

CORPUS DELICTI

by

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The body is a micro-universe; a landscape of its own. It is an uncharted land waiting to be discovered. But for something that constitutes the very substance of our whole existence, it is amazing how little we know – or choose to know – about it.

The body was once a blessing to the mind and soul. Children at our best, we'd be running around restlessly, kicking balls, climbing trees and slippery rocks, scratching our knees and bruising our skin, our noses bleeding and our little teeth cracked behind – what else – our mischievous and yet innocent everlasting smiles. Our body was an empty canvas, begging for all our creativity and imagination to fill it up with colorful marks and scars that were in such an ironic way nothing else than traces of life.

One day when I was around ten, my childhood friend Nikos and I were roaming around the beach. A midsummer afternoon, we could feel the warm sunrays hitting our faces, the sand confiscating our feet and the salty breeze whipping our skin, and this sweet abuse of our bodies was alone enough to make us happy. We were pretending to be explorers, as we usually did, and it was not long until we finally found our treasure. Lying there in front of us half-buried in the sand were two pieces of plastic boards. They were about our size, and although their surface was terribly weathered they felt solid and light. In seconds, we were splashing into the water, thrilled with the idea that we had found ourselves two wonderful pieces of surfing boards and we were seconds from transforming into the wild surfers we used to watch in our favorite TV shows.

We never surfed of course. All we would manage to do was get up on the boards with our knees, and before we could even lift ourselves up to stand on them, we would immediately lose our balance and off we fell into the water. And so we did, over and over again, countless times for hours and hours. Falling, and up again; falling, and up again. But, God, what joy we found in all our failure. And all this time, our laughter echoed in the air, mixing with the sounds of the playful seagulls.

When we eventually left the beach we were both exhausted, so when I went to bed that night I was convinced that I would fall asleep in seconds. But the night that was about to follow our adventurous afternoon proved to be a whole new experience. The very boards that had filled us with such joy only hours ago, were indeed so terribly weathered that tiny particles of plastic had come off their surface sticking all over our skin. And thus, as I lay on my bed, a terrible itching started to gradually take control, second by second and inch by inch, until my whole body was so itchy that I had to wake up my mom. So she took me to the shower, grabbed a sponge and almost rubbed my skin off, so as to make sure all the plastic particles were washed away. My whole body was aching from the scratching and the rubbing. And still, when the morning came and Nikos and I met again, all we could do was run to each other giggling and exchanging all the details of each one's tormenting night that now seemed hilarious. Our moms, standing nearby,

were exchanging their own comments on the incident, but in a totally different tone, telling each other how worried they got, and how careless we were for letting such “old junk” touch our bodies. But as they watched us retelling the whole story, laughing it away again and again, some part of their adult seriousness eventually gave in to our childish carefreeness. And so we laughed and laughed, our juvenile bodies next to each other, so different and yet so similar covered in the same reddish marks.

And then time passed, and I grew old enough to start watching action movies and TV shows, captivated by all the action and thrill that my inner child was still craving for. But now all the pain portrayed before my eyes was so much different from the pain shared by two children with itchy skin. Now it was body against body, flesh against flesh, human against human. I remember how every time there was blood or a wounded body portrayed on the screen, my dad rushed and covered my eyes, shouting "don't look, don't look." But most of the times it was too late. The worst part after all was hearing the sufferer screaming in agony, as if the scream was coming straight from their bones, cutting through their flesh to release the pain. The body that was once a blessing had now become a curse.

And as I kept growing older, soon came the time when I'd witness the pain on real people. Bruises and wounds on real human skin; under their clothes, behind their dark glasses or just in plain sight. So different from the ones our bodies carried in our juvenile days. Now I notice the bruises as they transform day by day. First blue, then purple, then yellow. Then they go away from the skin, but they never really go away from the body, because these bruises reach down to the soul, like blue ink permeating page after page after page. Now the body is such a heavy burden to carry on my soul. Because I'm terrified at the thought that the only thing I consider my own, the very substance of my own existence, lies helpless at the disposal of anyone strong enough to dominate it against my own will. Now I wish I were unbreakable. I wish I were a woman of steel, and my body my impregnable fortress. Sometimes I close my eyes and there is this image in my mind of millions of pieces of steel covering gradually my body, inch by inch, like millions of tiny shields; and I can almost hear their sound as they cling to each other securing my body, so soothing and relieving. And then there is another sound that comes to my mind, and this paranoid fear almost goes away: the sound of two ten-year old children on the beach, laughing and laughing under the midsummer sun.

