

# TRACES OF WAR

*Interpreting Ethics and Trauma in  
Twentieth-Century French Writing*

COLIN DAVIS



# Contemporary French and Francophone Cultures

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COLIN DAVIS

# Traces of War

Interpreting Ethics and Trauma  
in Twentieth-Century French Writing

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# Introduction

## Don't Mention the War

Between September 1939 and March 1941, the friends, lovers, fellow writers and intellectuals Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir saw little of each other. Sartre was mobilized at the beginning of the Second World War, and then held for ten months as a prisoner of war. During this period of painful separation they wrote to each other prolifically, sometimes more than once a day, as Sartre's *Lettres au Castor* and Beauvoir's *Lettres à Sartre* testify. Their posthumously published correspondence during the long, anguished months of their separation covers more than 500 pages of printed text. This is striking in part for its sheer length. It is not as if they had nothing else to do, and their correspondence was by no means their only written output for the period. Sartre assiduously wrote in what would be published as his *Carnets de la drôle de guerre* whilst working on his novel *Le Sursis* and his philosophical magnum opus *L'Être et le néant*; and Beauvoir also kept a substantial journal, published as her *Journal de guerre*, and she worked on her first novel *L'Invitée*. If nothing else, war was very good for their productivity as writers, even if not everything they wrote at the time was initially intended for publication.

Another striking feature of the correspondence between Sartre and Beauvoir is how *little* it has to say about the war. It is not that they had forgotten about it. Of course they hadn't. It was the cause of their separation, and it affected every aspect of their lives. But it was as if it was too big to be seen, so totally present that it did not need to be mentioned. It is (relatively) unspoken and (absolutely) ubiquitous, ubiquitous *because* unspoken. The war was, according to Sartre at one

point in his *Carnets de la drôle de guerre*, ‘insaisissable’.<sup>1</sup> It is both there and not there. As their contemporary and sometime friend Albert Camus put it in his *Carnets* from the same period, ‘La guerre a éclaté. Où est la guerre?’ (*Œuvres complètes II*, p. 884).

A central concern for the writers discussed in this book is how to perceive, experience and recount the war, how to integrate it into an intellectual and aesthetic project, when it is simultaneously elusive, intangible and all-pervasive. In his celebrated essay ‘The Storyteller’, Walter Benjamin touches on some of the key issues here when he discusses the imminent end of the art of storytelling, precipitated in part by the First World War. Benjamin describes how ‘men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience’ (p. 362). Individual experience had been overwhelmed by huge economic and mechanical forces, leaving the ‘tiny, fragile human body’ (p. 362) with no story of its own to pass on to others. It is nevertheless noticeable that this loss of experience is still to a meaningful extent *collective*: it is shared even if it cannot be communicated through stories. Although it was doubtless premature to announce the end of storytelling, the particular problems associated with telling about experience were exacerbated by the Second World War. The historian Olivier Wieviorka contrasts the two world wars in this respect. The first may have – as Benjamin argues – deepened the crisis of storytelling because its survivors felt ‘poorer in communicable experience’. Even so, in fact in France there soon developed a reasonably strong consensus about how to tell the story of the war: France had been attacked by imperial Germany, fought bravely to defend its territory and its values, and emerged victorious and stronger thanks to the valiant efforts and sacrifices of its soldiers (*La Mémoire désunie*, pp. 19–20). However traumatic the experience and however difficult to tell the tale, a sense of shared and shareable meaning nevertheless endured. The Second World War was a different matter. Even today, no way has been found to unify the competing strands of defeat and victory, abjection and heroism, collaboration and resistance, complicity and dignity. As Wieviorka puts it, ‘la mémoire de la Seconde Guerre mondiale apparaît, hier comme aujourd’hui, comme une mémoire fragmentée, conflictuelle et politisée qui sépare plutôt qu’elle ne rassemble’ (*La Mémoire désunie*, p. 23).

1 Sartre, *Les Carnets de la drôle de guerre*, p. 35. Future references to this and other quoted works are given in the main text with short titles. Full details of editions used are given in the Bibliography.

One of the premises of this book is that the war is present even, and perhaps especially, when it cannot be seen. I am concerned here with the great generation of French writers and thinkers who all had in common that they lived through the war, as combatants, prisoners, *résistants* and sometimes as passive or active collaborators. The book does not attempt to give a comprehensive overview or synthesis of the impact of the Second World War on the writing and thought of those who experienced it at first hand. Such a project would in all likelihood be interminable, though scholars and critics have made important progress with some of its key aspects.<sup>2</sup> I have chosen here to concentrate on a number of writers – Sartre, Beauvoir, Delbo, Camus, Levinas, Ricœur, Althusser, Kofman, Wiesel, Semprun – whom I admire, but who do not give grounds to establish a consistent, unified story about the war and its lasting impact. My aim here is to seek out some of the traces of war in their writing. The guiding question is: What mark does war, and specifically the Second World War, leave on their work? I am particularly interested in how the war is present in their writing precisely when it is *not* the explicit topic. How is it there when it is not there? The theoretical tool I develop to explore this is what I call ‘traumatic hermeneutics’, which I introduce in Chapter 2.

The book is divided into four sections. The first discusses some of the ethical and hermeneutic issues which arise in trauma studies, as critics have attempted to speak about and interpret the suffering of others. The positions adopted in the two chapters of this section inform and underlie the discussion through the rest of the book. The second section looks at aspects of the work of perhaps the three best-known French intellectuals who lived through the Occupation: Sartre, Beauvoir and Camus. The third section considers three of France’s most important post-war philosophers – Ricœur, Levinas and Althusser – all of whom spent most of the war in German POW camps. And the final section discusses issues in the texts of three survivor-witnesses: Semprun, Wiesel and Kofman. The first of these was interned in Buchenwald for resistance activities, and the second in Auschwitz because of his race. As a Jewish girl in Paris, Kofman survived the war even though her father was deported and murdered in Auschwitz; but recounting her memories of the Occupation in a brief, poignant memoir was shortly followed by her suicide. In all

2 For an overview of some of the work done in this field, see Atack and Lloyd, *Introduction to Framing Narratives of the Second World War and Occupation in France, 1939–2009*, pp. 1–15.

these cases, my concern is to suggest how the war is present in their work, sometimes explicitly and sometimes as an occluded but no less powerful influence on their thought and writing.

This book is concerned with *traces* of war rather than the war as a theme or object of memory. Work in memory studies has accustomed us to the insight that what a text or film represents overtly may not be its only or its principal preoccupation. Important works such as Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory* and Max Silverman's *Palimpsestic Memory* show how the memory of one event may cover or allude to others. Silverman describes how the relationship between the past and the present may entail 'a superimposition and interaction of different temporal traces to constitute a sort of composite structure, like a palimpsest, so that one layer of traces can be seen through, and is transformed by, another' (*Palimpsestic Memory*, p. 3). This is not exactly the sense of *traces* which interests me here. Rather, I use the word in a sense adapted from Levinas and Derrida to refer to a kind of elusive sign which is effaced but still legible, if not ultimately intelligible.<sup>3</sup> In 'La Trace de l'autre', Levinas describes how the trace signifies outside any intention or project (p. 199). It is not so much the trace of a retrievable meaning as an opening onto what he calls 'l'absolument Autre' (p. 200). The trace does not point towards an occluded, forgotten or repressed presence, but rather to the disruption of all presence and identity through the encounter with otherness: 'La trace est la présence de ce qui, à proprement parler, n'a jamais été là, de ce qui est toujours passé' (p. 201). The trace is a sign which produces signification without leading to or recalling a final signified. My suggestion, on this basis, is that the traces of war in the works discussed in the current book do not make of the Second World War their final, hidden meaning. Rather, the war leaves traces insofar as it remains problematically absent, unavailable to experience, representation or comprehension. It inflects post-war writing precisely because it is invisible except in its barely readable traces.

In theoretical terms, the book argues that the *ethics* of trauma studies must also entail a *hermeneutics*, and that the paradoxical endeavour to speak of that which is not there, to say the unsaid, is strengthened once it accepts its position within the rich hermeneutic tradition. In a nutshell, trauma studies has readily acknowledged and explored its

3 See for example Levinas, 'La Trace de l'autre', and Derrida, 'Freud et la scène de l'écriture'.

indebtedness to psychoanalytical pioneers such as Freud and Lacan, and to developments in cognitive psychology and neuroscience; but to its detriment it has been less eager to embrace the long inheritance of hermeneutics, brought to its most powerful expression in the twentieth century in the work of Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricœur.

In this discussion, not mentioning the war may be as significant and revealing as mentioning it. Not talking about something may be a way of talking about it. To close this Introduction, I want to give a first indication of what I mean by this by crossing the Channel from France to the UK, to give a sketch of how talking about the war and not talking about it are hermeneutically and psychologically confused.

Probably the best-known use of the phrase ‘Don’t mention the war’ occurs in the British situation comedy *Fawlty Towers*, written by and starring John Cleese and Connie Booth. Only two series of *Fawlty Towers* – a total of 12 episodes – were made, in 1975 and 1979. John Cleese plays Basil Fawlty, the bad-tempered, misanthropic, probably sociopathic proprietor of a small hotel in the seaside town of Torquay. In the final episode of series one a group of Germans is staying in the hotel. Their visit coincides with Fawlty receiving a number of severe, accidental blows to the head which leave him concussed, and even more out of control than usual. Escaping from his hospital bed, he returns to his hotel and attends to two German couples waiting to order dinner. As Fawlty desperately endeavours not to mention the war, he can talk of nothing else, and takes what he believes to be the guests’ order for prawn Goebbels, Hermann Goering and Colditz salad. One of the German women becomes upset, leading another member of the group to ask Fawlty to stop talking about the war. Fawlty retorts that the Germans started it. ‘We did not start it,’ says the German man. ‘Yes you did,’ retorts Fawlty. ‘You invaded Poland’. ‘It’ can only mean the war here; if there is an ‘it’, the ‘it’ must be the war. The war is the referent that informs every utterance. Not mentioning the war turns out to be a way of talking *exclusively* about the war.

The phrase ‘Don’t mention the war’ masquerades as good manners because it keeps peace with our former enemies. At the same time, it also carries a clear implication of moral superiority. In national memory, the early years of the war were Britain’s finest hour. After the fall of France in June 1940, the nation stood alone against Nazism, until Japan’s ill-judged attack on Pearl Harbour and Germany’s ill-judged attack on the Soviet Union. By not mentioning the war, we are silently asserting that we are better than other nations: we didn’t capitulate, we didn’t

collaborate. Basil Fawly's question 'Who won the bloody war anyway?' is clearly rhetorical. The British did, of course. But the British also pride themselves on their manners. We don't want to offend our defeated enemies by reminding them that we are militarily and ethically better than they. So not mentioning the war is our way of recalling it, and feeling comfortably at home with ourselves in otherwise difficult times.

And yet, in enjoining himself and others not to mention the war, of course Fawly does mention the war. In fact, by insisting that he should not talk about it, he does nothing *but* talk about it. The war turns out to be the only thing worth discussing, the only thing Fawly *can* discuss, the secret or not-so-secret reference point to everything he says. The sequence ends with Fawly imitating Hitler and exaggeratedly goose stepping out of the dining room.

This sequence from *Fawly Towers* illustrates brilliantly how the war is obsessively present precisely when and because Fawly wants to say nothing about it. The war intrudes as an absent presence which informs and quietly (or not so quietly) inflects every utterance. Another aspect of this absent presence of war can be shown through the example of Robb Wilton. It is unlikely that many readers of this book will remember or even have heard of Robb Wilton (1881–1957). He was a northern comedian who worked in the music halls, and then in film and radio in the 1930s and 1940s. He often played bumbling, amiable, officious but ineffective characters. He is associated with the phrase 'The day war broke out'. Here is the beginning of one of his monologues, recorded in 1943:

The day war broke out, my missus looked at me and she said, 'What good are you?'

I said, 'How d'y' mean, what good am I?'

'Well,' she said, 'you're too old for the army, you couldn't get into the navy and they wouldn't have you in the Air Force, so what good are you?'

I said, 'I'll do something!'

She said, 'What?'

I said, 'How do I know ...? I'll have to think.'

She said, 'I don't know how that's going to help you, you've never done it before, so what good are you?'<sup>4</sup>

The speaker goes on to describe his plan to join the Home Guard and defeat Hitler if the occasion arises, all the while countering what he

4 The full monologue can be heard at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=775DEoYkT3U>> [accessed 11/08/2017].

regards as the unreasonable scepticism of his wife. From the very first line, the monologue raises the question of how public events are linked to private relations. Neither we nor the narrator are initially sure how the chronology of the anecdote, which takes place on the day war broke out, relates to the wife's taunting question: 'What good are you?' 'How d'y' mean, what good am I?', the narrator immediately replies. What point is being made here? Is the suggestion that the husband is useless related to the war, or are the war and his uselessness independent from one another? In which respects is he no good? Perhaps he is no good as a husband, and specifically as a lover. We might recall that much popular British humour revolves around the male fear of sexual inadequacy. So, at first, we cannot know whether the wife's complaint about her husband's shortcomings is necessarily related to the outbreak of war, or whether it represents a more general dissatisfaction. As the monologue develops, it becomes clear that both are in fact the case: the war gives an outlet for the wife's sense of her husband's underlying inadequacy. And yet, the strange dignity of the monologue lies in the narrator's knowledge that he is both useless and willing to serve. How, his wife asks, will he know if he comes across Hitler. 'I've got a tongue in me 'ead, 'aven't I?', replies her embattled but not yet fully exasperated husband.

The examples of Basil Fawlty and Robb Wilton show how the war can be simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. It underlies every utterance, especially when it is not explicitly named, but at the same time it does not entirely explain the fundamental dynamics of what we see or hear. There is always something else going on, some other cause of distress or behavioural malfunction, something else that needs to be interpreted. In this respect, the Second World War shares some of the characteristics of trauma, and raises some of the same questions of understanding and interpretation. How do we make sense of the suffering of others, when its sources, causes and conditions are ambiguously present or all-too-absent? How do we understand and speak about suffering which we can recognize and acknowledge, but which is so far outside our own experience that to discuss it seems almost improper? These are the questions with which the first two chapters of this book are concerned.





SECTION A

**Ethics, Trauma  
and Interpretation**



## CHAPTER ONE

# Trauma and Ethics

## Telling the Other's Story

The two chapters in this section explore ethical and hermeneutic issues which arise from trauma studies, partly in a theoretical frame, and partly with reference to material concerning the Second World War. The question discussed in this chapter goes to the core of trauma studies and its difficult ethical negotiations: Who should speak for those who do not speak for themselves – the dead, the mute, the traumatized, those who cannot or will not tell their own stories, or those who have no story to tell? In his 'Plaidoyer pour les morts', Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel is adamant that no one has the right to speak in the place of the victims of atrocity: 'Vouloir parler au nom des disparus [...] c'est précisément les humilier. [...] Laissez-les donc tranquilles' (*Le Chant des morts*, p. 197). We cannot speak on their behalf, nor should we even try to understand them:

Vous voulez comprendre? Il n'y a plus rien à comprendre. Vous voulez savoir? Il n'y a plus rien à savoir. Ce n'est pas en jouant avec les mots et avec les morts que vous allez comprendre et savoir. Au contraire. Les Anciens disaient: 'Ceux qui savent ne parlent pas; ceux qui parlent ne savent pas'. (*Le Chant des morts*, p. 219)

We should not have the arrogance to assume that we can share some part of what happened to the victims. And yet not to speak for those who have been silenced, not to recall, not to study what happened to them in the hope of learning something from their stories, would be an act of barbarity in itself, hideously complicit with the forces which sought to eliminate them. As Wiesel puts it elsewhere, 'Oublier les morts, serait les trahir. Oublier les victimes serait se mettre du côté de leurs bourreaux' (*Discours d'Oslo*, p. 27).

Talking of the other's trauma is an ethical minefield. The duty to preserve the memory of pain has been asserted so often that it has become difficult to contest. This chapter focuses rather on the less evident but insidious dangers inherent in secondary witnessing and vicarious trauma. In one of the key texts for the development of modern trauma studies, the psychiatrist Dori Laub says that 'the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself' ('Bearing Witness', p. 57). This may be psychologically correct, but I find Laub's formulation ethically problematic. My argument here is that we do not participate in or co-own the other's trauma; and the sense or desire that we do should be resisted because it gives us the potentially self-serving illusion of empathic understanding. Rather than the 'unsettlement' described by Dominick LaCapra,<sup>1</sup> the claim to participate in the other's pain might be used to confirm the authority of the analyst and produce premature, unwarranted closure; and closure is not one of the aims of the current book. This chapter examines briefly two authors, Giorgio Agamben and Shoshana Felman, who represent different but equally worrying ways of encroaching on traumas which are not their own; and then at slightly greater length it considers Charlotte Delbo, whose book *Mesure de nos jours* seems to do precisely what I am arguing against by purporting to speak in the place of traumatized others. The chapter asks how it is that Delbo avoids the charge of over-hastily appropriating the other's pain which I shall level against Agamben and Felman.

Is it theoretically possible to settle the meaning of another's story without delusion or falsification? In her book *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler suggests that we cannot even give final form to our own stories, let alone those of others. There are a number of what she calls 'vexations' which prevent me from giving a narrative account of myself: I cannot narrate the exposure to the other which establishes my singularity in the first place; the primary relations which form lasting impressions on the course of my life are irrecoverable; there is a history which I do not own and which makes me partially opaque to myself;

1 On 'empathic unsettlement', see for example LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*: 'At the very least, empathic unsettlement poses a barrier to closure in discourse and places in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance or a benefit (for example, unearned confidence about the ability of the human spirit to endure any adversity with dignity and nobility)' (pp. 41–42).

the norms that enable my narrative are not authored by me, so they rob me of my singularity at the very moment I seek to assert it; and because every account is an account given to someone else, it is superseded by the structure of address in which it takes place (p. 39). As Butler puts it succinctly, ‘There is that in me and of me for which I can give no account’ (p. 40). We cannot offer narrative closure for our lives because we are, Butler argues, ‘interrupted by alterity’ (p. 64).

An important point here is that what Butler calls ‘my own foreignness to myself’ (p. 84) also entails our foreignness to others and their foreignness to us. The Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero, who is an important interlocutor for Butler in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, argues against the empathy, identification or confusion through which one person’s story may be appropriated by another; as she insists, ‘your story is never my story’ (*Relating Narratives*, p. 92). This view goes together with distrust of the first person plural ‘we’, which implies the existence of a community where there is none: ‘No matter how much the larger traits of our life-stories are similar, I still do not recognise myself *in* you and, even less, in the collective *we*’ (*Relating Narratives*, p. 92; emphasis in original). Butler is less hostile to the first person plural than Cavarero (see Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p. 33). But we can use it, she suggests, only on the understanding that our fundamental sociality is constituted on the basis of our foreignness to one another. There is no final account of our own lives and no secure bridge between our experience and that of other people.

Butler gives good reasons why we cannot provide a definitive narrative of our own lives. It follows that it will be all the more impossible to account without distortion for the lives and deaths of others. We cannot possess our own stories, and *a fortiori* we cannot claim to possess the stories of others. And yet, as critics, historians, analysts, teachers, students and readers, we are bound to attempt to do precisely that. As inevitable and indeed important as this may be, the current chapter suggests that it is fraught with intellectual and ethical dangers.

