

# Paul Bailey and the Enchantment of Forgiveness

Rob Hardy

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Paul Bailey's novels appear to have been written out of a core of great personal distress and deserve the attention not only of those students of literature interested in the confessional impulse behind fiction but also of those, like therapists and priests, professionally dedicated to alleviating rooted sorrow. Bailey's autobiography (1990) describes traumatic childhood events including prolonged separation from his mother, his father's death and his mother saying to him things that no child should have to hear. But what makes the autobiography memorable is that it is much more than a bleak account of a broken life: it is also the narrative of a man who in it fights for a creative identity beyond victimhood by remembering the good as well as the bad experiences of his childhood, his mother's kindness as well as her cruelty. His autobiography is not so much one story but many, all competing to be told around a central tale of suffering and loss. This tale is really what all his best novels retell, but like his autobiography they too contain accounts of how the teller fought for a creative identity, for a self beyond suffering. One of Bailey's finest accounts of this fight is the novel *Gabriel's Lament* (1986) the retrospective first-person narrative of a young boy's desertion by his mother and his subsequent belief that she somehow continued to live and think of him until, when grown up, he discovers the truth. This, deliberately kept from him by his domineering and emotionally abusive father, was that his mother committed suicide only weeks after vanishing. Such a desolate story, one of the saddest ever told in fiction, should be unendurable to read whereas it is a life-affirming examination of how a child's 'craving for enchantment' (Bailey, 1993, p. 3) becomes both his snare and, in the end, his salvation.

One of the highest accolades one can pay the novel is to say that it recalls Dickens's writing, just as Bailey's personal story recalls Dickens's own. Dickens was the great master of enchantment in nineteenth century fiction, not only in the sense that his wonderful stories offered readers forgetfulness of suffering but also in the sense that he knew the necessity of controlling the enchantment that stories can offer, particularly the stories one tells oneself. One thinks of all those solipsists in Dickens's fiction enchanted by the stories they tell

themselves – ‘Mr Pickwick, for whom everything must be assigned its Pickwickian meaning ... Mr Micawber, for whom sooner or later everything will “turn up”; Mrs Gamp, whose world is peopled with her own inventions’ (Gilbert, 1990, p. 150) and so on. Dickens knew the necessity as well as the dangers of enchantment, and that the most seductively beautiful stories, the stories one most wants to believe, can be the most dangerous. But he knew this without abandoning a belief that there can be a healthy craving for the *good* enchantment which some stories can provide, and that this enchantment can save the life of the person who experiences it. Bailey wrote of the young David Copperfield’s misery that ‘it is a tearful business, being deprived of enchantment and affection’ (Bailey, 1999, p. vii) and he, like Dickens (and David Copperfield) knew as a child what it was to read ‘as if for life’ (Dickens, 1987, p. 56.) Paul Bailey is not Dickens, but the seriousness of his investigation into how someone might save their life through discovering the enchantment of life-affirming stories, or lose it through yielding to the seduction of a beautiful but ultimately life-denying one, recalls Dickens. His investigation additionally recalls the work of narrative psychotherapists, who also believe that lives can be changed by good stories, but who ask what happens if one’s story has been ‘authored by perpetrators of child sexual or physical abuse’:

We have little choice but to start out with copies ... We cannot perform meaning in our lives without situating our experience in stories. Stories are, in the first place, given. However, it is the relative indeterminacy – the ambiguity and uncertainty – of all stories that we can only negotiate through recourse to our lived experience and our imagination. And this requires that we engage in a process of ‘origination’.

So what might be the effects on a person’s interpretation of events in his or her life, if the story that framed, selected, and determined the meaning given to those events was oppressive and authored by perpetrators of child sexual or physical abuse ... (Epston, 1998, p. 15)

And where (one could also ask) might a victim of abuse find good stories strong enough in their enchantment to help him in his struggle against the primary text of his suffering? How might he use them to stop compulsively retelling to himself the solipsistic, enchanting story he wants to hear, the story that makes his life bearable?