When the Body of the Crime Solves the Mystery

“Corpus Delicti” is a memoir that has emerged in the context of a Narrative Medicine course. An inner journey from my childhood to the very present, “Corpus Delicti” – the body of the crime – is a piece of life-writing that has miraculously managed to undo its own murder.

In “Narratives of Illness” Rita Charon delves into the multi-leveled and significant role of life-writing in both the diagnosis and healing process of any patient. As Charon points out, “[t]he healing process begins when patients tell of the symptoms or even fears of illness –first to themselves, then to loved ones, and finally to health professionals” (65). Similarly to the patients’ oral narratives, life-writing functions as a means of both conscious and subconscious externalization, addressed not only to the health professionals, but first and foremost to the narrator-self. Thus, whether in oral or written form, at the very time that the patients externalize their thoughts, emotions, or fears, putting them into words, they automatically gain some kind of control by rendering their illness “visible,” and it is this “visibility” of what was thus far the “unknown” that strips it of its power over them, enabling the patients to confront it, demystify it and eventually overcome it.

“Corpus Delicti” is essentially built on the grounds of a much shorter version of the story, which is composed as a response to a prompt about a “precious memory” in the context of the same Narrative Medicine course. Thus far, then, it is a story about a childhood memory: my childhood friend Nikos and I sharing an exciting experience which, although challenges the integrity of our bodies, is not something we never regretted, but something that bonds us even more. This, then, could have very well been a story about an adult’s nostalgia for the carefree and innocent days of her long gone childhood; at least that is what I intend it to be –or think I intend it to be– as I am putting this memory down onto the paper. It is also this intention that defines the literary genre through which I present this memory. Thus, the genre of the short story seems the most appropriate and effective one, since my aim is not only to portray the childish carefreeness and the bonding between the two characters, Nikos and me, in the most realistic way possible, but at the same time to portray these characteristics by emphasizing the characters’ own *actions*: their clumsiness, their laughter, even their scratching.

However, as Charon points out, the actual significance of a story is not always straightforward and apparent at first glance. Whether oral or written, the patients’ stories contain crucial yet often “encoded” information and details which both the health professionals and the patients’ themselves are called to “decode” for the healing process to initiate. For instance, Charon explains that every aspect or feature of the story told, the events, facts or people that the patient-narrator chooses to narrate, what the patient chooses to focus on or even the sequence in which these events and facts are narrated, are themselves extremely significant and revealing (66). Hence, taking into consideration Charon’s words as I am reflecting upon this initial short version of the story, I am led to a significant realization: that the very reason why this particular memory can be used in the context of a Medicine Narrative course is because it is a whole new story of its own. The next step for me is to put this “why” into words and make it itself part of the initial story.

This process of re-evaluating the significance of the story is also closely related to what Charon points out about the “time” of the story, which transcends the actual time of the events narrated transforming into a revelation about the “now” of the narrator. Eventually I realize that this is not simply a story about my past, but most importantly, a story about my present. It is a story about the relationship between my self, my body and its fragility but at the same time about the relationship between my self, body, and its fragility on the one hand, and another human being’s self, body and its own fragility on the other. Most importantly, it is a story about the way that these complex and multi-leveled interrelations have transformed through the years, and how this transformation has affected my present self.

Thus, as I start reflecting upon the initial version I realize that the element that plays the most pivotal role, the one that the whole story actually revolves around, is nothing else but our very own bodies. The significance of the body as well as its relation to the self has been a source of considerable dispute for centuries. Since Descartes’s philosophical thesis that separated the mind from the body, the body has been condemned to be perceived as rather unimportant or at least inferior to the mind. It is not accidental that in many worldviews the body, because of its materiality is associated with mortality and by extension with sin, whereas the mind, the soul or the spirit, because of their immateriality are related to immortality and by extension to the purity of a God-like force. However, this depreciation of our corporeality as human beings and Descartes’s mind-body dualism seems to be gradually overturned, as revealed through Charon’s remark that “all roads in the contemporary theory lead to the body” (76). According to the contemporary theories, the body is not merely a material shell that dresses the self but *is* the self, “the very substance of our whole existence” as I mention in my story, and consequently the relationship of the self and the body plays a significant role in life-writing. In this light, I realize this particular memory is so important to me because it conveys this special relationship we have with our bodies as children. During our childhood our bodies alone are enough to become the means or even the source of our happiness, of our self-expression and liberation. Even our own clumsiness, even our “failure” to control our bodies so they can stand up on the surfing boards is an experience on its own, and the minor injuries, as a result both of the fragility of our bodies and these experiences, are considered as trophies.