### Agamben and the other’s truth

Giorgio Agamben’s *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* has rapidly become an important and widely cited text in Holocaust and trauma studies. It has not been exempt from criticism, though, particularly for its central move of making the so-called

'Muselmann' the principal figure for the understanding of Auschwitz.<sup>2</sup> The word *Muselmann* (Muslim) was used at Auschwitz and some other camps to designate a type of prisoner who seemed to have given up on life, surviving precariously as a set of biological functions. The *Muselmänner* were, as Thomas Trezise puts it, 'those who, in the eyes of other inmates, had come to stand (or lie) at or beyond the limit of the human, those "living dead" produced by the slow murder for which most of the concentration camps were designed' (*Witnessing Witnessing*, p. 134). Drawing on a partial reading of Primo Levi, Agamben elevates these figures to being the key which will unlock the significance of Auschwitz. He describes the *Muselmann's* status between life and death as 'the perfect cipher of the camp' (*Remnants*, p. 48); and he insists that 'we will not understand what Auschwitz is if we do not first understand who or what the *Muselmann* is' (p. 52). He then goes on to reveal to us the true meaning of the *Muselmann*, which is also the true meaning of Auschwitz and the whole concentrationary universe. Auschwitz appears as a kind of terrible experiment which lays bare 'the hidden structure of all subjectivity and consciousness' (p. 128). The *Muselmann* is what this experiment reveals to be the limit point of human existence: 'he marks the threshold between the human and the inhuman' (p. 55); and he is 'the final biopolitical substance to be isolated in the biological continuum' (p. 85).

In his account of the *Muselmann*, Agamben draws on the testimony of a number of camp survivors, in particular that of Primo Levi. Indeed, *Remnants of Auschwitz* can be viewed as an extended commentary on a few passages from Levi's work. In a quotation to which Agamben repeatedly refers, Levi describes the *Muselmänner* as 'the true witnesses [...] the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance' (*The Drowned and the Saved*, pp. 63–64); but, 'just as no one ever returned to recount his own death' (*The Drowned and*

2 For criticisms of Agamben's book, see Mesnard and Cahan, *Giorgio Agamben à l'épreuve d'Auschwitz*; Eaglestone, 'On Giorgio Agamben's Holocaust'; Benslama, 'La Représentation et l'impossible'; Leys, 'The Shame of Auschwitz', pp. 157–79; Davis, 'Speaking with the Dead: De Man, Levinas, Agamben', pp. 111–27; Trezise, *Witnessing Witnessing*, pp. 122–58. While Agamben's account of the *Muselmann* has attracted a great deal of criticism, it has been readily accepted by some readers. Notably, Slavoj Žižek repeatedly returns to the figure of the *Muselmann*, basically agreeing with and building on Agamben's analysis. See for example Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, pp. 155–59; *The Parallax View*, pp. 112–13; 'Neighbors and Other Monsters', pp. 160–62.

*the Saved*, 64), they cannot tell of their experiences. In consequence, according to Levi, the survivors ‘speak in their stead, by proxy’ (*The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 64). This statement might appear to contradict Wiesel’s view, quoted above, that no one could or should speak in the name of the dead. In fact, though, the difference between Wiesel and Levi on this point is not as great as it might appear. Levi’s formulation is characteristically exact. To speak in someone’s stead or by proxy is not to assume their voice or to imply that their experience can be understood or narrated by another. The survivor speaks because someone has to, not because he has access to some otherwise barred knowledge. When Levi tells us that only the *Muselmann*’s testimony would have ‘general significance’, he insists on the point that such testimony cannot be given and therefore the general significance of the camps will never be available. The *Muselmänner*, Levi insists, have no story to tell and no lesson to teach us.<sup>3</sup>

For all his close reliance on Levi, Agamben misses precisely this point. He endeavours to describe the significance of the *Muselmann* and his centrality to the experience of the camps despite Levi’s implicit warning that this would be to find meaning – and comfort – where there is none. And Agamben’s failure to understand Levi’s point that the general significance of the *Muselmann*’s testimony is not available leads him to misunderstand Levi’s related point that survivors speak ‘in their stead, by proxy’. Agamben takes this to mean that, despite the fact that no one returns to recount their death, ‘it is in some way the *Muselmann* who bears witness’ (*The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 120). Provoked into speech by those who are speechless, the survivor nevertheless *in some way* testifies on behalf of the *Muselmann*. It is essential to Agamben’s argument that, although the *Muselmann* does not bear witness for himself, there is still a lesson to be learned from his existence. So, even if secure, centred subject positions are relinquished in Agamben’s account of testimony, the speechless one nevertheless speaks. It is hard to avoid the suspicion, though, that the position of Agamben himself comes out of this all the stronger, as he asserts his authority as interpreter over subjects who can no longer speak for themselves. Levi’s point is that speaking by proxy can never yield an understanding of the *Muselmann*. The survivor speaks

3 See Levi, *If This is a Man*, and *The Truce*: ‘All the musselmans who finished in the gas chambers have the same story, or more exactly, have no story; they followed the slope down to the bottom, like streams that run down to the sea’ (p. 96).

'in his stead' because the *Muselmann* cannot speak for himself; but the survivor speaks in ignorance and incomprehension of the *Muselmann's* experience. Agamben turns this into something rather different. In his account, the witness speaks for the *Muselmann*, and Agamben speaks for the witness. In the absence of the *Muselmann's* testimony, he takes it upon himself to explain the meaning of the camps. This is confirmed by the final pages of *Remnants of Auschwitz*. Agamben's book ends with texts by a number of *Muselmänner* who survived the camps. Agamben wants, he says, to leave 'the last word' to the *Muselmänner* (*Remnants*, p. 165). On the face of it, the words of the *Muselmänner* appear to contradict the claim that, by definition, they are unable to bear witness. Agamben is nevertheless unshaken, and concludes by insisting that the testimony of the *Muselmänner* 'fully verifies' (p. 165) the paradox according to which they are the witnesses who cannot bear witness. By this point he has stopped listening. He has already decided what meaning the lives and deaths of the *Muselmänner* should have.

Agamben tells us that 'all witnesses speak of [the *Muselmann*] as a central experience' (*Remnants*, p. 52). This is simply untrue, but it perfectly encapsulates Agamben's rush to generalize from fragmentary material and it decisively inflects his understanding of the camps. Moreover, it grossly neglects the variety of experiences of the camps by privileging one over all others. Making the *Muselmann* the key figure discounts all those whose experience was quite different: those who were killed on arrival at Auschwitz, or those who struggled and resisted and died, those who found comradeship and those who lost faith, those who survived against all the odds and those who were used in hideous experiments or gassed or shot or hanged. All these must take second place, in Agamben's account, to the unutterable yet somehow uttered experience of the *Muselmann*.

Agamben's understanding of the *Muselmann* entails, and is enabled by, a misreading of Levi's comments. Showing how Agamben may not accurately represent the texts to which he refers (particularly works by Levi and Robert Antelme), Ruth Leys states her disapproval of 'the partial and misleading way he has of reading certain crucial passages, expounding them in terms that are alien to the meaning of the texts in which they appear' (*From Guilt to Shame*, p. 180). This misreading is not merely a matter of literary interpretation, since it has far-reaching consequences for Agamben's thought. According to Leys, it underpins his view of the human subject as lacking intention and agency. Moreover, it is important because Agamben regards the concentration



camps not simply as an anomalous occurrence but, on the contrary, as the means to explain the modern world as a whole. The camps are, he tells us in *Homo Sacer* and elsewhere, ‘the hidden matrix and *nomos* of the political space in which we are still living’ (*Homo Sacer*, p. 166; see also *Means Without End*, p. 36); they appear ‘as an event that decisively signals the political space of modernity itself’ (*Homo Sacer*, p. 174). Through the suspension of the normal rule of law in the camps, the state creates for itself a place where it can fulfil what is now one of its main functions, according to Agamben: to manage ‘bare life’, which otherwise cannot be inscribed in the order of the nation (*Homo Sacer*, 174–76; *Means Without End*, pp. 41–44). The *Muselmann* manifests this bare life in its rawest form. So the *Muselmann* is presented as the key to understanding the camps, and the camps are the key to understanding the modern world. Agamben’s rushed appropriation of the other’s trauma in his account of the *Muselmann* underlies and risks discrediting his conception of modernity in general.

### Felman and the pedagogy of trauma

If Agamben’s study turns into a questionable appropriation of the other’s suffering, in Felman’s case it is the participatory re-creation of trauma which raises problems. The first chapter of the hugely influential book she wrote with Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, includes her account of a graduate class she gave at Yale University in 1984. The class and what happened to it played a significant role in the development of modern trauma studies since the crisis it underwent contained, as Felman puts it ‘the germ – and the germination’ of the book which describes it (‘Education and Crisis’, p. 47). Entitled ‘Literature and Testimony’, the class covered works by Camus, Dostoevsky, Freud, Mallarmé and Celan, and culminated with the screening of two testimonial videotapes borrowed from the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimony at Yale. Towards the conclusion of the class, something happened. As Felman puts it, ‘The class itself broke out into a crisis’ (p. 47). In Felman’s account, she began getting phone calls from students at odd hours to discuss the class; colleagues reported that Felman’s students could not focus on other work, and talked only about the class. The students were, Felman says, ‘obsessed’:

They felt apart, and yet not quite together. They sought out each other and yet felt they could not reach each other. They kept turning to each

other and to me. They felt alone, suddenly deprived of their bonding to the world and to one another. As I listened to their outpour, I realized the class was entirely at a loss, disoriented and uprooted. (p. 48)

After consulting with her colleague and future co-author Dori Laub, Felman concluded that in the final session of the class, when the second videotape was due to be screened, it was necessary for her 'to reassume authority as the teacher of the class, and bring the students back into significance' (p. 48). She prepared a lecture which summarized and interpreted the students' reactions to the first videotape in the context of the rest of the course. In effect, she returned to them their own words and responses, but this time overlaid with significance which her position as teacher allowed her to supply. On reading the students' final term papers a few weeks later, Felman 'realized that the crisis, in effect, had been worked through and that a resolution had been reached, both on an intellectual and on a vital level' (p. 52).

Rather than breathing a sigh of relief that this difficult situation was resolved, Felman now goes on to theorize that a crisis such as the one undergone by her students is in fact essential to genuine teaching:

I would venture to propose, today, that teaching in itself, teaching as such, takes place precisely only through a crisis: if teaching does not hit upon some sort of crisis, if it does not encounter either vulnerability or the explosiveness of a (explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps *not truly taught* [...]. Looking back at the experience of that class, I therefore think that my job as teacher, paradoxical as it may sound, was that of creating in the class the highest state of crisis that it could withstand, without 'driving the students crazy' – without compromising the students' bounds. (p. 53; emphasis in original)

This is certainly a heady vision of teaching. Rather than enslaving ourselves and our students to the demands of the syllabus and examinations, we should be provoking crises and opening up ourselves and our students to traumatic encounters. It is striking, however, that this exposure to trauma does not lead Felman to question her authority as a teacher. On the contrary, her account of what teaching should be involves maintaining her dominance over the classroom. She seems confident that she has the ability, the right and the wisdom to decide (to a degree that I, for example, could not) what does or does not compromise the students' bounds, and what does or does not drive other people crazy; and she appears to be comfortable with her prerogative to

put an end to the crisis by '[bringing] the students back into significance' (p. 48). She provokes the crisis and then resolves it, comparing her role to that of a psychoanalyst who helps her patients work through their trauma (pp. 53–54).

Dominick LaCapra expresses what I believe are legitimate concerns about this approach, which entails the traumatization of students through encouraging them to identify with the victims of atrocity. It would be preferable, he suggests, 'to avoid or at least counteract such traumatization – or its histrionic simulacrum – rather than to seek means of assuaging it once it had been set in motion' (*Writing History, Writing Trauma*, p. 102). The teacher's placing of herself in the role of therapist and the identification of her class with trauma victims and survivors are at best questionable and at worst positively dangerous. Once the complex dynamics of transference and counter-transference have been unleashed, it may not be a straightforward matter to bring them back under control. The working-through which Felman believes has been achieved by the end of the course – 'I realized that the crisis, in effect, had been worked through' ('Education and Crisis', p. 52) – may be illusory. Freud concluded his classic paper on working-through by warning that the process may turn out to be 'an arduous task for the subject of the analysis and a trial of patience for the analyst' ('Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through', p. 155). Even if trauma is vicarious rather than primary, it may not be quickly resolved by a final course assignment. For LaCapra, the teacher should endeavour to avoid or at least to minimize crisis. Felman, by contrast, insists that real teaching *depends upon* instigating the highest level of crisis that can be borne, to a degree and in a manner which might be thought reckless.

There is, moreover, a normative, even coercive, element in this transformation of the classroom into a site of vicarious trauma. After the outbreak of the crisis Felman reports how she called the students 'who had *failed* to contact [her]' to discuss their reactions to what was occurring ('Education and Crisis', p. 48; my emphasis). It turns out, then, that not all students were affected to the extent that they felt obliged to contact their teacher; and this response or absence of response is designated as a *failure*. They are at fault for not participating in the crisis to an adequate degree or in the right way. Failing to be traumatized might lead to failing the class. Felman's narrative seems to recommend *forcing* students into crisis, sharing it with them and then imposing one's authority as teacher to resolve it:

I lived the crisis with them, testified to it and made them testify to it. My own testimony to the class, which echoed their reactions, returning to them the expressions of their shock, their trauma and their disarray, bore witness nonetheless to the important fact that their experience, incoherent though it seemed, *made sense*, and that *it mattered*. My testimony was thus both an echo and a *return of significance*, both a repetition and an affirmation of the double fact that their response was *meaningful*, and that it *counted*. ('Education and Crisis', pp. 54–55; emphasis in original)

Describing her students' experience, Felman refers here to 'their shock, their trauma and their disarray'. The students of trauma have now become the victims of trauma, and their teacher wants her part of it too. I would argue, however, that witnessing the other's trauma is precisely *not* to share it. The responsibility of the witness is not to *become* the victim, to partake of the victim's pain; rather, I want to suggest, it is to regard the other's pain as something alien, unfathomable and as an outrage which should be stopped. There is nothing enviable about suffering, and for most of us there is nothing to be gained by sharing in it unnecessarily. My objection to Agamben is that he wants to speak on behalf of the victims of trauma in order to tell us the meaning of their experience. Felman goes further, endeavouring to create and participate in a crisis that will turn her students into secondary victims. Both Agamben and Felman maintain their authority to understand, to bestow significance and to theorize. Their magisterial positions remain strangely unaffected by the traumas they oversee.

### Delbo and the other's story

The work of Charlotte Delbo, in particular her book *Mesure de nos jours*, speaks on behalf of the victims of trauma;<sup>4</sup> however, I shall

4 From the growing body of work devoted to Delbo, my understanding of her writing has benefited in particular from the following: Thatcher, *A Literary Analysis of Charlotte Delbo's Concentration Camp Re-Presentation*, and *Charlotte Delbo: Une voix singulière. Mémoire, témoignage et littérature*; Hutton, 'Conclusion: The Case of Charlotte Delbo', pp. 210–19; Jones, "'A New Mode of Travel": Representations of Deportation in Charlotte Delbo's *Auschwitz et après* and Jorge Semprun's *Le Grand Voyage*', pp. 34–53; Marquart, *On the Defensive*. Some of the issues discussed in this chapter, such as the question of community and the use of the first person, are brilliantly analysed in Trezise, 'The Question of Community in Charlotte Delbo's *Auschwitz and After*'.

suggest, it manages to avoid the appropriative assumption of authority which problematizes the work of Agamben and Felman. Delbo was 28 in March 1942 when she was arrested in occupied France along with her husband, Georges Dudach, for resistance activities. She was allowed to visit her husband for the final time in May of that year on the day he was executed. She was subsequently deported to Auschwitz and later to Ravensbrück. She was one of the 49 survivors from the 230 women on the convoy in which she was transported to Auschwitz.<sup>5</sup> After the war she published, among other things, three remarkable works grouped together as a trilogy under the title *Auschwitz et après*, which describe and comment on experiences in Auschwitz, Ravensbrück and post-war France. In the current context, it is the third part of the trilogy, *Mesure de nos jours*, which is of most interest. The book presents a series of accounts of the lives of camp survivors after their return to France. Most – though not all – of the survivors are women, and most are named in the title of the section which presents their story: Gilberte, Mado, Poupette, Marie-Louise, Ida, Loulou, Germaine, Jacques, Denise, Gaby, Louise, Marceline, Françoise. Most of these accounts are in the first person singular. No explanation is offered of how the narratives were gathered or composed, and no generic marker on the book indicates whether the reader should take them as biographical or fictional. It would seem that Delbo is doing exactly what I have been objecting to: speaking in the place of others, presenting their stories as first-person narratives when the words they use may not be their own.

One way in which Delbo avoids the dangers of asserting authority over the other's story is through the absence of any attempt to unify the disparate experiences of her narrators into a coherent aesthetic whole. Agamben's *Muselmänner* all betoken the same meaning; Felman speaks of her students as an undifferentiated block. By contrast, Delbo's approach preserves the specific difference of each narrative. There is no consistent theory or diagnosis of survival in *Mesure de nos jours*, only a series of diverse, contradictory stories: one woman recounts how she does not marry after her return to France, another marries but does not tell her husband about her experiences, another divorces; one shares everything with her husband and carefully preserves every memory of the camps; one thinks it would have been easier to marry a fellow survivor, another does marry a fellow survivor but finds that it is in

5 Delbo attempts to piece together the lives and deaths of the women in her convoy in *Le Convoi du 24 janvier*.

fact no easier; some endeavour to forget the past, others insist on the importance of remembering. In a passage quoted above, Cavarero asserts that ‘your story is never my story’; Delbo does not ask us to recognize ourselves in the stories of others. There is no thematic consistency to the lives of survivors which would allow us to interpret *Mesure de nos jours* monolithically as a work of, say, despair or hope. The text implies that there is no Story of the return from Auschwitz, rather we are offered a multiplicity of stories without overarching sense.

According to a key topos of survivor literature, there is a stark tension between the need or duty to narrate and the impossibility of narrating. Even as they endeavour to tell their stories, survivors are acutely aware of the limitations of their own narrative capabilities and the likely incredulity of their audience.<sup>6</sup> The impossibility which Butler ascribes to any attempt to give an account of oneself is felt with particular keenness by the survivors of trauma. Delbo certainly shares the intuition that a story cannot succeed in explaining a life to a listener or reader. This awareness can be seen in *Mesure de nos jours*, for example, in the strange incongruence between the determined attempt to tell the other’s story as if it were one’s own and the recurrent theme that it is impossible or pointless to talk of the camps. We are told that it is not worth trying to explain to those who cannot understand (p. 44). Referring to the title of the book, one speaker says that time that can be measured is not the measure of the survivors’ time (p. 48; see also p. 197). Their temporality is not ours, and we cannot share it. One survivor talks of her grief to her goats, as if only they can understand: ‘As-tu remarqué ces yeux mélancoliques qu’elles ont, les chèvres? On dirait vraiment qu’elles comprennent quand on leur parle’ (p. 112). The goats may understand, or they may not; what is repeatedly suggested, though, is that no human who is not a survivor of the camps can share the survivors’ experience. We can be instructed of the facts, but we cannot partake of the meaning or the pain, as one of Delbo’s narrators explains: ‘Pour les autres, je n’attends pas qu’ils comprennent. Je veux qu’ils sachent, même s’ils ne sentent pas ce que je sens moi. Ce que je veux dire quand je dis qu’ils ne comprennent pas, que personne ne peut comprendre. Au moins doivent-ils savoir’ (pp. 53–54).