*Gabriel’s Lament* thinks deeply about these last two questions. In asking where Gabriel, the retrospective adult narrator, might find good stories, the novel also asks another question: what is it about them, when he finds them, that makes them resonate with the desperateness of his need? A story Gabriel tells early in his narrative is of a blissful, enchanting Easter childhood visit, before his mother vanished, to his aunt. She, with her cottage on the Downs and

harmless eccentricities, faintly resembles David Copperfield's Aunt Betsey (whom Bailey described himself as 'already acquainted with', before he read Dickens's novel . . . 'in the shape of a favourite aunt who was cantankerous and kindly by turns' (Bailey, 199, p. vi). What is it about this memory, told in the novel as a story, that helped to support Gabriel through the long years of his bereavement, so that it demands admission into his retrospective narrative as he writes it? One answer the novel seems to give is that it opened a door and showed the child Gabriel another, more spacious world than the one dominated by his father. In this world, women refused to endure abuse from men, people showed tenderness to animals and, above all, they read and valued books. And it is from books, which he started to read 'as if for life' after the departure of his mother, that Gabriel's narrative shows him drawing most sustenance, so that his life, although almost devoid of possibilities, was not completely devoid of them. His narrative records the many stories he learned about after he started reading: the life of Swedenborg, the life of George Fox, Melville's *Moby Dick*, biography and fiction of equal importance, only their stories mattering to Gabriel. And the theme that all these stories share, it gradually becomes apparent as the narrative unfolds, is, in a broad sense of the word, religious.

One of the triumphs of this novel is that it allows that word a space to accrue meaning. It shows how a young man's yearning for good enchantment to help him after his mother's desertion might also, in his case, be called a religious yearning. In his case: because the novel carefully limits the area of generalization that it will permit. Bruno Bettelheim suggests, in his account of the importance of fairy tales to children, that 'which story is most important to a particular child at a particular age depends entirely on his psychological stage of development, and the problems which are most pressing to him at the moment' (Bettelheim 1991, p. 15), a view endorsed by *Gabriel's Lament*, which carefully describes the particular terms of Gabriel's need. These stories, of George Fox, Swedenborg and other religious visionaries, were the stories that in some way addressed Gabriel's problems, the ones that offered him the good enchantment that resonated with the desperateness of his need. As his memory of 'the best of all Good Fridays' (Bailey 1987, p. 31) with his aunt was infused with light and air, so Gabriel's reading of the life of George Fox noted that the founder of The Society of Friends worshipped God 'in the streets, in the fields, and in the market place' (293). And these physical images of space, light and air are joined, in Gabriel's selection within his narrative of details from the life of George Fox, by another image: of a man given to hallucinatory distress but nonetheless capable of relating to others. Gabriel throws a little light on how George Fox helped him by telling the story of his

approaching Lichfield, taking off his shoes, and crying 'Woe' to its inhabitants. These, instead of laughing at him, come to him and ask 'Alack George! Where are thy shoes?' Gabriel continues:

I like to think that I might have been one of those friendly people, worried about the condition of George Fox's feet. They represent the best of which we are capable, throughout history. And it says something for George's essential humanity that he should record what the friendly people said to him in the midst of his frantic "Woe"-ing. He noticed, and noted, their concern (301).

Bettelheim writes that 'today even more than in past times, the child needs the reassurance offered by the image of the isolated man who nevertheless is capable of achieving meaningful and rewarding relations with the world around him' (11). That Gabriel, almost destroyed by mother's desertion, should find succour in the story of George Fox who, despite his distress, was capable of noticing and noting others' concern, indicates Bailey's grasp of his character's psychology. But there is also another reason, reaching into his past, as to why, the novel hints, the story might be important to Gabriel. His narrative records an early episode where his father reacts with derision on receiving a letter from Gabriel's religious education teacher which suggests that the boy 'should be encouraged to pursue a vocation in the Church of England' (60): 'I shall write this Murdock a polite note saying that Oswald Harvey has other plans for his young son' (61). The boy's inchoate yearning for a world different from his father's, expressed in his R.E. essay where he wrote that God grants 'the humblest and most stupid of His creatures a power he denies the mighty (59): that yearning, the novel shows, also waits to find expression for Gabriel in the story of George Fox.

But although these stories offer the adult Gabriel good enchantment in barren bedsits in London houses, after he leaves his father, they are not enough in themselves to challenge the dark enchantment of the story by which he has lived: the perilously seductive story of his mother's survival, which he describes himself having kept alive by different magical means, including reciting the HMV number of her favourite Handel aria, or sometimes secretly wearing one of her dresses, long after he has become adult. When that story is finally shattered by Gabriel, at the age of forty, reading his father's posthumous account of the truth – that his mother had drunk bleach alone in a London hotel room only seven weeks after leaving him – no stories can help. The incantations by which he has kept alive the story of his mother's love are shown to him to be nothing more than a magician's tricks which his body, wiser than his mind, had eschewed. This quality of the novel makes it tragically beautiful: Bailey shows the place of unconscious knowledge in a wounded life, and the identification of the unconscious with the body. The conscious

yearning that the twelve-year old Gabriel experienced from the moment of his mother's departure was to see her again, a yearning which his father kept alive by spinning stories about her because he thought that the child could not cope with the truth. But the boy's unconscious knowledge of her death had been felt by his body which expressed

the grief my mind was unaware of, long ago. Indeed, it had even been premature in its expression, since I had become the despised *Piss-a-Bed* before she had consumed her fatal *Brobat* and tonic. When she was only three months dead, I had smeared myself with shit in a grieving ecstasy. And the chill that always followed the warmth of wearing the *Moygashel* frock – that was grief, surely; grief up to its icy tricks (321).

