on it, I can still see the glossy whiteness of her scalp. She wasn't bald. Not quite. Not completely. There were some tufts of hair, little patches of grayish brown fuzz. But what I saw then, and keep seeing now, is all that whiteness. A smooth, pale, translucent white. I could see the bones and veins; I could see the exact structure of her skull. There was a large Band-Aid at the back of her head, a row of black stitches, a piece of gauze taped above her left ear.

Nick Veenhof took a step backward. He was still smiling but the smile was doing strange things.

The whole time Linda stared straight ahead, her eyes locked on the blackboard, her hands loosely folded at her lap. She didn't say anything. After a time, though, she turned and looked at me across the room. It lasted only a moment, but I had the feeling that a whole conversation was happening between us. *Well?* she was saying, and I was saying, *Sure, okay.*

Later on, she cried for a while. The teacher helped her put the cap back on, then we finished the spelling test and did some finger painting, and after school that day Nick Veenhof and I walked her home.³⁸

Shortly after, Linda died of cancer. After being told of her death, the nine-year-old O'Brien, Timmy, walks home to an empty house, having talked to no one other than Nick Veenhof who had informed him, 'Your girlfriend, she kicked the bucket.'

I drank some chocolate milk and then lay down on the sofa in the living room, not really sad, just floating, trying to imagine what it was to be dead. Nothing much came to me. I remember closing my eyes and whispering her name, almost begging, trying to make her come back. 'Linda,' I said, 'please.' And then I concentrated. I willed her alive. It was a dream, I suppose, or a daydream, but I made it happen. I saw her coming down the middle of Main Street, all alone. It was nearly dark and the street was deserted, no cars or people, and Linda wore a pink dress and shiny black shoes. I remember sitting down on the curb to watch. All her hair had grown back. The scars and stitches were gone. In the dream, if that's what it was, she was playing a game of some sort, laughing and running up the empty street, kicking a big aluminum water bucket.

Right then I started to cry. After a moment Linda stopped and carried her water bucket over to the curb and asked why I was so sad.

'Well, God,' I said, 'you're dead.'

Linda nodded at me. She was standing under a yellow streetlight. A nine-year-old girl, just a kid, and yet there was something ageless in her eyes—not a child, not an adult—just a bright ongoing everness, that same pinprick of absolute lasting light that I see today in my own eyes as Timmy smiles at Tim from the graying photographs of that time.

'Dead,' I said.

Linda smiled. It was a secret smile, as if she knew things nobody could ever know, and she reached out and touched my wrist and said, 'Timmy, stop crying. It doesn't matter.'³⁹

For O'Brien Linda never goes away. She is dead and he recognises that. But by his writing, he brings her back. In his dreaming, he meets with her in secret places, away from a world of death, suffering and atrocities. O'Brien conjures up birthday parties, conversations about life and death, walks together, games to be played and so on. She returns to him in his childhood and later in Vietnam outside that decimated village and then later as he writes stories about decimated villages. A ghost, she stays with him. But her presence does not frighten or destroy but rather blesses, a conclusion and a continuation at the same time. Her memory allows Timmy and later Tim to go on because she remains with him, after his insensitivities and cowardice, after his inability

to speak when warranted and shut up when necessary. She is with him in Vietnam when he kills a man, when he helplessly watches his best friend get sucked under a manure field, and when he gains a sense of humour as a way of coping with unspeakable violence. As a 'middle-aged writer knowing guilt and sorrow' O'Brien still dreams of Linda, meets her in secret places.

And then it becomes 1990. I'm forty-three years old, and a writer now, still dreaming Linda alive in exactly the same way. She's not the embodied Linda; she's mostly made up, with a new identity and a new name, like the man who never was. Her real name doesn't matter. She was nine years old. I loved her and then she died. And yet right here, in the spell of memory and imagination, I can still see her as if through ice, as if I'm gazing into some other world, a place where there are no brain tumors and no funeral homes, where there are no bodies at all. I can see Kiowa, too, and Ted Lavender and Curt Lemon, and sometimes I can see Timmy skating with Linda under the yellow floodlights. I'm young and happy. I'll never die. I'm skimming across the surface of my own history, moving fast, riding the melt beneath the blades, doing loops and spins, and when I take a high leap into the dark come down thirty years later, I realize it is Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story.⁴⁰

O'Brien's story demonstrates how stories save us, how they return the dead and transport the living. Here stories are told again and anew. What was gone is remade, what was killed is given life. For O'Brien, stories must be written. Otherwise he could not survive the memories of Vietnam and his own failings before death. In his dreams, and in his stories, 'in the spell of memory and imagination', O'Brien meets with his fallen comrades, with Linda, with Timmy before death entered the world. In stories, we write not necessarily to report facts, to relate 'the way it was'. Instead, stories create the 'as-if'. We emplot for good, telling stories *as if* they turned out well. We complete what was incomplete and bring concordance out of discordance.