6 This is evident in the earliest accounts by survivors of the concentration camps, such as Robert Antelme’s *L’Espèce humaine*, first published in 1947. The opening words of the book’s introduction describe the survivors’ dilemma, desperately wanting to speak yet unable to recount or identify with their own experiences (p. 9). For further discussion of this issue, see chapters 3 and 10.

This sense of the necessary unintelligibility of one's own story is given further poignancy when the speaker insists that she is dead. In Edgar Allan Poe's story 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar', the titular M. Valdemar says of himself '*I am dead*' (p. 277; emphasis original). Poe's text repeatedly marks its awareness that this claim will appear nonsensical, defying his narrator's and reader's frame of understanding. Delbo's *Mesure de nos jours* issues the same challenge. The section attributed to Mado begins with the words 'Il me semble que je ne suis pas vivante' (p. 47). Listing the dead – 'Mounette, Viva, Sylviane, Rosie, toutes les autres, toutes les autres' (p. 47) – Mado believes that no one could return from the camps alive. This recalls the title of the first volume of *Auschwitz et après*, *Aucun de nous ne reviendra*. The fact that the book exists suggests that, contrary to the title, some will return and that they will tell of their survival in Auschwitz. But they return with a sense that in fact they have not survived.<sup>7</sup> Their temporality is incommensurable with ours because they died in Auschwitz and return to tell of their deaths. Mado concludes:

Je ne suis pas vivante. Les gens croient que les souvenirs deviennent flous, qu'ils s'effacent avec le temps, le temps auquel rien ne résiste. C'est cela, la différence; c'est que sur moi, sur nous, le temps ne passe pas. Il n'estompe rien, il n'use rien. Je ne suis pas vivante. Je suis morte à Auschwitz et personne ne le voit. (p. 66)

The story of a woman who declares herself to be dead epitomizes the narrative deadlock of *Mesure de nos jours* and survivor literature more broadly. The death of the self is unnarratable, and the death of the other is irretrievable. At the same time, survivor literature disturbs the boundaries between the living and the dead, and shows their eerie cohabitation. Robert Jay Lifton describes the survivors of massive traumas as fearing that they have become 'carriers of death' (*Death in Life*, p. 517). The dead and the living are no longer comfortably separate. The opening section of *Mesure de nos jours* describes how, on her return from captivity, the narrator finds herself still accompanied by her dead comrades, and asks herself: 'Si je confonds les mortes avec les vivantes, avec lesquelles suis-je, moi?' (p. 11). None of us shall return, Delbo and others suggest, even if it might look to you, the non-survivors, as if we

7 This is suggested by the play on the word *revenir* and the description of the female survivors as *revenantes*, which also means 'ghosts', implying that in some sense they have died. For discussion, see Davis, 'The Ghosts of Auschwitz: Charlotte Delbo', pp. 93–110.

are back among you. The dead cannot tell their own story. The living would not, could not and – it is implied – *should* not understand it. The title of the second volume of *Auschwitz et après, Une connaissance inutile*, implies that what the dead know would be of no use to us. It can teach us nothing that will help us live more fully. We are better off not knowing.

Yet *Mesure de nos jours* does purport to tell the stories of the dead or the living dead who returned from the camps. What saves Delbo's work from what I regard as the failings of Agamben and Felman is not simply that she is a survivor herself. It is partly, as already suggested, her refusal to exert authority over the stories of the survivors by imposing a coherent meaning on them. It also resides, I want now to suggest, in the simultaneous merging of voices and loss of voice that constitute the intimate texture of her writing. We should note the first person plural which occurs in the title of both *Aucun de nous ne reviendra* and *Mesure de nos jours*. Cavarero's distrust of the plural 'we' is a reluctance to allow a singular story to be subsumed in a generalizing narrative. Delbo, by contrast, frequently uses the first person plural. In her writing, the terror of a loss of self is countered or at least palliated by the comfort of belonging to a community of sufferers. Just as the lines between the living and the dead are blurred, so is the division between self and other; and in the process the subject's possession of a unique voice is thrown into disarray. As Mado, ventriloquized by Delbo, puts it: 'Je suis autre. Je parle et ma voix résonne comme une voix autre. Mes paroles viennent d'en dehors de moi. Je parle et ce que je dis, ce n'est pas moi qui le dis' (p. 60). In this passage Mado reflects on the question of who is speaking here. Her words are literally not her own because they are Delbo's. Someone else speaks through her. But this ventriloquism is not simply Delbo speaking on Mado's behalf or in her place, because every voice in this text is inhabited by others. One of the narrators of *Mesure de nos jours* is identified as Charlotte, and of course we are likely to assume that this refers to the author, Charlotte Delbo. But the textual Charlotte is no wiser or more all-knowing than any other character. The fact that she may be the one who puts pen to paper does not make of her an authority figure who bestows significance on everything around her.

The merging of voices becomes most evident in the section entitled 'L'Enterrement'. A group of camp survivors, including the narrator of this section, who is addressed as Charlotte, meet at a railway station on their way to attend the burial of one of their former comrades. Some of



the women have not seen each other for years, yet they fall easily into a familiar conversation, exchanging and sharing memories and news. Much of the section is set out as dialogue, sometimes with no indication of who the speaker is at any given moment. It barely matters. The narrator explains the ease with which the group converses: 'Entre nous, il n'y a pas d'effort à faire, il n'y a pas de contrainte, pas même celle de la politesse usuelle. Entre nous, nous sommes nous' (pp. 193–94). This final sentence, 'Entre nous, nous sommes nous', emphatically insists on the persistence of identity within the group of survivors. The first person plural contains and exceeds the first person singular. Each can tell the story of the other because, in this haunted community of survivors, each story belongs to all of them.

And each death belongs to all of them also. The burial the women are attending is that of their comrade Germaine. In an earlier section, when Charlotte visits Germaine's death bed with two others, for a moment she is taken back in her mind to Auschwitz and a visit to another dying comrade, Sylviane, together with two different companions, Carmen and Lulu.<sup>8</sup> The scenes of death, their witnesses and the identity of the deceased become interchangeable. Delbo writes:

Je sais que les deux autres qui étaient avec moi ce jour-là, le jour où Germaine est morte, n'étaient ni Carmen ni Lulu. C'est uniquement parce que nous étions ensemble, Lulu, Carmen et moi, pour dire adieu à Sylviane, que je les confonds avec celles qui étaient réellement avec moi quand Germaine est morte. (pp. 149–50)

Scenes and identities are overlaid, as later events become confused with and substitutable for earlier ones. What happens outside Auschwitz merely repeats what happened inside it. The living and the dead merge across time. The funeral which the women attend is Germaine's, but also Sylviane's, and that of so many others, and their own. Each one survives with every other, and each dies with every death, along with and in place of the other. So, to witness and to recount the death of the other is also to tell of one's own demise and one's own survival in the living death of those who can say, along with Mado, 'Je suis morte à Auschwitz et personne ne le voit' (p. 66).

Delbo's use of the first person plural – 'we' – forges a community across the boundaries of death, trauma and survival. But we should not be misled into thinking that the reader – the non-survivor – can

8 On Sylviane, see Delbo, *Le Convoi du 24 janvier*, pp. 273–75.

be admitted to this community. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag writes that ‘No “we” should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people’s pain’ (p. 6). Delbo freely uses the first person plural, but it is as exclusive as it is inclusive.<sup>9</sup> The non-survivor is addressed as ‘You’, and thereby permanently distanced from the community of survivors. ‘You’ and ‘we’ can never understand one another. One of the passages which close *Une connaissance inutile* describes the barrier between the survivor and the non-survivor:

Je suis revenue d’entre les morts  
 et j’ai cru  
 que cela me donnait le droit  
 de parler aux autres  
 et quand je me suis retrouvée en face d’eux  
 je n’ai rien eu à leur dire  
 parce que  
 j’avais appris  
 là-bas  
 qu’on ne peut pas parler aux autres. (p. 188)

The reader – the non-survivor – is not and cannot be part of the community which Delbo forms together with her living and dead comrades. In his study of the problematic sense of community in Delbo’s *Auschwitz et après*, Thomas Trezise describes ‘attentiveness to the irreducible difference between a survivor of Auschwitz and those not directly affected by the Holocaust’ as ‘an ethical prerequisite’ (‘The Question of Community’, p. 886).<sup>10</sup> Those of us who were not in the camps are excluded. The text repeatedly informs us that we can observe but not comprehend. Our knowledge is not the survivors’ knowledge. What Anne-Lise Stern calls *le savoir-déporté* is incommensurable with

9 For subtle discussion of Delbo’s use of ‘we’, see in particular Trezise, *Witnessing Witnessing*, pp. 106–08.

10 Trezise’s focus is slightly different from mine in that he is interested in the possibility of community between survivors and the ‘you’ to whom Delbo sometimes refers, whereas I use the word ‘community’ in the current discussion to refer to the group formed by the survivors. In his nuanced and subtle reading of parts of *Aucun de nous ne reviendra*, Trezise suggests that the irreducible difference between survivors and non-survivors does not preclude the possibility of a form of community which includes both groups: ‘the tension between identification and estrangement is not a misfortune to be surmounted but a condition of community to be maintained’ (‘The Question of Community’, p. 886). See also Trezise, *Witnessing Witnessing*, pp. 104–21.

what we can know.<sup>11</sup> Charlotte and her comrades are both the source of the text and the only audience capable of receiving it fully. Indeed, we are warned that we are better off not comprehending, since only the dead can understand the dead, so that to take a share in their narratives would be to forego life. Delbo, the author, may speak in the voice of dead others; but that does not entitle the excluded reader to appropriate their stories and to respond to their pain as if it were our own. Agamben wants to tell us the meaning of the *Muselmann*'s experience and its relevance for the post-Holocaust world; Felman wants to participate in the suffering of others and then to reassert her authority by conferring significance on it. Delbo, by contrast, issues no invitation to explain or to share.

### Conclusion

To conclude, I want to warn against the allure of trauma envy, that is, the temptation that those of us who witness the testimony of others appropriate to ourselves an unmerited, unearned part in the story of suffering. It has been argued that vicarious trauma may have socially and ethically useful effects;<sup>12</sup> but it may also be self-indulgent and ethically delusional. Those of us who study and teach emotionally gruelling material run the risk of succumbing to the dark glamour of vicarious trauma, regarding ourselves as traumatized subjects by proxy. When Felman refers to the modern world as 'post-traumatic' ('Education and Crisis', pp. 1, 54), she invites us to extend the scope of trauma by making us all survivors and victims. Agamben also, according to Ruth Leys, offers a view of the human subject which has the result that 'a kind of traumatic abjection is held to characterize not only all the victims of the camps without differentiation but all human life after Auschwitz – including those of us who were never there' (*From Guilt to Shame*, p. 180). The danger of this is that it collapses the necessary distinction

<sup>11</sup> See Stern, *Le Savoir-déporté: camps, histoire, psychanalyse*, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 10.

<sup>12</sup> For discussion and references, see Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, for example pp. 39–41, 87–93, 122–25. Kaplan states that, 'Arguably, being vicariously traumatized invites members of a society to confront, rather than conceal, catastrophes, and in that way might be useful'; but she goes on to say that 'On the other hand, it might arouse anxiety and trigger defense against further exposure' (p. 87).

between, for example, those who were in Auschwitz and those who were not. Delbo reminds us uncompromisingly that those who survived the camps are unintelligible in the terms of those who did not know it at first hand. We are not the victims; we do not share or feel their pain. Dominick LaCapra insists that 'a historian or other academic, however empathetic a listener he or she may be, may not assume the voice of the victim' (*Writing History*, p. 98). I would add that he or she may not assume the victim's trauma either. It should be possible to speak of these difficult topics with moral urgency, but also analytically and with respectful distance. Following Butler, we may not be able to give a final account of our life, and even less an account of others' lives; and we have no mandate to assume the pain or decide the meaning of the lives and deaths of others. As readers, the best we can do may be to try to attend as honourably as possible to the traces of that which remains foreign to us.

For the purposes of the current book, what is important about Delbo's writing position in *Mesure de nos jours* is that it cannot be reproduced, emulated or empathetically repossessed by those of us who did not experience the camps. Moreover, Delbo does not attempt to find a coherent, overarching Story or Meaning which underlies the experiences of her speakers. The camps produce a proliferation, sometimes even a competition, of stories, calling for a practice of interpretation which attends to the detail of each narrative without subsuming it into a final, rigid thesis. The next chapter takes this issue a step further: if we cannot speak on behalf of others, can we at least recognize and understand their pain?

## CHAPTER TWO

# Traumatic Hermeneutics

## Reading and Overreading the Pain of Others

The previous chapter discussed the problem of speaking for others. This one turns to the question of how we can speak *about* others, how we can understand what their pain means to them, when it is not commensurable with our own. Or even more radically: How can I know that someone else is in pain, let alone have any real knowledge of what that pain *feels like*? Wittgenstein answers these questions with breathtaking directness. Neither dismissing nor solving the problem, he tells us all we can know and all we need to know: ‘If I see someone writhing in pain with evident cause I do not think: all the same, his feelings are hidden from me’ (*Philosophical Investigations*, p. 223). I can doubt most things if I put my mind to it; and of course I cannot know precisely how another’s pain feels. But if I see a woman who has been hit by a truck, it would be better to call an ambulance than to consider the merits of philosophical scepticism. As Wittgenstein puts it in another passage, ‘Just try – in a real case – to doubt someone else’s fear or pain’ (*Philosophical Investigations*, p. 102). We cannot directly share it, but we know it when we see it.

The case of trauma and of trauma texts nevertheless complicates the recognition of the other’s pain. Wittgenstein refers to suffering which is visible (‘I see someone writhing in pain’) and has ‘evident cause’. Its source and its signs cannot be misinterpreted: the truck hit the woman and she is crying in pain. The causes and symptoms of trauma, however, are less obviously manifest and more easily mistakable. This is suggested in one of the most frequently quoted passages in trauma studies, where Freud describes the survivor of a train crash in *Moses and Monotheism*:

It may happen that a man who has experienced some frightful accident – a railway collision, for instance – leaves the scene of the event apparently

uninjured. In the course of the next few weeks, however, he develops a number of severe psychical and motor symptoms which can only be traced to his shock, the concussion or whatever else it was. He now has a 'traumatic neurosis'. (p. 309)

Initially at least, the survivor shows no sign of suffering. He walks away from the scene of the crash without apparent physical or mental damage. There is no visible writhing in agony or unmistakable cause that would lead an observer to the conclusion that he is in pain. Yet his later behaviour will demonstrate that he is traumatized, and that he is prey to an agony which has no demonstrable physical source. Thomas Elsaesser neatly summarizes the problem of recognizing trauma: 'If trauma is experienced through its forgetting, its repeated forgetting, then, paradoxically, one of the signs of the presence of trauma is the absence of all signs of it' ('Postmodernism as Mourning Work', p. 199). Trauma *isn't there*. This is not to say that it is not real, that it does not exist; but its sources and signs are not always immediately manifest as in the case of the woman hit by the truck. As Judith Butler suggests in *Undoing Gender*, trauma demands a resourceful practice of reading in which 'One will have to become a reader of the ellipsis, the gap, the absence' (p. 155).<sup>1</sup> We have to be prepared to interpret gaps and absences as much as explicit statements and obvious clues.

This is where hermeneutics – and what I call here *traumatic hermeneutics* – comes in. Hermeneutics starts from the assumption that people and texts do not say only or exactly what they mean. Trauma exacerbates and radicalizes the hermeneutic search for what-is-not-quite-said because the signs which point to it may be totally absent. This inaugurates both a pressing need for interpretation and the inevitable risk of mis- or over-interpretation. How do we distinguish between signs which are absent because there is nothing for them to signify and signs which are absent because what they signify is too dark, repressed and unknowable to be given manifest form? A person or text which does not appear traumatized may be, quite simply, not traumatized; or they may be so profoundly traumatized that they cannot acknowledge it. The call to interpretation is exhibited very clearly in Freud's example of the train crash survivor, quoted above. The initial absence of signs of suffering is followed by what Freud calls 'symptoms' which can '*only* be traced to his shock' (my emphasis); and Freud now confidently concludes that 'He now has a "traumatic neurosis"'. Every step in this diagnosis, including

1 I am grateful to Avril Tynan for this reference.

the final unveiling of the name of the illness, involves interpretation. Deciding that the man's behaviour amounts to a set of 'symptoms' insists on their repetitive and medical nature (When does an action become a symptom? How many times does it have to be repeated?); and the assurance that the symptoms can *only* be traced to the train crash is questionable even on Freud's own terms. Moreover, it is in the nature of Freudian interpretation that any action, word or dream thought may mean more than it seems on first, second or third sight. There are no stable criteria for determining what can and what cannot yield further meaning if exposed to further interpretive pressure.

As Laplanche and Pontalis put it, 'On pourrait caractériser la psychanalyse par l'interprétation, c'est-à-dire la mise en évidence du sens latent d'un matériel' (*Vocabulaire*, p. 207). Psychoanalysis is an art of interpretation, with all the risks of error that such an art inevitably brings with it. Indeed, Freud has a good claim to be regarded as one of the pre-eminent hermeneutic thinkers and practitioners of the twentieth century, alongside Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricœur. Although in the case of the train crash survivor Freud appears to rush with suspect assurance to a final diagnosis ('He now has a "traumatic neurosis"'), in his customary theory and practice the 'latent sense' to which Laplanche and Pontalis refer is generally more open and elusive, and less readily attained. Ricœur, who more than almost everyone appreciated Freud's hermeneutic importance, points out that the Freudian movement from the manifest to the latent cannot be regarded as 'un rapport simple entre discours chiffré et discours déchiffré' (*De l'interprétation*, p. 99). The symptom or the dream are not just coded messages which the interpreter decodes in order to restore their true meaning. The language of the unconscious operates according to different rules from that of the conscious, and one cannot be translated directly into the other. We can never be confident that a dream, for example, has been fully, properly and finally interpreted (Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 383), and in any case all psycho-pathological structures regularly have more than one meaning (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, pp. 230–31). For practical or therapeutic reasons, we may need to bring an interpretation to an end, but we can always start again the next day, exploring hitherto neglected details or fresh associations (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 669).