Perhaps this, the novel hints, is Gabriel's deepest source of his interest in figures like George Fox. He, who had lost so much with his mother, searched beyond her since his body knew she would never return – searched for the God whom his father had forbidden him to serve as a priest. He searched by trying to see God through itinerant preachers' eyes, George Fox's eyes in particular, whose gaze 'consoled me in room after London room' (41). These stories: of the God in whom Gabriel cannot believe but whom he looks at through others' eyes; of his mother who left him but whom he can summon through the enchantment of an incantation or by wearing her dress; of his father who cruelly abuses him when a child, by telling him lies, addressing him as '*Piss-a-Bed*' and '*Oaf*', rubbing his face into urine-soaked sheets he has sprinkled with pepper: all are linked by the difference between bad and good enchantment which the novel establishes. What Gabriel craved as a child, a healthy craving, satisfied by his father whom then he 'truly loved' before his mother left, was stories, which his father supplied abundantly, good, bed-time stories such as all children need. And when he has eventually broken free from the terrible enchantment of the years when he believed his mother was still alive, he is left with 'nothing' – a word he frequently uses to describe himself. *Gabriel's Lament* is the record of how, in the end, he learned to think of himself as more than nothing.

The novel purports to be the first-person narrative of the life of Gabriel Harvey but it is also Paul Bailey's text about how someone might learn, through telling a story, to discover a self beyond numbness and suffering. I earlier asked how a victim of abuse might use stories to struggle against the primary text of his suffering, and how he might use them to stop compulsively retelling to himself the solipsistic, enchanting story he wants to hear, and in the case of Gabriel we are now beginning to arrive at an answer. *Gabriel's Lament* is also an account of the genesis and writing of Gabriel's first book, '*Lords of Light*' (114), his stories of the itinerant preachers, George Fox and others. Telling these stories was the means

by which he managed to control the enchantment of the story of his mother's love. In an exalting passage he records that 'I shook, literally shook, with excitement . . . I had a subject' (178) – an especially appropriate use of the word 'subject' because in discovering the subject for his book, Gabriel also discovered himself to be a subject, a creative identity. But these stories were not enough in themselves to destroy the enchantment of the story of his mother's love: only the truth, recorded in his father's letter to him, could do that. After discovering the truth Gabriel had to tell a deeper story than that of the itinerant preachers, a story 'dredge[d] . . . up from [his] very heart' (327), a 'lament for my numb life' (329). David Epston, thinking about the effect on a person's life if 'his story . . . was oppressive and authored by perpetrators of child sexual or physical abuse' goes on to ask what difference would it make if a person who had been situated in an oppressive 'story' . . . found herself either to be entitled to her own 'story-telling rights' or to have them restored and be enabled to tell her own life and become her own author?' (14).

*Gabriel's Lament* is an answer to Epston's question: this is the difference it would make to the person situated in an oppressive story, if they could become their own author. *Gabriel's Lament* is a fiction, not a case study, but it is a wonderful, liberating book because it breaks down barriers between the two genres, offers a text about living as well as about the importance of reading. I have suggested that it is a religious text, in that it portrays Gabriel's religious yearning and how he sought to assuage it. It is also religious in the sense that Don Cupitt means when he says that 'it is a religious duty so far as one possibly can to say a simple Amen to one's own life without complaining about or regretting anything. It is almost a matter of loyalty that one should not complain.' (2003). It is too much to suggest that Gabriel does not complain about his life as he tells his story – addressing his dead father he records that he set out to write it in order to 'polish you off for ever, and I think I have failed. You are still here, curse you, in these pages' (329). But that is not his final word on his father, or his mother. On the last page Bailey has Gabriel record of his long-dead mother 'I find I love her still, now that my numbness has gone' (331); and he refers to his father as 'My lecturer, my dissembler, my old dad' (331). In writing his book, his therapeutic text, Gabriel finds himself at the end telling a religious story of his own, of his forgiveness of those, his mother and father, who hurt him, most. It is a story that perhaps offers the best enchantment of all.

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Robert Hardy  
*The Bournemouth and Poole College,*  
*Lansdowne*  
*Bournemouth*  
*BH1 3JJ*