

## Scene One: Io

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The heifer Io [1] guarded by Argos, on an Athenian Red Figure pitcher, c. 460 BC

So to my first scene: Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*. The play opens with Prometheus, the heroic Titan, brutally tied and staked to a rock by the figures of Strength and Violence. He justifies the acts that have roused the Gods' anger against him. His outrage takes the form of a passionate accusation of Zeus and the new, arriviste Gods on Olympus – and an equally impassioned self-justification for his acts in stealing fire and other exploits, which have defied the Gods. He is a tragic, archetypal figure of human heroic suffering, who will not bend his will or retract his action.

The God of the Sea, Oceanus, rises out of the chasm roaring round the rock where Prometheus struggles against his bonds. He chides him, saying,

Have you not learnt, Prometheus, anger's a disease  
Which words can heal?

But Prometheus holds to his sense of right. He refuses a soft answer. He broods instead on revenge.

Read extracts [1] from Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* said [2].

The move from empathetic sorrow to public apology is unthinkable within the order of Greek fate. Its appearance today, as a response to tragic injustice, results from the growth of our ever deeper investment in concepts such as responsibility, blame, accountability, which search out individual human agents, actors, perpetrators. At the same time, apology can become a secularised ritual that grows out of identity politics and its particular, Ionic aspect of victimhood. Victim politics may have a long reach into the past. It has also acquired a new, less rooted salience – one in which, as Seamus Heaney puts it, grief becomes grievance.

This is where the writing I am committed to converges with the issue. The difficulty that this personal accent on wrongs introduces can become very uncomfortable indeed. Being true to both empathy with an individual and justice in a conflict can produce a bristling, jagged and intractable contradiction. Compassion, empathy – these have become, as Richard Rorty has argued, the grounds of ethical decision-making. But I would like to ensure that history is not lost to view when it is personified in a suffering subject....

Since the 1980s, women writers in particular have been recomposing 'the book of memory' in order to give muted subjects their voice. Novelists such as Toni Morrison and Margaret Atwood are actively engaged in reconstituting, through sympathy and imagination, lost histories and lost strands of courage and invention. They are summoning reserves of 'negative capability' in order to engage passionately with the past.

Adrienne Rich [3], the American poet, has been credited with coining the term, 're-visioning', with reference to the political enterprise, within feminism, of recasting the past, of re-ascribing value, of working against the grain of received opinion and received stories. If history is an agreed fable, as Voltaire said, then any initiative to change things must begin with stories. Adrienne Rich's vision of the writer's engagement includes a dark and mordant perspective on Memory, in *Atlas of a Difficult World*, a fine and complex series of meditations on contemporary issues. One poem begins:

Memory says:

Want to do right? Don't count on me.

Then, as Memory speaks, she remembers the twentieth century and, in the first person, she recalls some of the things that have happened,

I am a canal in Europe where bodies are floating  
I'm a mass grave...  
I'm accused of child death, of drinking blood ...  
There is spit on my sleeve, there are phone calls in the night

This continues, taking us through more of the atrocities and horrors of the recent past. Later, Adrienne Rich asks 'what does it mean to say I have survived?' With fierce irony, she calls for a newly imagined, reactivated history, a new storehouse of stories that will reconfigure Memory – for a way of speaking that forces the silence to open up its secrets.

The embassies of campaigners for apologies belong to this same enterprise. Their popularity reflects the unexpected success, it strikes me, of the fictional revisionist mode since the 1980s. The reason that fiction and women figure in the forefront of this development is that such storytelling has been explicitly concerned with the sufferings of the silenced, invisible, oppressed and unchronicled past – with anonymous, marginal and disappeared peoples. Toni Morrison, in her novel *Jazz* [4] writes, in the narrator's voice, of the black, male protagonist, 'I wanted to be the language that wished him well.' In the field of apology, remembrance can likewise work as language that wishes someone well.

Morrison's fictions, such as *Beloved* [5], embody voices of the voiceless, drawing on first person accounts such as the autobiography of Mary Prince, the first woman to write about a life in slavery. Morrison turned the lens of history around to look, not at the victorious – or defeated – generals of the civil war, but its consequences for ordinary individuals. Through this act of imaginary identification, a writer such as Morrison follows in the footsteps of the abolitionists who supported historical women, such as Mary Prince, to stand witness; she is pressing literature into the service of liberty and justice. But she is doing so today. Hers is not a historical romance, which exploits identification to let us feel how bad it was then. She uncovers the inner, still living scars which the experience laid down, so that everyone can understand the shame, hurt, anger and need for justice that lives on now in the grandchildren of slaves.

An economy of virtue also flourishes around claims of injustice. Like pilgrims kissing the wounds of the crucified Christ, contemporary political subjects seek to touch these springs of sympathy,

and apologists – by consenting and yielding and admitting wrong – strive to reach the same condition of pathos, and consequently partake in the currency of merit. With a dose of sharp scepticism and withering wit, Roy Foster has shown how wishful, imaginary narratives, rather than historical inquiry, have shaped political allegiances and even policy in his recent book, *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making it Up in Ireland* [6]. The new coin of sympathy risks turning into a black market in competitive injury, an inflationary spiral of self-pitying self-justification.

How did we reach this point? How has tragic pathos, such as Aeschylus communicated, or the polyphony a Toni Morrison novel stirringly arouses, become instrumentalised to deepen, justify and routise conflict? How has grief become grievance, to echo Seamus Heaney once more?

The question calls for a detour through the somersaults of the word itself.

Apology's first meaning is vindication. This is the use it was put to in *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, by John Henry Newman [7] – the title for his great testimonial to his conversion from Anglican to Catholic Christianity in nineteenth-century Oxford. Plato calls Socrates' defence at his trial *The Apology*; pleading for his life, against charges of corrupting Athenian youth, Socrates emphatically does not apologise.

How did the concept – and the practice – shift from such righteous reasoning in self-defence to the abject, self-abasing petition of apologising, as we understand it today? From avowal as a vindication, to confession as a formal statement of culpability? From the Promethean stand of heroic defiance, to the adoption of the Ionic suppliant?

The second scene from literature may illuminate the issue: **St Augustine's Confessions** [7].

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[3] <http://www.poets.org/poets/poets.cfm?prmlD=50&CFID=12930436&CFTOKEN=32746297>

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