Key to Freudian hermeneutics is what he calls 'overinterpretation' (*Überdeutung* in German). Overinterpretation often bears negative connotations, suggesting that the interpreter has gone too far, to

the point of imposing improbable or implausible meanings on an action, utterance or work. Some critics and thinkers have nevertheless endeavoured to defend overinterpretation: by overinterpreting, we push the boundaries of what can be said, potentially discovering new questions to be answered and opening up new fields of enquiry.<sup>2</sup> However, this is not quite the sense of overinterpretation in Freud. He is aware that his readers would be inclined to accuse him of being unnecessarily ingenious in some of his dream interpretations, though he adds soberly that ‘actual experience would teach them better’ (*Interpretation*, p. 670). Moreover, he argues that overinterpretation in fact belongs to the proper process of interpretation. Without it, there is no full understanding: ‘all neurotic symptoms, and, for that matter, dreams’, he writes, ‘are capable of being “over-interpreted” and indeed need to be, if they are to be fully understood’ (*Interpretation*, p. 368; my emphasis). Later in *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud reinforces the point:

It is only with the greatest difficulty that the beginner in the business of interpreting dreams can be persuaded that his task is not at an end when he has a complete interpretation in his hands – an interpretation which makes sense, is coherent and throws light upon every element of the dream’s contents. For the same dream may perhaps have another interpretation as well, an ‘over-interpretation’, which has escaped him. (p. 669)

Freud describes a process resembling the Derridean notion of supplementarity, whereby something is complete and yet can still be augmented. Here, he argues that an interpretation can make sense, be coherent and elucidate every element of a dream; and yet, although complete, it is not finished. This version of overinterpretation entails a conception of meaning as layered, so that further layers can always be added or found. And this process has no theoretical conclusion, although it may need to be curtailed for practical reasons. Even the most exhaustively analysed

2 The key quotation to which I find myself repeatedly drawn on this topic is from Stanley Cavell: ‘In my experience people worried about reading in, or overinterpretation, or going too far, are, or were, typically afraid of getting started, or reading as such, as if afraid that texts – like people, like times and places – mean things and moreover mean more than you know. This is accordingly a fear of something real, and it may be a healthy fear, that is, a fear of something fearful. [...] Still, my experience is that most texts, like most lives, are underread, not overread’ (*Pursuits of Happiness*, p. 35). For discussion of the possible gains of overreading, see Culler, ‘In Defence of Overinterpretation’, and Davis, *Critical Excess*.



dream retains a link to the unknown, which ensures that further interpretation is always possible:

There is often a passage in even the most thoroughly interpreted dream which has to be left obscure; this is because we become aware during the work of interpretation that at that point there is a tangle of dream-thoughts which cannot be unravelled and which moreover adds nothing to our knowledge of the content of the dream. This is the dream's navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown. The dream-thoughts to which we are led by interpretation cannot, from the nature of things, have any definite endings; they are bound to branch out in every direction into the intricate network of our world of thought. It is at some point where this meshwork is particularly close that the dream-wish grows up, like a mushroom out of its mycelium. (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, pp. 671–72)

Freudian interpretation is sometimes criticized for being reductive, always finding the same sexual content wherever it looks. This passage gives the lie to such claims. If the tangle of dream-thoughts cannot be unravelled and adds nothing to our knowledge, this does not mean that it should be definitively relegated to oblivion. It is a mystery, a connection to the unknown, which we do not yet know how to address or understand, but which may become approachable by some accident or newly discovered association. It is not so much the end of interpretation as the guarantee that there is no such end, in principle if not in practice.

Freud's discussion here is specifically concerned with the interpretation of dreams. He makes it explicit, though, that his comments are equally applicable to literary works (see *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 368); and following Ricœur's lead in modelling the interpretation of meaningful action on the hermeneutics of the text, we can extend the relevance of Freud's discussion to other forms of human behaviour.<sup>3</sup> The significance of this for traumatic hermeneutics is twofold: first, identifying and interpreting trauma entails – even more than other interpretive occasions – looking for what is not there (initially at least, the survivor of the train crash shows no signs of trauma, but this does not mean that he is not or will not become traumatized); and second, insofar as the tangle of (absent) signs of trauma reaches down into something unknown, interpretation always invites and even requires a further interpretation, an overinterpretation, which adds ever more layers of meaning. The rest of this chapter explores these issues through

3 See especially the texts collected in Ricœur's *Du texte à l'action*.

examination of some stories and texts which encapsulate the problem of traumatic hermeneutics: the sad case of Phineas P. Gage, which is one of the starting points of modern neuroscience; and some of the works of the Holocaust survivors Jorge Semprun and Charlotte Delbo.

### Gage was no longer Gage

In 1848 Phineas P. Gage was a 25-year-old construction foreman of good character in charge of a gang laying railroad tracks in Vermont. To continue their work, the gang needed to use explosives to break a way through the rock. Gage was an expert at this; and one day in September 1848 he prepared a charge with a specially designed iron bar. But something went wrong. Here is Antonio Damasio's account:

The explosion is so brutal that the entire gang freezes on their feet. It takes a few seconds to piece together what is going on. The bang is unusual, the rock is intact. Also unusual is the whistling sound, as of a rocket hurled at the sky. But this is more than fireworks. It is assault and battery. The iron enters Gage's left cheek, pierces the base of the skull, traverses the front of his brain, and exits at high speed through the top of his head. The rod has landed more than a hundred feet away, covered in blood and brains. Phineas Gage has been thrown to the ground. (*Descartes' Error*, p. 4)

Astonishingly, Gage survived this accident. Or did he? Was the person who survived the accident still Phineas Gage? After two months, apart from losing vision in one eye, he seemed to have recovered physically. But his character had changed. The temperate, energetic foreman became irresponsible, obstinate, profane and capricious. He was unable to hold down a steady job, became a circus freak and then died in obscurity at the age of 38. He was not the person he had been: 'Gage was no longer Gage', as his acquaintances observed (Damasio, *Descartes' Error*, p. 8). He survived, but he was not the person he had been before the accident. His character had changed fundamentally. Spelling out the importance of the case, Damasio demonstrates how the brain lesion suffered by Gage raises issues about what it means to be human:

Gage's story hinted at an amazing fact: Somehow, there were systems in the human brain dedicated more to reasoning than to anything else, and in particular to the personal and social dimensions of reasoning. The observance of previously acquired social convention and ethical

rules could be lost as a result of brain damage, even when neither basic intellect nor language seemed compromised. Unwittingly, Gage's example indicated that something in the brain was concerned specifically with unique human properties, among them the ability to anticipate the future and plan accordingly within a complex social environment; the sense of responsibility toward the self and others; and the ability to orchestrate one's survival deliberately, at the command of one's free will. (*Descartes' Error*, p. 10)

So this industrial accident turns out to have philosophical significance. It raises questions about free will, identity, responsibility and ethics. The literal, physical trauma to Gage's brain seemed to reach deep down in to his soul; and in the process, it raised questions about the extent and limits of our knowledge. As Damasio puts it, 'Gage posed more questions than he gave answers' (*Descartes' Error*, p. 18). These concern, according to Damasio, his very status as a human being: 'May he be described as having free will? Did he have a sense of right and wrong, or was he the victim of his new brain design, such that his decisions were imposed on him and inevitable? Was he responsible for his acts?' (*Descartes' Error*, p. 19).

These are fundamental questions about how the brain works and what it means to be human. So far as I am able to judge, neuroscience tends to overestimate its ability to answer them. Having shown the limitations of nineteenth-century science, Damasio goes on to show how modern scientific techniques allow us to understand fully what happened to Gage, which parts of his brain/mind were affected, and therefore why he became a different person in his post-traumatic years. We can now arrive at what Damasio calls 'certain conclusions' about the extent and consequence of the 'selective damage to the prefrontal cortices of Phineas Gage's brain' (*Descartes' Error*, p. 33). We know what happened and why its consequences were what they were.

One might wonder, though, whether this account of neuroscience overestimates its ability to answer fundamental questions about the meaning of human action. By contrast, it is striking that early psychoanalytic attempts to understand the nature of trauma more subtly concede the speculative, interpretive and provisional nature of their conclusions and weave it into the fabric of their thought. The psychoanalytical conception of trauma grew out of the industrial and medical concerns of the nineteenth century, and was then forced to refine its thinking in the dark light of the First World War (see Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, pp. 19–76). The early analysts became intensely

preoccupied with victims of shell shock, or what we might now call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). New questions arise which further problematize the identification of the sources of trauma in the chronology of the subject. In the case of the train crash, why is it that two people sitting side by side, experiencing more or less the same event, react totally differently? One shrugs off the event as an unfortunate but meaningless accident, and gets on with her life; the other finds himself haunted, perhaps years later, by nightmares which repeat the crash over and over again. In relation to the war neuroses, why do some suffer from debilitating shell shock while others do not, when their experience in the trenches is more or less the same? In part, the answer lies in the future, through the process of deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*), whereby a later trigger re-creates the past as traumatic. But the answer also lies in the more distant past. Karl Abraham introduces his paper on the war neuroses by referring to another accident, this time involving a tram:

I might mention the case of a young girl who met with a slight tram accident when she was in the throes of a serious erotic conflict. The analysis shows that the accident in a certain measure gave a pretext for the outbreak of the neurosis. The symptoms were in connection with the conflict in question; the importance of the trauma receded quite into the background. I might add that some litigious cases of traumatic neurosis which I observed in greater detail all suffered from impotence; this disturbance was produced by the accident, but seemed to have its real basis in old and unconscious sexual resistances. (*Psychoanalysis and the War Neuroses*, p. 22)

The accident itself is a pretext which requires a subsequent trigger before it becomes traumatic. However, the event and the trigger acquire their traumatic potential only because of a prior predisposition which lies deeper in the past. As Freud says of the German National Army in the Great War, it was the 'condition, and fruitful soil, for the appearance of war neuroses' ('Introduction', p. 3). But that is not to say that the war was their direct and sole cause. The traumatic event is the actualization of a possibility which may lie unrealized in the absence of a further accident, this being the trigger which will give it deadly potency. In classical psychoanalysis, then, trauma lies in a deep past which has not yet been, and in a fractured present which cannot yet be. We may all be accidents waiting to happen, or accidents which have already happened without our knowledge.

We might wish to debate the rights and wrongs of this account of trauma, both in general and in particular cases. A key point, though,

is that it *can* be debated, that it allows for the possibility and even the inevitability of reinter-pretation, because it concedes its interpretive nature. As Ricœur puts it, ‘La psychanalyse est ainsi de bout en bout interprétation’ (*De l’interprétation*, p. 76). The role of the analyst is to explore the interplay of meaning and event, sense and nonsense, in the construction of a life story. The French philosopher Catherine Malabou contrasts this starkly with an approach based in neuroscience. Malabou prefaces her book *Les Nouveaux Blessés* by referring to her grandmother, who suffered from Alzheimer’s disease. Her grandmother, like Phineas Gage (whose case she also discusses, pp. 46–47), poses a fundamental philosophical question about the continuity of identity through time. Is the Alzheimer’s sufferer the same person as she was, or has a former identity been changed into something new, with diminishing connections to a disappearing past? Gage was no longer Gage, we were told. The implication of this phrase is that a new being has taken the place of the existing one. The guiding idea of Malabou’s book is that the ‘new wounded’ of her title are not the victims of some long-buried trauma retrievable through interpretation, but are new beings without temporal continuity with pre-existing identities, which are now forever lost. There is no interplay of meaning and event; instead, there is a radical *accident* which comes entirely from the outside and makes permanent changes. What this also means for Malabou is that there is no hermeneutics of cerebral trauma because there is no interpretable continuity between former and present selves: ‘*toute hermeneutique [de l’événement] est impossible. [...] Les accidents de la cérébralité sont des blessures qui déchirent le fil de l’histoire, la mettant hors d’elle, en suspendent le cours et demeurent herméneutiquement “irrécupérables”, alors que le psychisme continue de vivre*’ (*Les Nouveaux Blessés*, p. 29; emphasis original).

Between classical psychoanalysis and this version of neurophilosophy, there is a stark division. We have on the one hand a practice which embraces its hermeneutic nature, and on the other an open declaration of hostility towards hermeneutics: ‘*L’ennemi aujourd’hui, c’est l’herméneutique*’, declares Malabou (*Les Nouveaux Blessés*, p. 259; emphasis original). This division goes together with a fundamental difference of approach to the analysis of trauma. For psychoanalysis, the traumatic event must be interpreted carefully in the light of earlier and later events in the life of a subject so that its meaning as trauma can emerge. For Malabou, there is nothing to interpret because trauma bears no meaning; it marks the radical, unpredictable, uninterpretable

invention of a new subjectivity. To explore this division further, I shall now look at works by two Holocaust survivors, Jorge Semprun and Charlotte Delbo, who also raise the problems of the interpretation and interpretability of trauma.

### Semprun and Delbo

By any standards Semprun had a remarkable life. He was born in Spain in 1923. His republican family left their homeland and eventually settled in France in the 1930s in order to escape the Spanish fascists. During the Occupation, Semprun joined the communist resistance, and was captured in 1943 and deported to Buchenwald. After the war, he became a leading member of the Spanish Communist Party in exile, and wrote an award-winning, semi-fictionalized account of his deportation, *Le Grand Voyage* (1963), before being expelled from the Party for ideological differences in 1964. He then went on to become a novelist, autobiographer, screenwriter and eventually Minister for Culture in the first Spanish Socialist government after the death of General Franco. He died in 2011.

*Le Grand Voyage* is an astonishing literary debut. It was immediately recognized as achieving a unique combination of political and moral seriousness with modernist literary techniques. In short, it cut across and in its way resolved contemporary French debates which appeared to demand a choice between commitment and experimentation in literature. Describing the deportation of Resistance fighters to Buchenwald, its historical, testimonial importance was unimpugnable; and, adopting complex time frames, involving flashbacks and flash-forwards, it also brought an intense literary self-knowingness to the treatment of its material. What is striking about the book is that it is *not yet* – though it is *almost* – a trauma text. What I mean by this is that, while it describes terrible things, those things do not quite entail a wholesale collapse of the narrator or author's ability to recall, recount and comprehend what is happening. The particular tension of *Le Grand Voyage* comes from the first-person narrator's continued assertions of command over his experience and his text, coupled with the spectre of a possibility that his self-assurance is on the verge of falling apart.

There is an important historical point here about the first French accounts of deportation and the experience of the concentration camps. The earliest works to appear were written by communist deportees, such as David Rousset in *L'Univers concentrationnaire* and Robert

Antelme in *L'Espèce humaine*. These works describe awful, unimaginable experiences which are nevertheless not *traumatic* in the sense of radically undermining beliefs and identity. The things that happened to their authors were certainly terrible; but they *made sense* within their established world view: if you are opposed to fascism, and you take arms against it, then it is not all surprising if the fascists do bad things to you when they capture you. There are traces of this kind of reasoning in Semprun's *Le Grand Voyage*: the account of the deportation to Buchenwald and early experiences there is harrowing, but the narrator remains confident to a significant extent, even to the point of irritating arrogance. When he wrote the work, Semprun was still a communist insider. His political beliefs provided him with a framework in which his experiences could be processed and understood. They made sense within a conceptual system which ensured that they remained intelligible, possessable and bearable.

That system would not survive long. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was published in France in 1963, shortly after Semprun completed *Le Grand Voyage*. In a political climate still heavily influenced by communism, the publication of Solzhenitsyn's work implicitly encouraged comparison between the Nazi camps and the Soviet Gulags. It undermined the moral authority of communist opponents to Nazism, suggesting that the regime in whose name they were struggling may have been no better than the one they were fighting against. Semprun's experience *becomes traumatic* at the point where the political framework which had made it intelligible was no longer tenable for him. As he wrote in *Quel beau dimanche!* in 1980, his later account of his time in Buchenwald, the sense of his experience changed retrospectively. It became traumatic not, or not only, because of its inherent nature, but because of an enforced revision of the context in which it was understood:

Tout mon récit dans *le Grand Voyage* s'articulait silencieusement, sans en faire état, sans en faire un plat ni des gorges chaudes, à une vision communiste du monde. Toute la vérité de mon témoignage avait pour référence implicite, mais contraignante, l'horizon d'une société désaliénée: une société sans classes où les camps eussent été inconcevables. Toute la vérité de mon témoignage baignait dans les huiles saintes de cette bonne conscience latente. Mais l'horizon du communisme n'était pas celui de la société sans classes. L'horizon du communisme, incontournable, était celui du Goulag. Du coup, toute la vérité de mon livre devenait mensongère. (pp. 384–85)

Semprun's account of his transformed relation to his earlier experience fits well with the classical psychoanalytic model of trauma as something occurring in a deep past, but not becoming traumatic until it is awoken, triggered, by events which may occur decades later. To put it schematically, the experience of Buchenwald was terrible but not yet traumatic for Semprun in 1963, 18 years after the liberation of the camp. He was still a committed communist and he had not read Solzhenitsyn. His persecution by the Nazis had purpose, value and meaning because it made sense in the context of his political convictions. In 1964, having read Solzhenitsyn and been expelled from the Communist Party, the past became traumatic because its meaning had been abruptly transformed. The truth of his earlier testimony became a lie. His destiny and his testimony now change. From being a communist militant actively involved in the clandestine fight against fascism, he will now become an author and public witness to the trials, tribulations and failures of the political left in twentieth-century Europe. Is this the realization of what he could have been all along, or the invention of a new identity, utterly transformed by the encounter with trauma? Rather than answering this straightaway, I want to place Semprun's experience alongside the work of another Holocaust survivor, Charlotte Delbo.

In the literature of Holocaust memory, Charlotte Delbo is one of the few authors who is as fascinating, brilliant, technically sophisticated, demanding and finally humane as Semprun. Like Semprun, Delbo was captured and deported for working in the communist French Resistance. Set in Auschwitz, the first volume of her trilogy *Auschwitz et après* poses the problem of survival in the most brutal terms possible. It is entitled *Aucun de nous ne reviendra*. In a banally literal sense, the certainty expressed in this title turns out to be thankfully misplaced: the fact that she is writing the volume is material proof that she has in fact returned. Return is possible. Yet the title poses the question of whether return does in fact occur. Can one come back from this place called Auschwitz, is the person who returns the same person who went away? One of the questions which dominate Delbo's work, like Semprun's, is the meaning and possibility of return; and what this also concerns is the relation between a before and an after, between the subject who went away and the subject who comes back. Are they the same, or at least joined together in a temporal continuity, or are they forever torn apart, thrown into a new temporality? To return to my refrain, is Gage still Gage, is Semprun still Semprun, is Delbo still Delbo? Does the



traumatized subject rediscover something more ancient, or does she experience something terribly new?

As discussed in the previous chapter, the third volume of *Auschwitz et après, Mesure de nos jours*, describes the post-war lives of some of those who returned from the camps. The opening section is entitled 'Le Retour', posing once again the question of what it means, whether it is possible, to return from Auschwitz. The section on the character given the name 'Loulou' is particularly interesting here. Loulou is a male deportee whom his former comrades are seeking for the 20-year anniversary of the liberation of the camps. A week before the anniversary, he is found and his story reconstructed. When he returned in June 1945, the whole world he knew had disappeared. His family were gone, their home occupied by strangers. Without money or a place to stay, he is arrested; without a good explanation of how he came to be where he is, he is taken to be suffering from amnesia and interned in a lunatic asylum. Although there seems to be nothing particularly wrong with him, he stays there for 20 years and grows fat. When his former comrades find him, they eventually recognize him and he recognizes them. He is who he was; and yet his world is changed, utterly changed. He has lost his notion of time; his memory is intact, but his experience is not his own: 'Autrement, il se souvient de tout. Il s'en souvient peut-être mieux que toi ou moi – pour lui le passé est bien plus proche que pour nous –, seulement il a l'impression que ce n'est pas à lui que c'est arrivé. Il a un passé qui n'est pas le sien, pour ainsi dire' (*Mesure de nos jours*, p. 133).