Stories draw forth new plots, enjoining previous characters with new and wonderful strangers who expand and bring new action, reversals, and surprise endings that follow from previously untold middles, offering wholeness to what had been incomplete. Here the time of the world is drawn into another time, an endless epoch that illumines all previous times. The logic of a new story lays bare previous rationalities and attempts at concordance. There memories of horror become parts of a grander narrative called 'the memory of redemption'. The horrid details are not left out but rather retold within a horizon where such horror is understood for what it is and placed on the road to the redemption of all things. New stories allow us to go on because they tell us, 'Your memory of horror is not all that you are.'

We tell our stories within the story of God's self-giving forgiveness, the *muthos* of history. More precisely, we discover our stories there. When God

forgives, he re-narrates our stories. As O'Brien creates secret meeting places with Linda so God in opening the scroll, *gives* coherence, logic, wholeness, plot, character and action to the story of human existence (Revelation 5). The wonderful difference between our story-telling and God's is that while we offer stories seeking redemption (seeking concordance) God gives stories *as* the gift of redemption (giving concordance). Mimesis as the soul's yearning in time is consummated by the 'thereness' of the God who forgives, completing the forgiveness sought by O'Brien's stories. Redemption produces concordance out of discordance, making sense of sin and suffering's incoherence. This claim speaks 'as-if' and concludes, 'It is finished' (John 19:30 and Revelation 21:6). This story brings newness, our acting out of our forgiveness, our returning gifts to God and others, rendering us persons capable of friendship, the *telos* of forgiveness. The *muthos* of this world now plays out on the theatre of faith where new plots, characters, logics and times are given to save lives. On the old world's terms these gifts seemed impossible. Now in the new world, not only are they possible by Jesus' 'thereness', they are germane to our lives in God.

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- ³ Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- ⁵ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 132.
- ⁶ Volf, *The End of Memory*, p. 131.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 182–3.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 214.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 161–5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 62.
- ¹¹ Amos Oz, *The Slopes of Lebanon* (London: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 123.
- ¹² Volf, *The End of Memory*, p. 85.
- ¹³ See Ricoeur's *The Reality of the Historical Past* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1984). Also consider Michael Dummett's classic essay, 'The Reality of the Past' in Michael Dummett (ed.) *Truth and Other Enigmas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).
- ¹⁴ As David Wood puts it, 'Life Prefigures Narrative' in David Wood (ed.) *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 17. See also David Pellauer's commentary in Morny Joy (ed.) *Paul Ricoeur and Narrative: Context and Contestation* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1997), p. xx.
- ¹⁵ For an alternative view, consider Hayden White's 'Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth' in Saul Friedlander (ed.) *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) and Helen M. Buss' 'Women's

- Memoirs and the Embodied Imagination: The Gendering of Genre that Makes History and Literature Nervous' in *Paul Ricoeur and Narrative: Context and Contestation* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1997), pp. 87–96.
- ¹⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative Vol. 1*, trans. K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). See also Ricoeur's 'Narrative Time' in *Critical Inquiry* (Vol. 7, No.1, 1980), pp. 169–90.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- ¹⁸ See Ricoeur's 'Life in Quest of Narrative' in David Wood (ed.) *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 20–33, and James Fodor's exemplary *Christian Hermeneutics: Paul Ricoeur and the Refiguring of Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 189–90.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- ²⁰ See Dan R. Stiver's *Theology after Ricoeur: New Directions in Hermeneutical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), p. 114.
- ²¹ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative Vol. 1*, p. 40.
- ²² Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. K. Blamely and D. Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 57–8. See Ricoeur's prefatory comments in Morny Joy (ed.) *Paul Ricoeur and Narrative: Context and Contestation* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1997), p. xli.
- ²³ Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, p. 457.
- ²⁴ P.E. Digeser and Charles Griswold have recently made similar claims in their respective works *Political Forgiveness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001) and *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- ²⁵ Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, p. 466.
- ²⁶ For the performative nature of language acts, consider J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 100.
- ²⁷ Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, p. 482.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 492.
- ²⁹ On forgiveness as restoration, see Margaret Urban Walker's *Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations after Wrongdoing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
- ³⁰ Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, p. 493.
- ³¹ L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), pp. 5–6, p. 281.
- ³² *Ibid.*, pp. 113–4.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 293.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 287.
- ³⁵ O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, p. 226.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 228–9, p. 230.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 223.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 235.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 237–8.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 245–6.