However, what also makes this memory so precious is the fact that this story is not only about the relationship between me and my body or between Nikos and his, but at the same time about the relationship between each other, between Nikos and me. The relations between individuals are yet another significant parameter in life-writing, as Charon explains:

[r]elation with others has become far more prominent within recent theories of life-writing than it used to be, replacing the monolithic loyalty to the Western concept of the individually constructed self with a realization of the relationally created self [...] Human beings do not come – or create – themselves in autonomous and deracinated acts of will but instead develop over time in concert with others. (74-75)

However, as I keep rethinking my own story, I gradually come to the realization that these two forms of relationship – between our selves and our bodies on the one hand, and between Nikos and me on the other – are not only associated, but also inextricably interrelated. If shared experiences are what help people bond, Nikos and I have definitely shared a quite intense one. Most important, we have shared both the enjoyable part and the unpleasant aftermath in the same

way: through our bodies. Thus, the sharing of the “injury” or pain only emphasizes the sharing of the experience itself, bonding us even more. As we grow older, however, these interrelations are transformed. The fragility of the body takes a whole new meaning as we start becoming more and more familiar with the concept of violence. I can still remember my own gradual exposure to violence and how traumatic this experience has been, even when the violence has been depicted through fictional characters on the media.

Unfortunately, my encounter with violence has not been restricted to the media. Like everybody else, I have been gradually introduced to violence in real life. The sacred relationship between the self and the body of our childhood times is now gradually reversed, exactly because the relationship between the individuals themselves has been reversed in the first place. Ironically, this exact body, once a means of carefree and ultimate liberation, can now become the means for the loss of an individual’s autonomy, and this exact fragility of the body, once a means of bonding between individuals, now enables one individual to inflict pain and suffering gaining ultimate control over the other. Step by step, the deeper significance of this memory becomes clear to me as the process of self-writing itself eventually leads me to the climax of the story, the confession of my very own deepest fear that has been haunting my adult life but also my very own ultimate wish.

Nevertheless, perhaps the greatest benefit of life-writing, as Charon argues, is that it can function not simply as a form of documentation or reporting or even self-reflection, but rather as a form of recreation of reality and of our own selves (69). Quite interestingly, this recreation is held possible because of a paradox that Charon refers to as “autobiographical gap” (70). In other words, even when one narrates the story of his or her own life, there is always a distance between the “narrator-who-writes” the story and the “protagonist-who-acts” the story (Charon 70). Thankfully, this distance becomes noticeable to me even as I am writing the story. Although I am fully aware and conscious of the fact that I am writing about myself and my own experiences, I can still sense that this “I” in the story has a life of its own. We are at the same time the same person, and still independent entities. This sense, although quite strange, is extremely liberating.

Thus, now that the fear is eventually confessed, verbalized, I can stare at it on the paper and confront it. So I ask myself, “is this how I want this story to end?” and more importantly, “is this who I want to be?” And my answer is “no.” Right then I realize that accepting the fear is one thing, and allowing it to take total control is another. The “tiny shields,” as I note in my story, that were covering my body made our experience so precious. And as I keep writing towards its completion, I choose to end my story with the “sound of two ten-year-old children on the beach, laughing and laughing under the midsummer sun” (“Corpus Delicti”).

The story of “Corpus Delicti,” however, is narrated not only in the form of a written text. After writing the story, I felt compelled to re-tell and re-present it not simply through another genre, but through a completely different medium. Thus, I developed a short video which, following the flow of the story, constitutes the visual re-presentation of what is being narrated, functioning nevertheless in the exact same way as its written counterpart. Thus, as in the case of life-writing, both the video itself as the outcome of the personal narration, and the actual process of making it, function as a means of either conscious or subconscious self-confession and self-expression, which further enables the re-evaluation and eventually the therapeutic re-creation of the self.