Continuity with the past is preserved while, paradoxically, also being completely broken. Delbo's work suggests that there is something incommensurable between the before and the after; an absolute divide now separates them. This is magnificently described in one of the fragments which ends the second volume of *Auschwitz et après, Une connaissance inutile*:

Je reviens d'un autre monde  
 dans ce monde  
 que je n'avais pas quitté  
 et je ne sais  
 lequel est vrai  
 dites-moi suis-je revenue  
 de l'autre monde?  
 Pour moi  
 je suis encore là-bas  
 et je meurs

là-bas  
chaque jour un peu plus  
je remeurs  
la mort de tous ceux qui sont morts  
Et je ne sais plus quel est vrai  
du monde-là  
de l'autre monde-là-bas  
maintenant  
je ne sais plus  
quand je rêve  
et quand  
je ne rêve pas. (pp. 183–84)

The subject has both returned and not returned; she is both alive and dead, dying again, in the impossible verb 'je remeurs', used doubly impossibly because here it is transitive: she dies, and she (re-)dies the deaths of others. The disjunction is made palpable in the coexistence of two temporal frames: a past which cannot be escaped, so that the present does not exist except as the continual re-enactment of something lying in the past, and a present which has now lost all contact with a pre-traumatic reality. In the Freudian model, the traumatic event is traumatic insofar as it revives potential meanings which lie deeper in the past. Delbo's work suggests something closer to Malabou's interpretation of neuroscience, because in Loulou's case, trauma appears as an absolute end and an absolute beginning. The subject who returns is now irrevocably cut off from the subject who went away.

In trauma studies, Cathy Caruth's notion of unclaimed experience has now become more or less canonical. This refers to the trauma victim's sense that her experience is not her own, that it has not (yet?) been integrated into her life and her life story. It would be easy enough to push the story of Delbo's Loulou into this model, given that (as already quoted) we are told that 'il a l'impression que ce n'est pas à lui que c'est arrivé. Il a un passé qui n'est pas le sien, pour ainsi dire' (*Mesure de nos jours*, p. 133). This looks like classic 'unclaimed experience', but there is a crucial difference. 'Unclaimed experience' suggests that trauma is *waiting* to be claimed, that it *can* be claimed, made one's own and integrated into a meaningful narrative. What Delbo suggests is that, on the contrary, no such integration is available. Experience is both unclaimed and unclaimable, because the life story of the traumatized subject has been radically, irreversibly broken. The before and the after have been torn apart.

Wittgenstein may be right that it is difficult to doubt the pain of others when we are called on to witness it. This, though, does not make the work of *interpreting* another's pain any easier. Suffering has a story; it is part of a world of meaning(s) – albeit often ambiguous, conflicted or elusive meaning(s) – which appears tantalizingly in the interplay between what is said and what is not said in life narratives and fictions. The paradox of trauma is that it may interrupt or even utterly break the sequence of a story because it does not belong to it in any way, it may come completely from the outside; but it is also part of the sequence which it interrupts, or at least it can always be reread as part of that sequence. This is why Malabou is wrong to say that there is no hermeneutics of trauma. There certainly is; and indeed she provides one of the terms of its fraught hermeneutics by problematizing the link between continuity and discontinuity, for example as we have seen it in the writings of Semprun and Delbo. Traumatic hermeneutics does not provide final answers but, on the contrary, allows a practice of reading and understanding which has no definitive criteria for determining when interpretation slides into overinterpretation.

On this issue Freud is more subtle than his revisionists and detractors. Once the meaning of a dream narrative has become clear, he insists that the analyst needs to start again (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 231); full meaning can be achieved only by overinterpretation (p. 383), though this means that it is never full enough. What is already full can always be filled further. As Freud puts it, 'it is in fact never possible to be sure that a dream has been completely interpreted. Even if the solution seems satisfactory and without gaps, the possibility always remains that the dream may have yet another meaning' (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 383). Freud wants satisfactory solutions while knowing full well that there is always more to be said; and what he says of dreams here can be extended to other forms – all forms, I suggest – of text and narrative. The constraints of time, energy, human finitude and mortality may ensure that we cannot and should not carry on indefinitely trying to tease out further strands of meaning; but in principle the limitlessness of semantic possibility and the interminability of hermeneutic endeavour mean that even the fullest, most convincing interpretation can be succeeded, supplemented or contradicted by ever more overinterpretations and over-overinterpretations.

Of course, the time comes when we have to stop. Before ending this chapter, though, I want to add another term to the discussion, and that is 'responsibility'. In a widely quoted passage, Semprun wrote that the

story of the concentration camps must be ‘un récit illimité, probablement interminable, illuminé – clôturé aussi, bien entendu – par cette possibilité de se poursuivre à l’infini’ (*L’Écriture ou la vie*, pp. 23–24). That must be as true of the interpretation of the story as it is of the story itself. But what of my *responsibility* as a reader and interpreter? By ‘responsibility’, I mean my ability to respond (‘response-ability’, as Felman puts it; ‘Camus’ *The Fall*, p. 200) to the work, but also my moral responsibility for it, and for my reading of it. How can we justify interpreting and overinterpreting the pain of others, when what it may be thought to require most pressingly is *acknowledgement*? It would be foolish and wrong to give an easy answer to this. My provisional suggestion is that it may be better to give continuing, respectful and caring attention to the stories of pain – even at the risk of overreading – than to think that we have understood them once and for all.

#### Trauma, war, hermeneutics

The difficulty of interpreting trauma comes from the realization that it is not necessarily manifest in testimony or text. It may be least traumatic when it is most openly expressed and most traumatic when it goes unsaid, covertly inflecting utterances without becoming explicit. The central argument of the current book is that, in this respect, the Second World War epitomizes the hermeneutic problem of trauma. In his brilliant and influential essay ‘The Storyteller’, Walter Benjamin maintained that the First World War gave rise to a crisis in narrative because words could no longer do justice to the suffering of those who experienced it. But at least – we might argue – in the case of the First World War there was still a story to be told, even if no one knew how to tell it: that is, there was a significant degree of common ground which meant that the untellable story of the war was at least a *shared* untellable story. Of course, this is only relatively true, and could never be more than that; but it has been plausibly suggested that a significant difference between the first and the second world wars is that the second takes to a more extreme level the incommensurability of experience, so that to understand one person’s experience in the light of another’s becomes ever harder. Not only is the story of the war untellable, but perhaps there isn’t even a story to tell. That does not mean that the war isn’t present, all the time, serving as a motor for stories and thought precisely because it offers no particular insight or content.

The French thinkers and writers who lived through the Second World War were an extraordinary generation. They established nothing short of a Golden Age, during which French literature and philosophy would achieve massive international recognition inside and outside academia. But the Golden Age was tarnished by the memory of war. For that brilliant generation of writers, the war was a ubiquitous presence, even and especially when it was not their explicit subject. Two among them – Sartre and Beauvoir – emerged from the war as the leading writers and intellectuals of their generation, and the next chapter turns to the traces of war in some of their writings.



SECTION B

**Writing the War:  
Sartre, Beauvoir, Camus**





## CHAPTER THREE

# Sartre and Beauvoir

## A Very Gentle Occupation?

Que signifie au juste le mot guerre? Il y a un mois, quand il a été imprimé en grosses lettres dans les journaux, c'était une horreur informe, quelque chose de confus, mais de plein. Maintenant, ce n'est nulle part, ni rien. Je me sens détendue et vague, j'attends, je ne sais pas quoi.

(Beauvoir, *La Force d'âge*, p. 461, quoting a journal entry written on 3 October 1939)<sup>1</sup>

'Jamais nous n'avons été plus libres que sous l'occupation allemande' (*Situations*, III, p. 11). This was Sartre's provocative summary of the Occupation shortly after the liberation of Paris in August 1944. If we do not progress any further into the article of which it is the first sentence, 'La République du silence', we might suspect that for Sartre and his friends, and by extension perhaps for French people in general, the Occupation was not so bad after all. Indeed, with a degree of provocation to match Sartre's, the historian and novelist Gilbert Joseph has argued that Sartre and Beauvoir had, as the title of his book (to which the title of this chapter refers) puts it, *une si douce occupation*. According to Joseph, Sartre and Beauvoir's Resistance activities never got beyond talk, and they were careful not to put themselves in real danger. They spent the Occupation pursuing their literary careers and sexual conquests, cementing their intellectual credentials and enjoying a high time. If some of their wartime writings (such as Sartre's play

<sup>1</sup> The text in the journal entry is slightly different. See Beauvoir, *Journal de guerre*, p. 69.

*Les Mouches* and Beauvoir's novel *Le Sang des autres*) and some of their post-war statements implied support for and maybe even active participation in the Resistance, this was all part of their self-serving self-mythologization. Joseph reports that on one occasion he asked the historian of the Resistance, Henri Noguères, why his monumental five-volume *Histoire de la Résistance en France* never mentions Sartre, only to be told bluntly: 'Parce que Sartre n'a jamais été un résistant' (*Une si douce occupation*, p. 366).<sup>2</sup> In a subsequent letter, Noguères underscored his earlier statement: 'Je maintiens qu'en une vingtaine d'années consacrées à des recherches et des travaux sur l'histoire de la Résistance en France, je n'ai jamais rencontré Sartre ou Beauvoir' (quoted in *Une si douce occupation*, p. 366).

Joseph's account has been criticized on a number of grounds, ranging from factual inaccuracy to wilful misinterpretation.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter I aim neither to dismiss it out of hand nor to endorse it. Regarding Sartre's description of the Occupation as a period of unprecedented freedom, we do not have to read far into 'La République du silence' (reprinted in *Situations, III*) to discover that this freedom is neither as agreeable nor as counter-intuitive as the initial statement might lead us to believe. In the second sentence Sartre refers to French civilians' loss of rights and the mass deportation of workers, Jews and political prisoners. The French were nevertheless free, in Sartre's sense, insofar as the Occupation confronted them with the human condition stripped down to essentials, in constant proximity to death. French men and women had to decide for themselves who they were or who they aspired to be: 'Et le choix que chacun faisait de lui-même était authentique puisqu'il se faisait en présence de la mort, puisqu'il aurait toujours pu s'exprimer sous la forme "Plutôt la mort que ..."' (*Situations, III*, p. 12). Through oppression, the human subject could discover freedom in its existential, existentialist sense.

This position concords with the view of freedom elaborated by Sartre in his major philosophical work of the Occupation period, *L'Être et le néant* (1943). Because it was published under the censorship regime of

2 Joseph refers to the original five-volume edition, which was subsequently reissued in a ten-volume revised and expanded edition.

3 LaMarca, for example, comments of the book that it 'cannot be judged as completely reliable and definitely not as unbiased' ('Guilt and the War Within', p. 40), citing in support a mistake about the date of the birth of Camus's twin children.

the Occupation, the book could not refer explicitly to the Second World War or the German presence in France. Nevertheless, it is no great leap to suggest that its historical context to some extent informs Sartre's insistence that the essential aspect of human relations is conflict rather than fellowship (p. 481). And if Sartre does not specifically mention the war against the Germans, he does discuss war; indeed, I suggest that he plays on the ambiguity of the French *la guerre*, which can refer both to war in general and the specific war which would inevitably be on the minds of his first readers. In the section of the work devoted to freedom and responsibility, Sartre argues that (the) war is a human situation for which we must take total responsibility. The war is *mine*, and in choosing it, in deciding not to reject it, for example by suicide or desertion, I choose myself and the person I want to be: 'vivre cette guerre, c'est me choisir par mon choix de moi-même' (*L'Être et le néant*, p. 613). In typically uncompromising style, Sartre declares that 'On a la guerre qu'on mérite' (*L'Être et le néant*, p. 614) – a phrase which is echoed both in his *Carnets de la drôle de guerre* (pp. 161–62) and his novel *La Mort dans l'âme* (p. 95). Sartre insists that the subject is free even – perhaps especially – in times of war, even though its freedom brings with it a terrible burden of responsibility:

Ainsi, totalement libre, indiscernable de la période dont j'ai choisi d'être le sens, aussi profondément responsable de la guerre que si je l'avais moi-même déclarée, ne pouvant rien vivre sans l'intégrer à *ma* situation, m'y engager tout entier et la marquer de mon sceau, je dois être sans remords ni regrets comme je suis sans excuse, car, dès l'instant de mon surgissement à l'être, je porte le poids du monde à moi tout seul, sans que rien ni personne ne puisse l'alléger. (*L'Être et le néant*, p. 614; emphasis original)

In this dense sentence, the subject appears to be totally free, choosing the sense of itself and its period even if it could do nothing to prevent the war and, by implication, the Occupation. Atlas-like, I bear the whole world on my shoulders; but this weight does not inevitably crush me. Sartre says that if I am without excuse, I should also be without remorse or regret. This terrible freedom and this total responsibility at least leave me immune from accusations about past mistakes or misdemeanours. I can turn my back on everything except my freedom and responsibility. I can find a liveable accommodation with the harsh reality of war.

Sartre's argument in this section of *L'Être et le néant* anticipates what he would say in the later article 'La République du silence'. There is, however, one striking difference. In the passage from *L'Être et le néant*,

Sartre repeatedly uses the first person singular. Forms of the first person occur 11 times in the sentence quoted above, and Sartre draws attention to it through the emphasis on ‘*ma* situation’. ‘La République du silence’, by contrast, opens with the first person plural: ‘Jamais *nous* n’avons été plus libres que sous l’occupation allemande’ (emphasis added). The heroic solitary subject has been subsumed into the collective experience; rather than speaking just on its own behalf, it speaks for all. The first person plural refers to the inhabitants of occupied France as distinct from those who lived in unoccupied countries. Sartre gives his readers an account and an interpretive framework for their own experience. In terms of Ricœur’s hermeneutics, he provides them with the means to configure and reconfigure what they had lived through. What explains or justifies this shift from the isolated first person to the collective plural? ‘La République du silence’ itself raises this issue explicitly. Sartre says that 35 million people were affected by the Occupation: ‘Comment parler en leur nom à tous? Les petites villes, les grands centres industriels, les campagnes ont connu des sorts différents’ (*Situations, III*, p. 17). At this point Sartre poses, but does not decisively resolve, the question discussed in Chapter 1: who has the right to speak on behalf of others, and more specifically to unify the disparate experiences of a population which included *résistants*, collaborators and the morally indifferent? I shall return later in the current chapter to the problems raised by this passage from the first person singular to the first person plural.

### What did you do during the war?

So what did Sartre and Beauvoir do during the war? One answer to the question is that they wrote; indeed, they wrote a very great deal. Their writings included conventional literary and philosophical works: Sartre worked on the *Chemins de la liberté* sequence of novels, wrote the plays *Les Mouches* and *Huis clos*, and published his philosophical magnum opus *L’Être et le néant*; Beauvoir published her first novel, *L’Invitée*, and wrote her second, *Le Sang des autres*, as well as the philosophical essay *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*. They also wrote other, voluminous texts not meant initially for public dissemination, but some of which are now available, such as Sartre’s *Carnets de la drôle de guerre* and *Lettres au Castor*, and Beauvoir’s *Journal de guerre* and *Lettres à Sartre*. Before the war, Sartre was the reasonably well-known author of the novel *La Nausée*, the short story collection *Le Mur* and some philosophical essays; Beauvoir was an

obscure philosophy teacher. By the end of the war, Sartre was one of the leading writers and thinkers in contemporary France, and Beauvoir had established herself as an important novelist and intellectual. After the war, they would continue to write about the period in both fictional and autobiographical form, notably in Sartre's novel *La Mort dans l'âme* and Beauvoir's *La Force de l'âge*, the second volume of the autobiographical series begun with *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*.

In literary terms, the war was a fantastic opportunity for Sartre and Beauvoir: it gave them lots to write about. If this formulation sounds unnecessarily cynical, there is some justification for it in the texts which Sartre and Beauvoir produced during and about this period. Sartre's *Carnets de la drôle de guerre* is remarkable for its near total lack of any sense of the danger of war. He writes and writes and writes, and to be honest sometimes it is not very interesting. The same could be said of Beauvoir's *Journal de guerre*. The historical circumstances may have been momentous, but the day-to-day experience was banal. Sartre was eventually taken as a prisoner of war. Beauvoir was anxious and anguished about his fate, though actually life in the POW camp doesn't seem to have been a bad experience for him. He made friends and wrote a play, *Bariona*, and was then freed because of his poor eyesight, which allowed him to claim that he was not a combatant.<sup>4</sup> Back in Paris, he attempted to set up a Resistance group under the name *Socialisme et liberté*, but not much really happened. In occupied France, Sartre and Beauvoir devoted themselves to their careers: Sartre's *L'Être et le néant* would become the key work of French existentialism, and the plays *Les Mouches* and *Huis clos* consolidated his position as a literary author, while Beauvoir worked on her novels *L'Invitée* and *Le Sang des autres*. Although they despised the collaborationist Vichy regime and suffered from cold and hunger, there is no evidence that they were actively, seriously involved in the armed Resistance. Their works certainly refer to the war, directly or indirectly: *L'Invitée* concludes with a murder by gassing while *Le Sang des autres* openly espouses the cause of the Resistance; *L'Être et le néant* places conflict at the heart of the human condition and *Les Mouches* depicts the violent overthrow of tyranny. But there is something safely literary about this. No one really dies.

Towards the end of the Occupation, as Beauvoir recounts it in *La Force de l'âge*, she and Sartre were warned – by Camus – that they

4 For a short account of Sartre's time as a POW, see Martin, *The Boxer and the Goalkeeper*, pp. 176–79.

should move from their current residences. So they stayed for a while with the writer Michel Leiris and his wife. As Beauvoir puts it, ‘c’était *charmant* de séjourner à Paris chez des amis’ (p. 674; emphasis added). It was *charming*. Beauvoir’s choice of word here is remarkable. This account omits any sense of fear or danger. The war appears as a mild inconvenience because it forces one to move house. But let’s look on the bright side: at least one can have a lovely time by staying with one’s charming friends. All in all, the Occupation doesn’t sound too bad.

### So what changed?

A commonplace of French writing during and about the ‘*drôle de guerre*’ – the period between the declaration of war in September 1939 and the outbreak of serious fighting on the Western front in May 1940 – is the sense that war is everywhere and nowhere; it changes everything and is yet somehow invisible, not real. The so-called ‘phoney war’ doesn’t quite exist, even though it dominates every moment of the lives of those called up (like Sartre) and those who longed for them to return (like Beauvoir). We know we are at war, but where do we see it? Early in his *Carnets de la drôle de guerre*, Sartre writes that ‘La guerre n’a jamais été plus insaisissable que ces jours-ci. Elle me manque, car enfin, si elle n’existe pas, qu’est-ce que je fous ici?’ (p. 35). The phrase ‘Elle me manque’ is quite shocking: it would be better, Sartre suggests, if the war were more palpable, more violent, more deadly, so that conscripts such as Private Sartre could really believe that something were actually happening. They might even die. Anticipating Ricœur (see Chapter 6), Sartre describes the war as a kind of enforced sabbatical or even a premature retirement: ‘je suis entièrement libre et parfaitement seul: c’est une retraite’ (p. 35).

And yet, this near-invisible war will leave nothing untouched. It marked the beginning of a process involving experiences as a POW and in occupied France which would see Sartre turn from an individualist anarchist into the committed public intellectual who has not been matched in France before or since. His pre-war novel *La Nausée* caustically mocked the delusions of politicized humanism; his post-war work *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* became the most infamous manifesto of commitment. So the experience of war changed Sartre definitively. His *Carnets de la drôle de guerre* refer to the ‘rupture entre [sa] vie passée et [sa] vie présente’ (p. 383); and this ‘rupture’ has as much to do with his attitudes and beliefs as with his everyday routines. In her retrospective

memoir *La Force de l'âge*, Beauvoir also stresses that the war marked an irreversible change in her life. She summarizes the war years as a time when everything was transformed:

non seulement la guerre avait changé mes rapports à tout, mais elle avait tout changé: les ciels de Paris et les villages de Bretagne, la bouche des femmes, les yeux des enfants. Après juin 1940, je ne reconnus plus les choses, ni les gens, ni les heures, ni les lieux, ni moi-même. (p. 684)

Nothing can be the same again. The beliefs which sustained the pre-war world have been swept aside: 'la violence était déchaînée et l'injustice, la bêtise, le scandale, l'horreur. La victoire même n'allait pas renverser le temps et ressusciter un ordre provisoirement dérangé; elle ouvrait une nouvelle époque: l'après-guerre' (*La Force d'âge*, p. 684).

This presents an image of the war as an absolute turning point. It is perhaps surprising, then, that the text which announces this is itself so *placid*. It bears none of the structural, semantic or grammatical signs which might mark it out as a trauma text (such as those discussed in the following chapter, in relation to Camus's *L'Étranger*). In relative tranquillity, Beauvoir reflects on her life and its meaning. And although she claims that nothing could be the same again, actually the balance she draws is quite complacent. The Liberation saw her established as a major literary and intellectual figure: 'mes espoirs triomphaient' (*La Force d'âge*, p. 685). Even when she endeavours to look at the bleaker side, she is surprisingly sanguine and self-congratulatory: 'je me rétablissais dans le bonheur; tant de coups reçus: aucun ne m'avait fracassée. Je survivais, et même j'étais indemne' (*La Force d'âge*, p. 686). Beauvoir presents herself as simultaneously completely changed and utterly untouched ('j'étais indemne') by the experience of the war. What Beauvoir reflects here is, I suggest, the paradox of the Second World War: it affects every aspect of life, yet it is also absent, intangible; everything is changed, yet nothing changes. Beauvoir emerges from it a different person, but also *indemne*, more confident in herself than ever.

The texts of Beauvoir and Sartre give some credibility to the accusation that the Occupation was, for them, rather gentle. Their situation and their texts can be contrasted with those of two other major post-war figures, Marguerite Duras and Robert Altelme, who were married at the time of the war. There are some parallels between the experiences of the two couples. Just as Beauvoir was separated from Sartre during the phoney war and his period as a POW, Duras was separated from Antelme when he was deported to Buchenwald as a member of the Resistance. All

of them wrote extensively about their respective experiences: after the war, Antelme published *L'Espèce humaine*, one of the earliest and most important French accounts of life and death in the concentration camps. In 1985 Duras in turn published *La Douleur* (supplemented in 2006 by her *Cahiers de la guerre et autres textes*), which recounts her anguish as she awaited news of her husband's fate, and his eventual return. Duras was separated from Antelme as Beauvoir was separated from Sartre. But the differences in their experiences and their texts are as important as the parallels. While Sartre had what was relatively speaking a danger-free time in the phoney war and as a POW, Antelme was deported as a member of the Resistance and came close to death; and while Beauvoir's concern for Sartre is evident in her *Journal de guerre* and *La Force de l'âge*, it does not approach the palpable anguish of Duras's *La Douleur*.

Moreover, the issue of intelligibility further illustrates the difference between the two couples. Both Sartre and Beauvoir refer to the difficulty of explaining life during the Occupation to those who did not live through it. In Beauvoir's account, when Sartre returned from the POW camp, they had difficulty understanding each other's experiences: 'il arrivait d'un monde que j'imaginai aussi mal qu'il imaginait mal celui où je vivais depuis des mois, et nous avions l'impression de ne pas parler tout à fait le même langage' (*La Force de l'âge*, p. 548). Sartre echoes this problem of communication in his article 'Paris sous l'Occupation', in which he refers to the difficulty of describing the experience of incarceration and then Occupation to those who have not lived through it: 'Je rentrais de captivité et l'on m'interrogeait sur la vie des prisonniers: comment faire sentir l'atmosphère des camps à ceux qui n'y avaient pas vécu? [...] Aujourd'hui, je me trouve devant un problème analogue: comment faire saisir ce que fut l'occupation aux habitants des pays qui sont restés libres?' (*Situations, III*, p. 16). For both Beauvoir and Sartre, the problem of communicating unfamiliar experiences proves difficult, but not insurmountable. With creative effort from the narrator and good will from the listener, the gulf in understanding can be overcome. By contrast, in the Preface to *L'Espèce humaine*, Antelme describes a much more fundamental disruption of narratability and comprehensibility experienced by himself and fellow deportees:

Nous voulions parler, être entendus enfin. [...] Et dès les premiers jours cependant, il nous paraissait impossible de combler la distance que nous découvriions entre le langage dont nous disposions et cette expérience que, pour la plupart, nous étions encore en train de poursuivre dans notre corps. [...] A peine commençons-nous à raconter, que nous suffoquions.



A nous-mêmes, ce que nous avons à dire commençait alors à nous paraître *inimaginable*. (p. 9; emphasis original)

Here, Antelme powerfully expresses a double impossibility: first, the chasm between the deportees and their potential listeners is too great to be overcome; and second, crucially, the horror of the experience occasions a crisis in self-belief. The survivor's own experience becomes unimaginable, unintelligible to himself. His testimony, his past, no longer belong to him, as if they had not really happened. Beauvoir's and Sartre's cautious acknowledgement of the difficulty of communicating experience is radicalized by Antelme and other survivors into a fundamental crisis of narrative, witnessing and subjective integrity. But then, what they lived through in the concentration camps was far more extreme than the shortages and cold sometimes suffered by unpersecuted gentiles in occupied Paris.

### Where's the trauma?

The wartime writings of Sartre and Beauvoir and their post-war works which refer to the war traverse and describe traumatic times, but they are not what would normally be called 'trauma texts'. They are too syntactically and structurally placid, too secure in their writing positions. They are thus quite unlike, for example, Camus's *L'Étranger* which – I shall suggest in the next chapter – *can* be described as a trauma text, immersed in the experience of defeat and humiliation, even if it never once openly refers to the war. Writing, for Sartre and Beauvoir, is an act of witnessing, and it is also an act of resistance against trauma rather than an engagement with it. In *La Force de l'âge*, Beauvoir describes how, during some of the darkest days of the war when she had no news of Sartre, she stopped working on her first novel. Returning to writing represents a defiant affirmation of meaning in life and literature:

Je décidai de me remettre à écrire: il me semblait que c'était un acte de foi, un acte d'espoir. Rien n'autorisait à penser que l'Allemagne serait vaincue [...]. Mais je fis une espèce de pari: qu'importaient les heures vainement passées à écrire, si demain tout sombrait? Si jamais le monde, ma vie, la littérature reprenaient un sens, je me reprocherais les mois, les années perdus à ne rien faire. (*La Force de l'âge*, pp. 536–37)

Literature is on the side of values and sense: by writing, Beauvoir holds out the hope that Germany will be beaten and Sartre will return,

even if all the available evidence suggests the contrary. The despairing senselessness of trauma is lived in silence; writing, for Beauvoir, bears witness to the conviction that meaning and hope are still possible.

Writing, then, is the opposite of despair. One might say that it is disavowal in the Freudian sense: acknowledging unspeakable suffering without surrendering to it or perhaps even confronting it. This is not to say that there is no real trauma in the actual lives of the authors. Nothing gives us the right to say definitively that Beauvoir suffered less as she waited for Sartre than Duras did as she waited for Antelme. Duras's *La Douleur* is a trauma text because it enters into the experience without restraint or apology, letting it seep into every aspect of its textual and thematic existence. By contrast, the formal and emotional poise of Beauvoir's writing indicates a determination not to succumb to trauma and the attendant collapse of meaning, values and selfhood. Nevertheless, it is important to the argument of this book that trauma, and specifically the trauma of war, sometimes needs to be read in the less palpable traces it leaves behind, in a text's reticence, for example: in what it lets us see despite itself, as it were.

An instance where this may be seen is provided by an episode to which Beauvoir refers briefly, almost casually, in *La Force d'âge*. Before and during the first part of the war, Beauvoir made her living as a teacher, first in Rouen and then in Paris. However, after 12 years of teaching, she notes, 'Mes classes m'amusaient moins que par le passé' (p. 617). In June 1943, she was relieved of her teaching duties after the mother of a former pupil made a complaint about her. In Beauvoir's account, the complaint came about because she had supported the young woman, here named Lise,<sup>5</sup> in her decision not to marry a wealthy boyfriend, whom she did not love, and to live instead with another man. This is what Beauvoir tells us:

La mère de Lise, furieuse que sa fille eût laissé échapper un parti avantageux et qu'elle vécut avec Bourla, m'enjoignit d'user de mon influence pour la renvoyer à son premier amoureux; sur mon refus, elle m'accusa de détournement de mineure. Avant-guerre, l'affaire n'eût pas eu de suite; avec la clique d'Abel Bonnard, il en alla autrement; à la fin de l'année scolaire, la directrice au menton bleu me signifia que j'étais exclue de l'Université. (p. 617)

A footnote informs us that Beauvoir's right to teach was restored after the Liberation, but that she did not return to the profession (by this

5 Biographers refer to her as Nathalie (or Natasha) Sorokine.

time she could support herself by other means). In the main text, she comments that she was not ‘*fâchée de briser avec une vieille routine*’ (p. 617). She was, after all – as she has informed us – enjoying her professional obligations less than she had (‘*Mes classes m’amusaient moins*’); and she reassures us that she soon got a job working for the radio, without quite knowing how it happened: ‘*Je ne sais par quel truchement j’obtins une situation de “metteuse en ondes”*’ (p. 617). And that’s the end of the matter.

Even biographers sympathetic to Beauvoir concede that her account of events is incomplete to say the least. Deidre Bair describes it as ‘evasive’ (*Simone de Beauvoir*, p. 279). Danièle Sallenave agrees that Beauvoir gives ‘une version peut-être édulcorée des faits’ (*Castor de guerre*, p. 269). She also points out how Beauvoir astutely suggests that there was a political dimension to her professional downfall. Before the war, Beauvoir says, the accusation would have gone no further. Her dismissal (persecution?) during the war makes her a victim of the Occupation, as if she were being hounded by Nazi occupiers and collaborators. Abel Bonnard, to whom she refers here, was a minor writer with fascist tendencies who became Minister of Education under the Vichy regime. So, in Beauvoir’s version of events, she was guilty only of giving good advice to a young woman who did not wish to marry someone she did not love; the case would not have been pursued had the Nazis not been in power; she was exonerated after the war; and she was not particularly bothered because she did not wish to continue her teaching career in any case. It is almost as if her dismissal were a welcome occurrence.

Although the biographers Bair and Sallenave observe that Beauvoir’s account is manipulative and deficient, they do not worry much about the darker side of this incident. The more sensationalist biographer Carole Seymour-Jones is less guarded in confronting the underlying issue: Beauvoir had a sexual relationship with her former pupil, and she provocatively describes Beauvoir’s interest as ‘paedophile in nature’ (*A Dangerous Liaison*, p. 274). But even Seymour-Jones passes over the episode quickly, spending only two pages on it. To modern ears, now that we know more about the appalling extent to which prestigious figures have used their position to exploit, abuse and silence underage victims, I wonder whether this whole episode needs to be revisited. Was Beauvoir the victim of a malicious mother and a collaborationist regime, or an abuser of minors and a sexual predator who used her position as a teacher to seduce young girls, and then to procure them for her friends?

Although Beauvoir passes over the episode in a single, relatively short

paragraph, Gilbert Joseph devotes 25 pages to it in his highly critical *Une si douce occupation*, quoting at length from relevant documents held in the Archives du rectorat de Paris (pp. 197–222). These documents show that the investigation into Beauvoir extended over 18 months; and far from taking the dismissal as lightly as she implies, Beauvoir wrote a letter formally protesting against the decision and insisting on her innocence (quoted in *Une si douce occupation*, p. 222). Another interesting issue arises from these documents. In Beauvoir's account, the mother of her friend Lise accuses her of 'détournement de mineure'. It is important to note that this is not a sexual crime in itself, though behind it may be a hint at the sexual relations between Beauvoir and her former pupil. 'Détournement de mineur(e)' refers more specifically to the crime of removing a minor – who might have passed the age of sexual consent but not of civil majority – from the orbit of those who have legal authority over him or her, such as the parents. In this case, it is likely that the man with whom Lise was living, Bourla, would have been more guilty of 'détournement de mineure' than Beauvoir. The documents quoted by Joseph show that the accusation was actually 'excitation d'une mineure à la débauche', a rather different matter which, if proven in a court of law, could have led to Beauvoir's imprisonment. The allegation here is that Beauvoir had sexual relations with Nathalie Sorokine and encouraged her to sleep with her male friends. This was vigorously denied by Nathalie and Beauvoir, and by Sartre and Jacques Bost, who was Beauvoir's lover at the time.<sup>6</sup> Even so, Gilbert Gidel, the Rector of the University of Paris, concluded from the enquiry that Beauvoir and Sartre were not morally fit to teach in secondary education, and wrote to the Ministry of Education requesting their dismissal. Beauvoir was informed on 23 June 1943 that she had been relieved of her functions, though no action seems to have been taken against Sartre.

My point here is not to retry a case in which the rights and wrongs are complex. Nathalie Sorokine was 20 at the time of the initial complaint: legally still a minor, but certainly no longer a child. Sartre, Beauvoir and their friends unquestionably lied to protect themselves, but they presumably did not believe that they had any debt of truthfulness to the collaborationist authorities which were pursuing them. What I want to stress, though, is the disparity between Beauvoir's brief, sanguine narrative of the episode and the much longer account given by Joseph

6 When questioned in the course of the enquiry, Bost nevertheless insisted that he had never been Beauvoir's lover. See Joseph, *Une si douce occupation*, p. 215.

with the support of archive documents. Beauvoir makes light of the episode, hints at an element of political persecution, misremembers (on a generous reading) the nature of the accusation and seems relatively pleased to have been dismissed from her teaching job so that she can develop other interests, and ultimately secure her literary career. The documents quoted by Joseph suggest that, lurking behind Beauvoir's almost cheerful text is something potentially much more dangerous: the accusation was more serious, the enquiry was protracted and it could have resulted in imprisonment; this in turn could have brought Beauvoir to the attention of the occupying German forces, with potentially horrifying consequences.

In this instance, the availability of other versions of the episode allow us to measure the gap between the said and the unsaid in Beauvoir's text. This will not always be possible, but it nevertheless allows a provisional conclusion which will be important throughout this book. The calm surface of Beauvoir's short narrative covers over something potentially far more disturbed and disturbing, which we can nevertheless glimpse with some effort. The text contains the concealed but legible traces of a story it does not tell.

### Whose war is it anyway?

Sartre and Beauvoir would apparently sometimes complete each other's sentences, as if they were one person in two bodies; and it is tempting to write of them as if they were a single entity, though of course they were not. Although they lived through much of the Occupation in close proximity to one another, sharing opinions, food and lovers, the meaning of the period is not the same for both of them. In literary terms, it marked the beginning of Beauvoir's career as a successful novelist, with the publication of her first novel, *L'Invitée*, and the completion of her second, *Le Sang des autres*. In a sense, it marked the end of Sartre's career as a novelist. It is true that he continued to work on his *Chemins de la liberté* cycle during and after the war, publishing *L'Âge de raison* and *Le Sursis* in 1945, and the final completed volume *La Mort dans l'âme* in 1949.<sup>7</sup> But it is striking that *La Mort dans l'âme* ends with the German attack on France in 1940 and the first experiences of French

7 On the history of the composition of the cycle, see Grell, 'Les Chemins de la liberté' de Sartre.

prisoners of war. Sartre would continue for a while to work on what would have been the fourth volume of the cycle, which would take his characters into the later war years and the Occupation, but he would never complete it or, for that matter, any other work of prose fiction. For Sartre, the novel ends when the war begins.

Something of this sense of an ending can be seen in the last appearance of Sartre's principal character, Mathieu, in the final lines of the first and longest part of *La Mort dans l'âme*. Through three volumes, Mathieu has expostulated and postured, and resolutely failed to achieve any kind of meaningful freedom. Now, with the Germans approaching, rather than surrender or attempt escape, he takes arms in a stance that appears to be both murderous and suicidal (though in the unfinished fourth volume of the cycle we discover that, against all odds, he would in fact survive). Mathieu's desire to kill does not come from any patriotic urge to defend his country. For years, his acts have been futile, stolen from him, mere gestures at freedom; now, he can accomplish something definitive: 'Il avait appuyé sur la gâchette et, pour une fois, quelque chose était arrivé. "Quelque chose de définitif", pensa-t-il, en riant de plus belle' (*La Mort dans l'âme*, p. 236). In killing a man, he kills Man, destroys a world in which he was a failure, and appears likely to bring his own life to an end. As we see him for the last time, he believes he has finally achieved freedom: 'Il tira: il était pur, il était tout-puissant, il était libre' (p. 245). Here, Sartre's character, his novel and his career as a novelist reach a point where they have not much further to go.

The war allows Mathieu to become free. The statement that 'il était libre' might remind us of Sartre's claim, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, that the Occupation allowed 'us' ('nous') – presumably the French people – to realize an unprecedented freedom. This returns us to the question of who this 'we', this collective totality, can be, and who can speak on its behalf. For the author of 'La République du silence', the experience of the French people during the Occupation is difficult to understand and recount, yet nevertheless intelligible and recountable; it is not the same for everyone in every part of France, and yet to a significant degree it is shared. And Sartre, as its pre-eminent interpreter and mouthpiece, can write of 'us' because he speaks on behalf of all, or at least of most. It is as if he wanted to rival even De Gaulle as the voice of the French nation.

Mathieu, though, is free but alone as he disappears from Sartre's novel. There is no sense here that he acts, shoots or thinks on behalf of a settled or potential collectivity. On the contrary, the novel hints

that the war cannot be about ‘us’ and ‘them’ because there is no ‘us’: ‘Mathieu bâilla: il regardait tristement les types noyés dans l’ombre; il murmura: “Nous”. Mais ça ne prenait plus: il était seul’ (*La Mort dans l’âme*, p. 116). Later, Mathieu’s isolation is further underscored: ‘Tu ne fais rien comme tout le monde, poursuit Longin. Même quand tu te soules, ce n’est pas comme nous’ (p. 143). If there is a ‘nous’, Mathieu is not part of it. He may or may not be free at the end, but in no sense is he free *with others*, alongside others, and entitled to speak or act on their behalf. Moreover, the very form of the novel reinforces the separateness of the main characters and the incommensurability of their experiences of the war. It recounts scenes from a number of lives united in time but by little else. Everyone has his or her own war. No overarching purpose and no authoritative voice come to unite the strands of the narrative into a meaningful whole. Sartre’s last novel gives us stories but no Story, no final or even provisional interpretation that could justify the secure use of the first person plural.

We can see in the writings of Sartre and Beauvoir a tense enactment of the endeavour to make sense of the war. They want to witness for themselves and to speak for others, to tell their own stories as if they know and command their meaning. Yet alongside community there is separation; alongside freedom there is oppression. No story quite holds; other stories peep or burst out, changing any meaning into something quite different. Was Beauvoir the victim of persecution by an angry mother and collaborationist authorities, or an abuser of the young who escaped lightly? Is Mathieu free, or still futile? Does the Occupation bring us together or pull us apart? Does the war change everything, or leave everything pretty much as it was? And did Sartre and Beauvoir have, in the end, a very gentle Occupation? My current answer to this question is: yes and no. Sartre sums it up nicely, referring to the daily experience of horror: ‘Me comprendra-t-on si je dis à la fois qu’elle était intolérable et que nous nous accommodions fort bien?’ (*Situations, III*, p. 24). It was intolerable, and entirely tolerable. What is perhaps most impressive about the texts of Sartre and Beauvoir during this period is their willingness to bear witness to, and to inhabit, their own contradictions, and the contradictions of the Occupation.