Having established that the pivotal element of the story is the body, itself the epitome of physicality and materiality, I realize that this physicality and materiality would be more effectively presented and communicated through a more “concrete” medium than the (oral or written) word. This transition from the textual to the visual re-presentation of the story constitutes a case of what Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin have termed as *remediation*. Bolter and Grusin examine the “double logic” of remediation, a term that refers to the two kinds of effects that remediation is associated with, that of *immediacy* and that of *hypermediacy*. While immediacy is achieved through the illusion of the absence of the medium itself, which allows the *immersion* of the viewers/users into the content that the medium presents, hypermediacy aims at making the viewers/users aware of the medium (*Remediation*). In that sense, the visual image, offering a more “tangible,” “concrete” and generally realistic representation, and being perceived in a more direct way through the senses than the images convey through language, can be considered more immediate than text, allowing the viewers to get more attached or engaged to what is presented.

In its textual form, “Corpus Delicti” begins with a subversive definition of what the human body is or at least of how to view it in this story: “a micro-universe, a landscape of its own, an uncharted land waiting to be discovered.” Through this unusual definition I intended to emphasize a paradox as regards our relation to the body, and in particular the fact that although our body constitutes “the very substance of our existence” we are not at all used to observing it closely or exploring it. Thus, the first part of the video aims at emphasizing this exact paradox by visualizing it through the use of moving and static visual images. Through the camera’s macro focus and close zooming-in, the skin is transformed into an actual landscape giving the impression of some kind of desert or barren land to the viewers; and it is exactly when the viewers realize what the video actually depicts, that they can reflect on the fact that our body is indeed a landscape, but one that we are surprisingly unfamiliar with.

After this introduction, the story illustrates the way that we relate to our bodies as children. Accordingly, the video emphasizes the concept of the fragility and vulnerability of the body through the close depiction of a series of scars, but at the same time encourages our re-familiarization with the body. Although the contemporary era does encourage our obsession with appearance, our interest focuses mostly on the external look of our bodies in the context of what our culture in the particular era promotes as attractive and appealing, and thus disregarding any of its “unattractive” and “unappealing” features, forgetting that it is these exact feature that makes us who we are: a unique individual and at the same time a part of the human community sharing similar characteristics and experiences with other individuals.

However, as the relationship between the self and the body, as well as between the individuals themselves is reversed in the second part of the story, the images of the video now aim at emphasizing this reversion by providing an exaggerated, yet powerful visual representation of the concept of fragility. Thus, the image of the breaking glass, the symbol of fragility par excellence, is blended with the image of the falling “self” highlighting the vulnerability of the human body. Finally, the optimistic ending of the story is depicted through the literal reversion of the already reversed relationship of the self with the body, and like the narrated story, the video ends in the same way that it started.

Nevertheless, as in the case of life-writing, the process of the shooting itself, and in particular, my own engagement in the shooting, is perhaps of even greater importance, as it has allowed me to physically re-experience and act out each part of the story as well as move from one to the other. In that sense, the narrative has transformed into a performance. For the purpose of the shooting, I have had to explore my own body for old scars, scars that had long been forgotten along with the experiences that gave birth to them. As I explored my body, re-discovering my childhood scars and marks, the memories came back to my mind almost allowing me to re-experience the actual events. This did not only allow me to get in touch with my body and re-familiarize myself with it, but also to re-evaluate its significant role, seeing it equal to the mind as a “storage room” of memories. Now the body appears to be not only the carrier of scars and pain, but also the carrier of memories. Apart from my own scars, I recorded my mother’s scars as well. Thus, exploring her body and witnessing her own childish scars on her own body brought me back to the moment of the bonding, when Nikos and I met after our tormenting night showing the reddish marks to each other.

In this light, “Corpus Delicti,” the body of the crime, has turned out to be the savior as well. Through the process of life-writing, my own story has allowed me to become the doctor of myself; it has allowed me to present not only the “I” that I thought I knew, but also the “I” that eluded me. It has allowed me to present the “I” as I had feared it to be, as I had desired it to be, and by expressing these fears and aspirations, it has allowed me to regain control, re-creating the “I” as I choose it to be.

Works Cited

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