In more general terms, this might mean that recounting one’s past entails interminably creating and recreating a life story which by its nature can be narrated in innumerable ways. Paul Ricœur’s notion

of ‘identité narrative’ is instructive here.<sup>1</sup> Ricœur suggests that both individual and communal identities – insofar as we can know them – entail narrative. In telling stories about our lives and the histories of our communities, we tease out their potential sense and coherence. Central to this view is the acceptance that narrative identities are never stable, fixed, definitive and flawless. On the contrary, ‘l’histoire d’une vie ne cesse d’être refigurée par toutes les histoires véridiques ou fictives qu’un sujet raconte sur lui-même. Cette refiguration fait de la vie elle-même un tissu d’histoires racontées’ (*Temps et récit III*, p. 356). The stories which individuals or communities tell about themselves may contradict one another and change over time. The disputed legacy of the Second World War in France, and cases such as those of Sartre and Beauvoir, give abundant evidence of such inherent instability. Lucidity consists in acknowledging and trying to analyse the conditions, causes and consequences of the ambiguities and contradictions borne by the stories that mean the most to us. That may be a lifelong undertaking for us as subjects, citizens and readers.

1 See in particular Ricœur, *Temps et récit III*, pp. 355–59.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Camus's War

#### *L'Etranger* and *Lettres à un ami allemand*

*L'Etranger* was published in 1942. I begin the current chapter with this bald fact not because it will come as a surprise to anyone, but because it has not been sufficiently discussed. Camus's first novel was published in occupied Paris. It is not set in mainland France, and it makes no reference to the war. However, it is hardly controversial to suggest that other French works produced during the Occupation period comment on the war even when they do not – cannot – mention it directly. Marcel Carné's film *Les Visiteurs du soir* (1942) depicts a medieval city visited by the Devil, and with very little effort the work can be regarded as a study in how a population responds to the temptation of evil. Henri-Georges Clouzot's great film *Le Corbeau* (1943) depicts a small town thrown into panic by a spate of poison pen letters. Even if the precise political position of the film is a matter of dispute, no one doubts that this situation evokes the letters of denunciation which were terrifyingly commonplace in occupied France. And Jean-Paul Sartre's play *Les Mouches* (1943), showing the decision to oppose tyranny with violence, so obviously alludes to the wartime situation of occupied France that it is almost embarrassing to mention it. The war is not explicitly present in any of these works; yet it would be perverse to suggest that it did not influence them profoundly.

Camus initially conceived and began work on the novel that would become *L'Etranger* shortly before the outbreak of war. He had abandoned work on another novel, *La Mort heureuse* (which would be published posthumously in 1971), in February 1939. In July 1939, while still living in Algeria, he announced that he would soon begin work on his next

project. In March 1940, he moved to Paris and worked intensely on the new novel. France had been at war with Germany since the previous September, but serious hostilities had not yet broken out. On 1 May 1940, he wrote to his future wife Francine that he had finished a draft of the novel. Within days Germany would begin its major assault on Western Europe, leading to the French surrender on 22 June. Camus continued to work on his manuscript in occupied France and then back in Algeria, writing the date February 1941 at the end of the best surviving manuscript. It is likely that he made further changes, in particular in the light of comments made by André Malraux, before publication in May 1942.<sup>2</sup> *L'Étranger* is not and could not be a novel *about* the war. Yet its gestation, drafting and revision were precisely contemporary with the period leading to the outbreak of war, the phoney war of September 1939 to May 1940, the invasion of France, the French capitulation and the Occupation. Moreover, much of the work on the novel was done while Camus was living in France immediately before and then during the Occupation.

Even though Camus was in Algeria when the war broke out, he felt immediately concerned by it.<sup>3</sup> Despite his pacifism he attempted to enlist but was turned down on health grounds. One of the entries in his *Carnets* begins simply: 'Septembre 39. La guerre' (*Œuvres complètes II*, p. 884); and the following pages return repeatedly to the war and its significance. One entry, partly quoted in the Introduction to this book, is particularly interesting: 'La guerre a éclaté. Où est la guerre? En dehors des nouvelles qu'il faut croire et des affiches qu'il faut lire, où trouver les signes de l'absurde événement?' (p. 844). Camus immediately recognizes the war as an instantiation of the Absurd. Most importantly, it is both unmissable and invisible; it is everywhere, but no sign of it is to be seen. Camus concludes: 'Mais pour aujourd'hui on éprouve que le commencement des guerres est semblable aux débuts de la paix: le monde et le cœur les ignorent' (p. 884). So the war has begun but it has not yet made its mark on the world and the human heart; or, to be more precise, the way it has made its mark is by a curious experience of its absence, a sense that the world does not yet know how to register this enormous event. The witness does not yet know how to see what is massively present to him. This is, I want to suggest, how the war

2 Further details are given in Camus's *Œuvres complètes I*, pp. 1244–45.

3 For a biographical account of Camus's actions during the early days of the war, see Todd, *Albert Camus*, pp. 279–99.

impinges on the novel Camus was writing when the war broke out. Even if it is never mentioned, the war is part of *L'Etranger*. My argument is not that it recounts the early stages of the war and the Occupation, but that it *accompanies* them. It registers the massive emotional disaster of the war through the story of a lone killer, set far from the French mainland.

It is surprising that the wartime context of *L'Etranger* has received so little comment. The predominant readings of the novel have been existential or, more recently, postcolonial. For the former, the historical context of the novel's publication is not relevant because, even if Camus's ideas may have been formed by his historical circumstances, the novel is concerned with man's position in the universe. Sartre's brilliant 'Explication de *L'Etranger*' remains the key study here. Writing in 1943, and setting the interpretive agenda for readers of Camus for years to come, Sartre begins by referring to the context of occupied France. The novel, he says, has been heralded as 'le meilleur livre depuis l'armistice', depicting the sunlit world of Algeria rather than the Parisian 'aigre printemps sans charbon' (*Situations, I*, p. 120). Sartre's point is that, although it was published in occupied France, the novel should precisely *not* be read in that context because it depicts an alternative world, which is not beset by the restrictions and shortages of the Occupation. The novel, in this account, is not about the war. It is about man's situation in an absurd, godless universe.

In part in the wake of the posthumous publication of Camus's unfinished novel *Le Premier Homme* in 1994, much recent criticism has concentrated on colonial and postcolonial issues raised by Camus's work. Whereas in the Sartrean reading it is the existential situation of man which weighs most heavily on the novel, in this reading it is the colonial context. Conor Cruise O'Brien and Edward Said have both suggested that *L'Etranger* is tacitly informed by the colonial discourses of the time.<sup>4</sup> In their accounts of the novel the fact that Meursault is tried for killing an Arab suggests a faith in the fairness of the French justice system which far from accurately reflects the state of affairs in colonial Algeria: 'by suggesting that the court is impartial between Arab and Frenchman, [the novel] implicitly denies the colonial reality and sustains the colonial fiction' (O'Brien, *Camus*, p. 23). In this reading it becomes immensely significant that it is an *Arab*, moreover an unnamed and unspeaking Arab, whom Meursault murders on the beach. Virtually the only thing we know about him is his racial identity. He belongs to a

4 See O'Brien, *Camus* and Said, *Culture and Imperialism*.

group who look at Meursault and his white friends threateningly, ‘à leur manière’ (*L’Étranger*, in *Œuvres complètes I*, p. 169). In this perspective, *L’Étranger* looks to be more about simmering violence in Algeria in the years before the War of Independence than it does about man’s position in a senseless universe. This is not to deny the context of the Second World War. The most important sustained contribution to the postcolonial interpretation of Camus’s career and work, David Carroll’s *Albert Camus the Algerian*, links the injustices of French colonial Algeria, as depicted in *L’Étranger*, to those of Vichy France (pp. 28, 37). However, insisting on Camus as a specifically Algerian, or French Algerian, writer refocuses the interpretation of his work onto its colonial and postcolonial relevance. Rather than reflecting the timeless existential condition of man or the contemporary reality of occupied France, Camus’s *L’Étranger* can now be seen to register the growing racial tensions in colonial Algeria and to anticipate the War of Independence which would break out in 1954.

The postcolonial reading of Camus’s work effectively changes the framework through which *L’Étranger* may be read. It also in part deflects interest from that novel onto some of Camus’s later works, especially the short stories of *L’Exil et le royaume* and the posthumous *Le Premier Homme*, which were written during the Algerian War of Independence. For critics, these works also have the advantage that to date they have been less extensively interpreted than Camus’s first novel; the publication of *Le Premier Homme* in 1994 provided an invaluable new source of study which has been very welcome in the academic world. It is pretty hard, perhaps impossible, to find anything new to say about *L’Étranger* itself. In 1992 Adele King wondered, ‘Is it possible to find any incident, sentence, even detail [in the novel] that has not been subjected to some critical analysis?’ (Introduction to *Camus’s ‘L’Étranger’*, p. 12). The difficulty of saying anything new about the novel is reflected in *The Cambridge Companion to Camus*, edited by Edward Hughes. Chapters are devoted to Camus’s life, formative influences, his thought, theatre and journalism, his quarrel with Sartre, and to his works *L’Envers et l’endroit*, *La Peste*, *La Chute* and *Le Premier Homme*. There are numerous references to *L’Étranger* throughout, but only one of the 14 chapters is partially devoted to the novel. It is as if Camus’s most infamous work has now been exhausted, even for the purposes of a textbook which aims to give a comprehensive account of his life, work and continuing relevance.

The current chapter makes two core suggestions. The first is that the wartime context in which *L’Étranger* was completed and published has

been wrongly neglected. In occupied Paris in 1942, the chief German censor, Gerhard Müller, allowed the publication of the novel because he regarded it as apolitical. The existential reading inaugurated by Sartre confirms this insofar as it puts the novel's philosophical significance above its political resonance; and the postcolonial reading tends to focus on how the novel anticipates the Algerian War of Independence rather than how it relates to the more immediate context of the Second World War. It is nevertheless important to recall some basic facts, even if it is not obvious how they should be interpreted. The novel revolves around a murder committed by a white Frenchman. We are repeatedly reminded that his victim belongs to a different ethnic group. Indeed, this is nearly the only thing we know about the man whom Meursault kills. While this was being depicted, in 1942, the Nazis were formulating the policy of the 'Final Solution', following which white Europeans would set about the systematic murder of victims belonging to different ethnic groups. Moreover, only a couple of months after the publication of *L'Étranger*, white Frenchmen would officiate in the notorious Rafle du Vel' d'Hiv, thereby participating in a genocidal crime of which Meursault's murder of an Arab is a mere foreshadow. And we should also not forget that the sunlit Algeria in which *L'Étranger* is set was by no means a world separate from the war. Although it was not occupied by the Germans, it was governed by the collaborationist Vichy regime until its invasion by Allied forces in late 1942. The anti-Semitic legislation which affected the free zone was also valid in Algeria. When Pétain revoked the Crémieux decree in 1940, Algerian Jews were denied the French citizenship to which they had been entitled since 1870. Jews were excluded from administrative positions and many other professions; their property was confiscated and eventually they were excluded from public education; and some were interned in concentration and labour camps. They were probably only saved from a far worse fate by the Allied invasion. Meanwhile, the Arabs had *never* enjoyed the French citizenship granted to the Jews in the nineteenth century, and which would be restored to them in 1943. Killing an anonymous Arab in Algeria is a small-scale enactment of the widespread race crimes being perpetrated and prepared in Europe at the time when *L'Étranger* was published.

My second suggestion is that the way to find fresh insight into Camus's novel may not, for the time being, be to trawl it internally but to find new texts with which to juxtapose it. This chapter asks the question of what it means to regard *L'Étranger* as a novel about the Second World War. The text itself is utterly silent about this. Yet the war is absolutely

vital to the Camus's self-(re)invention in the early 1940s. As Carroll puts it, the war made of Camus 'the living symbol of the young, politically committed writer who had risked his life in the struggle against racism and oppression and challenged existing social norms and values in his editorials, novels, and plays' (*Albert Camus the Algerian*, p. 7). And yet there is no reference in his greatest work, *L'Étranger*, to the war which dominated the defining period in his life. This is not to say, though, that the novel has nothing to say about its context. In order to tease out what this might be, I want to look first of all at a text which explicitly confronts the meaning of war for Camus during the Occupation, namely his *Lettres à un ami allemand*.

### *Lettres à un ami allemand*

Camus's *Lettres à un ami allemand* consists of four texts which take the form of open letters written during the war by a Frenchman to a former German friend who has now embraced Nazism. Dated July 1943, December 1943 and April 1944 respectively, the first three were published in clandestine newspapers during the Occupation. The fourth, dated July 1944, was published after the Liberation, when Camus was revealed to be the author of the letters. The interest of *Lettres à un ami allemand* lies partly in what the four texts show about Camus's attitude to the war and in particular to the use of violence, and about the evolution of his ethical thinking in the years between *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942) and *L'Homme révolté* (1951). The philosophy of the Absurd developed in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* leads to an ethical impasse because it can envisage no overarching framework to regulate the lives of all citizens. The later work attempts to think beyond that impasse by the appeal to solidarity and collective revolt summarized in Camus's revised cogito, 'Je me révolte, donc nous sommes' (*L'Homme révolté*, in *Œuvres complètes III*, p. 79). Revolt establishes a new collectivity. *Lettres à un ami allemand* is an intermediary text in which Camus can be seen to be striving towards the ideas which would be developed in *L'Homme révolté*. As John Foley puts it, the letters '[display] a conscious effort, motivated by the experiences of occupation and resistance, to move beyond a discussion of the absurd itself to a discussion of the possibility of ethics' (*Albert Camus*, p. 33). The most recent editor of the letters, Maurice Weyembergh, concurs that they show Camus's thought in a state of transition:

Dans le parcours de Camus, les *Lettres* marquent à la fois le passage du pacifisme à l'engagement dans la lutte, le passage de l'individualisme extrême à la découverte du destin commun, de l'absurde à l'au-delà de l'absurde, de l'amoralisme du 'tout est permis' individuel ou politique à l'affirmation de valeurs morales communes. ('Note sur le texte', Camus, *Œuvres complètes I*, p. 1131)<sup>5</sup>

The implied relationship between the author of the letters and his German addressee is that they were friends before the war, and shared many of the same ideas. Those ideas might approximately be identified with those of the author of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*: there is no objective truth or universal values which rule over the chaos of existence; the world has no inherent meaning, purpose or structure; man's desire for order will always be frustrated. The author's aim is not to refute these ideas, but to show that they might lead to fundamentally different commitments and actions:

Vous n'avez jamais cru au sens de ce monde et vous en avez tiré l'idée que tout était équivalent et que le bien et le mal se définissait selon qu'on le voulait. Vous avez supposé qu'en l'absence de toute morale humaine ou divine les seules valeurs étaient celles qui régissaient le monde animal, c'est-à-dire la violence et la ruse. (*Lettres*, in *Œuvres complètes II*, p. 26)

Believing that cruelty and injustice are at the foundation of a meaningless world, the German addressee has embraced aggressive German nationalism. The author of the letters concedes that, at the time of their friendship, he thought in much the same way: 'Et à la vérité, moi qui croyais penser comme vous, je ne voyais guère d'argument à vous opposer, sinon un goût violent de la justice qui, pour finir, me paraissait aussi peu raisonné que la plus soudaine des passions' (p. 26). This sentence introduces the minimal but crucial difference between the author and the addressee. The Frenchman does not offer an *argument* against the German's convictions. Instead, he counters it with his craving for justice, while conceding that there is nothing rational, reasoned, objective or compelling about it. Equally, it is no *less* rational and compelling than the moral despair to which the German has succumbed. Starting from an acknowledgement of the Absurd, the

5 It is important to recall that Camus's letters were not written as a single text. There is an evolution from one to the next, as Camus shows an increasing confidence in imminent victory. Nevertheless, the attitudes and rhetoric discussed here are consistent across the four letters.

Frenchman develops a form of humanist pan-Europeanism grounded in solidarity, revolt and a refusal to consent to injustice:

Vous le voyez, d'un même principe nous avons tiré des morales différentes. [...] Je continue à croire que ce monde n'a pas de sens supérieur. Mais je sais que quelque chose en lui a du sens et c'est l'homme, parce qu'il est le seul être à exiger d'en avoir. Ce monde a du moins la vérité de l'homme et notre tâche est de lui donner ses raisons contre le destin lui-même. (pp. 26–27)

A key point here is the author's insistence that, although there is no Meaning ('sens supérieur'), not everything is equally meaningless. As the Frenchman puts it in the second letter, 'Si rien n'avait du sens, vous seriez dans le vrai. Mais il y a quelque chose qui garde du sens' (p. 15). What is at stake, for the Frenchman, is the need to rescue some shards of meaning from the abyss of meaninglessness. In this endeavour, it is of the utmost importance that the war itself is not treated as simply a random event in a senseless sequence of random events. On the contrary, it appears in the letters as both a bearer and a producer of meaning. In the first letter, the author considers the French defeat of 1940. Rather than explaining it in military terms by reference to the superior German forces and tactics, he describes the French as not yet intellectually prepared for victory: 'C'est pourquoi nous avons commencé par la défaite, préoccupés que nous étions, pendant que vous vous jetiez sur nous, de définir en nos cœurs si le bon droit était pour nous' (p. 11). Before they could fight effectively, the French had to wrestle with their own beliefs and values. In the second letter, the significance of this period of reflection and self-interrogation is developed further. The war appears not as something imposed from the outside; rather, the Frenchman writes, 'C'est la guerre [que notre peuple] s'est donnée à lui-même, qu'il n'a pas reçue de gouvernements imbéciles ou lâches, celle où il s'est retrouvé et où il lutte pour une certaine idée qu'il s'est faite de lui-même' (pp. 18–19). The French are 'défenseurs de l'esprit' (p. 19), and for them the war becomes a Hegelian dialectical struggle. The author does not underplay the danger represented by the Germans, and the hardship, despair and death which will be required to defeat them. At the same time, the Germans are strangely irrelevant. What is really at issue in the war appears to be something much bigger: the self-recognition and self-(re)discovery of the spirit as it unfurls in the history of Europe.

The Germans will be defeated militarily because they have already been defeated intellectually, spiritually and ethically. This is the



conclusion which flows from the author's apparently casual insistence that 'il y a quelque chose qui garde du sens' (p. 15). It also underpins the confidence sustained throughout the letters. What might most surprise a reader of *L'Étranger* in *Lettres à un ami allemand* is the author's comfortable, exultant, jubilatory certainty. He knows the truth and he does not doubt his ability to tell it: 'je vous dois de vous éclairer,' he tells his misguided addressee (p. 10), and he recognizes that he writes 'sur le ton de la certitude' (p. 14). Throughout, his sense of intellectual and ethical superiority is unshakeable. He positions himself as a patient, slightly exasperated teacher who knows better than his stubborn pupil. Misunderstanding is possible, but it is not the inevitable condition of humankind. Moreover, the first person singular who writes to a former friend rapidly becomes a first person plural, as the author speaks in the voice of truth on behalf of all right-minded citizens: 'Mais, pour finir, c'est nous qui avons raison' (p. 16). Camus's use of the first person plural is similar to Sartre's, as discussed in the previous chapter: it entails arrogating the right to speak on behalf of the collective. And the shift from *je* to *nous* also, crucially, anticipates the cogito of Camus's cycle of revolt, according to which 'Je me révolte, donc nous sommes'.

In the *Lettres à un ami allemand* there are, to be sure, traces of the more sceptical attitudes found elsewhere in Camus's work. In his 1944 article on Brice Parain, 'Sur une philosophie de l'expression', Camus wonders 'si notre langage n'est pas mensonge au moment même où nous croyons dire vrai', and whether, rather than binding humans together in shared communication, 'le langage n'exprime pas, pour finir, la solitude définitive de l'homme dans un monde muet' (*Œuvres complètes I*, pp. 901–02). This anxiety surfaces for a moment at the beginning of the third letter, when the author concedes that 'nous ne donnions pas le même sens aux mêmes mots, nous ne parlons plus la même langue' (*Lettres*, p. 21). When the same words have different meanings to different people, the author's command of his medium is put at risk. But here, linguistic anarchy is quickly dismissed. Misunderstanding turns out to be contingent and provisional, as the Frenchman quickly resumes his more confident, pedagogical role. A further problem which may unsettle the author's intellectual dominance is his similarity to Jean-Baptiste Clamence, the narrator of Camus's final completed novel *La Chute*. Clamence's verbal self-confidence aims to mystify as much as to explain; and *La Chute* is similar to *Lettres à un ami allemand* because in neither work do we get to hear the replies of the fictional addressees. Perhaps the author of the letters sounds a bit too much like Clamence for comfort.

However, I do not wish to dwell on these issues. The wartime context of the letters justifies their polemical lack of self-doubt. And in the letters war appears as an event which bears meaning and which positively contributes to the production of further meaning. It is something to be understood and explained. The reflection to which it gives rise reinforces the subject's self-confidence in its own speaking position. Moreover, the community and its values emerge stronger from the ordeal which it has undergone. Although Camus's text does not neglect the misery of war, it also hints at its benefits for subjectivity, society and ethics.

### *L'Etranger*

It is hard to believe that the same man wrote both *Lettres à un ami allemand* and *L'Etranger*. The narrator of *L'Etranger* could not be more unlike his counterpart in the letters. From the famous first paragraph, he reveals himself as someone whose command of reality is limited: 'Aujourd'hui, maman est morte. Ou peut-être hier, je ne sais pas' (p. 141). Moreover, 'Cela ne veut rien dire' (p. 141), whatever 'cela' might be: the death of the mother, the words of commiseration on the telegram which announces it, or the text we are just beginning to read.

My suggestion here is that *L'Etranger* is as much a response to the war as *Lettres à un ami allemand*. The novel does not describe, analyse or even refer to the war in any way, but that is not to say that it does not register it deeply. In order to argue this further, I need to invoke modern trauma studies. Trauma, as it is now commonly understood, is often traumatic to the damaged subject because it is not fully available to consciousness: it dominates and obsesses precisely insofar as it is forgotten, repressed, excluded from the conscious mind. The less we see it, the more it is there. As discussed in Chapter 2, the problem this poses for the interpretation of cultural products such as literature and film is that we are left looking for traces of what is not explicitly present. The task for the interpreter is to give a plausible account of how something which is not explicit in a text is nevertheless importantly present in it. For the moment, we might retain the point that, even if *L'Etranger* does not allude to the war and the humiliating French defeat of 1940 in any way, this does not mean that these factors do not determine the text to a fundamental degree.

One issue which impedes the depiction of *L'Etranger* as a trauma text – and which, I will suggest, the novel in turn problematizes – is

that of belatedness, or what Freud calls *Nachträglichkeit*. In classical trauma theory derived from Freud and his nineteenth-century medical predecessors, the enigma of trauma resides in the gap between event and symptom. The traumatic event seems, initially at least, to leave the subject physically and emotionally undamaged. It is only later – sometimes much later – that trauma becomes manifest. Chapter 2 referred to the much-quoted passage from Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* in which a man walks away from a train crash apparently in good health, but subsequently begins to show signs that he has not escaped unscathed. Trauma is not experienced at the moment of the crash. It comes about only retrospectively, after a period of incubation or triggered by some subsequent event which transforms its significance. The notion of belatedness (*Nachträglichkeit*) refers to this phenomenon in which the traumatic experience is not experienced as traumatic at the time of its occurrence. It becomes traumatic in the light of what comes after it.

In terms of the representation of the Second World War, the notion of belatedness should suggest that the most traumatized accounts would appear some time after the event, rather than in its immediate aftermath. There is certainly evidence to support this. Some of the best known and most important first-hand accounts of the concentration camps in French did not appear immediately after the war. Works such as Elie Wiesel's *La Nuit*, Jorge Semprun's *Le Grand Voyage* and Charlotte Delbo's *Aucun de nous ne reviendra* demanded an incubation period before their authors were ready to finalize and to release them. Works published in the immediate post-war period exhibit distress but not trauma, insofar as trauma entails the obstruction of narrative and understanding. David Rousset's *L'Univers concentrationnaire* and Robert Antelme's *L'Espèce humaine* certainly do not overlook the suffering of the camp prisoners, but they are not trauma texts as such because in both the camps and the experience of them *make sense* to a significant degree. As committed anti-fascists, both Rousset and Antelme fully understand why their enemies treated them so badly. The experience of the camps is awful, but it does not entail a traumatizing subversion of their existing world view and sense of self. The key point is that trauma strikes belatedly, in the light of more recent occurrences and experiences. Initially, the experience of horror appears still to make sense, so it is not perceived as traumatic. It becomes traumatic only later, when the sense which it appeared to make begins to dissipate. Meaning protects against trauma, but the protection it offers may crumble over time.

Henry Rousso's now canonical account of the phases of the Vichy syndrome supports this suggestion that the war becomes traumatic in French representations only belatedly. After an initial period of what, using psychoanalytical vocabulary, he calls 'mourning', Rousso describes France as entering into a period of repression, from 1954 to 1971. This does not mean that the memory of war was simply erased. Rather, the meanings of war – its potential as a source of multifarious, radically opposed meanings – was simplified. Although there were of course numerous dissenting voices, a unified vision prevailed, bringing the French people together through the myth of *résistancialisme*. This story of a nation united in resistance to the evil invaders kept the more problematic reality of Occupation at arm's length. The memory and representation of the war became problematic only later, when this unifying discourse began to break down, in part in the wake of the new crisis of May 1968. One trauma provokes the awakening and reinterpretation of another. The initial denial of trauma lays the ground for its subsequent devastating irruption.

All of this is to say that, according to this classic account, *L'Étranger* should not be a trauma text: it is too close to the initial traumatic event to register an impact which should become effective only later. The jubilatory command of meaning in *Lettres à un ami allemand* fits the scheme much better. Writing in 1943 and 1944, Camus displays a confidence that history bears meaning even in its darkest moments. And yet, *L'Étranger* suggests otherwise. Some of its most striking features can now be understood as characterizing the literature of trauma:

- Unsettled chronology. Although the events of *L'Étranger* unfold in a linear manner, Meursault's chronological position in relation to the narrative is impossible to pin down. The first word of the novel is 'Aujourd'hui', yet the text cannot consistently be explained either as interior monologue or a journal. The second paragraph of the novel uses the future tense ('Je prendrai l'autobus à 2 heures') whereas the third uses the past tense ('J'ai pris l'autobus à 2 heures') (p. 141). The narrator's position in time slips from one paragraph to the next. He is in the midst of events, but also floating strangely above them, as if his story is searching to find a proper chronology which is never settled.
- The subject's detachment from his own emotional life. Meursault's emotional detachment is such that his story barely seems to be his own. He appears to be unmoved by his mother's death, he is willing to marry Marie even though he says he does not love her and he kills a man without regret. When asked by Marie if he loves her, he replies 'qu'il me semblait que non' (p. 161), and later that 'je ne pouvais rien savoir sur ce

point' (p. 165). This sense of detachment reaches its peak at his trial. He listens with interest, but is surprised when his lawyer uses the first person to refer to Meursault's acts: 'Moi, j'ai pensé que c'était m'écarter encore de l'affaire, me réduire à zéro et, en un certain sens, se substituer à moi' (p. 201). It is as if he is a spectator to his own life rather than an agent in it. His emotions are not available to him.

- Events seem disconnected and lacking in meaning. Meursault attends his mother's funeral, takes a lover and kills a man. The issue at Meursault's trial, as for the reader of the novel, is to establish whether or not there is any connection between these separate events. Is there a link between drinking coffee over your mother's corpse and failing to show remorse over a violent crime? The paratactic style of the novel exacerbates the problem for the reader. Sentences are juxtaposed without the explanatory conjunctions which would establish the causal connections between them. As Sartre puts it in 'Explication de *L'Etranger*', 'on évite toutes les liaisons causales, qui introduiraient dans le récit un embryon d'explication et qui mettraient entre les instants un ordre différent de la succession pure' (*Situations, I*, p. 143). Each sentence is an island of meaning with unspecified, perhaps ungraspable, connections to what precedes or follows.
- The compulsion to repeat. Meursault's words are minimal but repetitive. The novel is constructed around repeated deaths: the mother's shortly before it begins, the Arab's at its centre and Meursault's (presumably) shortly after its ending. The novel's central, impenetrable enigma is the question of why Meursault continues to fire into the already dead body of his victim, shooting him five times in total. This is never adequately explained, as if the repetition of the murder impedes and replaces proper understanding. Meursault must keep on killing his victim precisely because his own actions make no sense to him. But such an interpretation of repetition may betray a critical desire to find meaning where there is none, as the novel suggests. Most insistently, Meursault repeats his refusal, unwillingness or inability to speak. Variants of 'Je n'ai rien dit' and 'je n'ai rien répondu' recur throughout the text; and this absence of response – the spoken declaration of withheld speech – is associated with an absence of meaning. 'Cela ne veut rien dire,' Meursault tells us in the first paragraph (p. 141); when asked by Marie if he loves her, he insists that 'cela ne voulait rien dire' (p. 161). What is pressingly repeated here is the senselessness of repetition itself, as the text both describes and enacts an encounter with a world without value or meaning.
- The damaged social bond. The novel describes a world without social cohesion. Human relations are devoid of friendship or love. Meursault desires Marie but does not seem particularly fond of her; Raymond beats his lover and Salamano beats his dog; the police are brutal, the judges are

bombastic zealots and the courts are depicted as Kafkaesque travesties. The epitome of the isolated human subject is the ‘femme automate’ who appears to be more of a robot than a human being. Individuals are mere ciphers, each substitutable by others: ‘Le chien de Salamano valait autant que sa femme. La petite femme automatique était aussi coupable que la Parisienne que Masson avait épousée ou que Marie qui avait envie que je l’épouse. Qu’importait que Raymond fût mon copain autant que Céleste qui valait mieux que lui? Qu’importait que Marie donnât aujourd’hui sa bouche à un nouveau Meursault?’ (p. 212). The final sentence of the novel says that the only way for Meursault to feel less alone is for the spectators at his execution to greet him ‘avec des cris de haine’ (p. 213). The only conceivable emotion which would bind individuals together is hatred.

*L’Etranger* depicts a world which has lost its moral bearings, where communication falters and individual subjects are isolated and detached from the meaning of their own lives, powerless and lacking agency. Even at the crucial moment when Meursault shoots the Arab, he describes the event as something which happens to him rather than an act which he determines: ‘Je ne sentais plus que les cymbales du soleil sur mon front et, indistinctement, le glaive éclatant jailli du couteau toujours en face de moi. [...] La gâchette a cédé, j’ai touché le ventre poli de la crosse et c’est là, dans le bruit à la fois sec et assourdissant, que tout a commencé’ (pp. 175–76). The novel both describes and embodies a massive breakdown of sense. It withholds answers, never allowing its reader access to an elusive core of truth. And it points towards a post-traumatic aesthetics and a post-traumatic subjectivity which are indelibly marked by a catastrophic collapse of meaning. Catherine Malabou does not refer to Meursault directly in her description of the post-traumatic subject, but her account of alienation and apathy resonates strikingly with aspects of *L’Etranger*:

Quand un traumatisme survient, c’est toute la potentialité affective qui se voit touchée, la tristesse n’est même plus possible; le patient tombe en deçà de la tristesse, dans un état d’apathie qui n’est plus joyeux ni désespéré. C’est alors à sa propre survie qu’il devient indifférent. A celle des autres aussi. L’indifférence au meurtre ne s’explique pas autrement. (*Ontologie de l’accident*, p. 31)

It would be as mistaken to explain this post-traumatic collapse solely in relation to the Second World War as it would be to overlook the link altogether. Meursault’s race crime is an enactment in miniature of the crimes being prepared and perpetrated in Europe at the same time. His crime, like those of the European anti-Semites, is possible only because

the moral compass which might have prevented it has been smashed. If, then, it is plausible to read *L'Étranger* as a traumatized response to war, it is striking how different it is from *Lettres à un ami allemand*. Despite the death and injustice caused by war, the letters reassure their readers – indeed, they insist – that meaning is intact; the rational subject retains its sovereignty; a certain idea of France and of Europe has not been destroyed; justice and morality are still possible; and the community will emerge strengthened in its values once the enemy has met its certain defeat. The war may be awful, but it is not *traumatic* in the sense of undermining the foundations of subjectivity, community, ethics and communication. *L'Étranger*, by contrast, depicts an irrevocably broken world where there would appear to be no prospect of solidarity and little point in resistance. Of course, we are dealing with quite different kinds of text here. As a novel published in occupied France, *L'Étranger* could not openly deal with the war; and as clandestine journalism aiming to rally and hearten their readers, the letters could not afford the rampant scepticism of Camus's first novel. But this does not, I suggest, fully explain the differences between the two texts. Camus's journalistic polemic is a necessary accompaniment to and disavowal of his novel. Neither he nor his compatriots could allow themselves to succumb to the traumatic collapse of meaning instantiated in *L'Étranger*. If there were to be a future for the subject, for France and for ethics, the persistent doubts of the novel had to be drowned out by the confidence of the letters.

In terms of classical trauma theory, it is important that *L'Étranger* comes before the *Lettres à un ami allemand*. The notion of belatedness would predict that the traumatic corrosion of subjectivity and sense should come after a period of incubation. The achievement of Camus's novel is that it registers the blunt senselessness of history with striking immediacy. Without referring directly to the war, it captures its violent intensity together with the accompanying sense of subjective powerlessness and incommunicability. Rousso's 'Vichy syndrome' describes a period after the war when the most painful aspects of it were forgotten, before they would return to haunt the French people. The implicit and perhaps necessary disavowal of the blunt senselessness of *L'Étranger* in Camus's later *Lettres à un ami allemand* suggests that repression had already begun before the war was over. *L'Étranger* bears an insight that the letters cannot allow themselves to acknowledge: something has happened which will have enduring consequences on sense, subjectivity and community. Meursault is a post-traumatic being, unaware even of the causes and extent of his own damaged subjectivity.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# Interpreting, Ethics and Witnessing in *La Peste* and *La Chute*

The previous chapter suggested that Camus's first novel, *L'Étranger*, is informed by the tragedy of a war which it never once mentions. This chapter examines problems of interpretation and ethics in two later works in which reference to the war is either widely taken for granted (*La Peste*) or explicit (*La Chute*). Camus emerged from the Second World War as an established author, after the publication of *L'Étranger* and his philosophical essay *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* and the staging of his plays *Caligula* and *Le Malentendu*; and, more than Sartre and Beauvoir, his association with the Resistance was strong because of his work on the clandestine newspaper *Combat*. So he had a claim to both artistic and moral credentials. The ethical question for post-war, post-Absurdist Camus is how to move beyond the impasse of *L'Étranger*, in which one man kills another in part because he can see no good reason not to. His second novel, *La Peste*, on which he had begun work during the war, was published in 1947, and marked a new phase in both his writing and his ethical thinking. The move from individual isolation to solidarity and collective revolt would later be theorized in his book *L'Homme révolté*, leading to his bitter split from his one-time friends Sartre and Beauvoir, and to competing visions of him as the champion of even-handed moderation or an emblem of ineffective liberalism. In Debarati Sanyal's words, Camus has been 'either celebrated as an exemplary witness to the atrocities of the century or denounced as an accomplice of an imperialist imaginary' (*Memory and Complicity*, pp. 57–58).<sup>1</sup> This

1 Sanyal's discussion of *La Peste* and *La Chute* in *Memory and Complicity* was published later than earlier versions of the material in this chapter, and I find many points of concordance with her searching readings, especially regarding



problem of interpreting his overall stature and achievement is matched by difficulties of restricting the sense of his most important works. In this chapter I want to suggest that the textual complexities of his two major post-war novels, *La Peste* and *La Chute*, frustrate the attempt to identify his writing confidently with any settled position.

*La Peste* does not mention the Second World War any more than *L'Etranger*; yet the assumption that Camus's novel, set in the Algerian city of Oran, implicitly refers to the mainland French experience of Occupation was quickly accepted, and has remained so ever since its publication. Roger Quilliot's analysis of the *triple sens* of the novel (as account of a plague, as description of the Occupation and as a metaphysical study) summarizes a consensus which still commands support (see *La Mer et les prisons*, pp. 168–70). Even the polemics of the 1940s and 1950s dealt mainly with the evaluation of the novel rather than its interpretation. Both sides of the argument seemed in agreement over the meaning of the work, and differed only in their attitudes to that meaning. Camus himself encouraged the reading of his novel which linked it to the experience of the Occupation. In 1955, responding to a dissenting article by Roland Barthes, Camus insisted on his right as author to control the reception of his work:

Bien entendu, tous les commentaires sont légitimes, dans la critique de bonne foi, et il est en même temps possible et significatif de s'aventurer aussi loin que vous le faites. Mais il me semble qu'il y a dans toute œuvre des évidences dont l'auteur a le droit de se réclamer pour indiquer au moins dans quelles limites le commentaire peut se déployer. ('Lettre à Roland Barthes', in *Œuvres complètes II*, pp. 285–86)

Camus is trying here, and largely failing, to steer a course between the Scylla of critical anarchy and the Charybdis of authorial dogmatism. Barthes, Camus suggests, has the right to publish his article, but he was wrong in his reading; all commentaries are legitimate, but some are more legitimate than others. Camus adds that *La Peste* can be read 'sur plusieurs portées', but that its 'contenu évident' is the struggle against Nazism (*Œuvres complètes II*, p. 286); and describing the evolution from *L'Etranger* to *La Peste* he adopts a polemical firmness which contrasts strangely with the hesitations and precautions of the narrator of his own novel: 'Comparée à *L'Etranger*, *La Peste* marque, sans discussion

the importance of history coupled with the difficulty of pinning it down. Sanyal's reading also brings in the importance of the Algerian context, which is vital but beyond the scope of the current book.

*possible*, le passage d'une attitude de révolte solitaire à la reconnaissance d'une communauté dont il faut partager les luttes' (*Œuvres complètes II*, p. 286; emphasis added).

Camus's exchange with Barthes gives an insight into the author's attempts to apply the hermeneutic brake to a text which, eight years after its publication, was escaping him. His desire to place constraints on the reception of his work can be explained in part by historical and biographical determinants. In 1947, when *La Peste* was published, an existentialist ethics seemed both urgent and possible; Sartre was still working on the posthumously published *Cahiers pour une morale* promised in the final sentence of *L'Être et le néant*. Moral and political controversies created unfavorable ground for decadent aestheticism. Camus's novel indicates his desire to participate in the debate. But by 1955 Camus was feeling wounded and misunderstood; and Barthes's article gave him the opportunity both to defend himself and to reappropriate his earlier work. Yet today, the terms of ethical debate having changed, *La Peste* may be more interesting for what remains unresolved in and by the novel than for the particular clarities which Camus wished to foreground. In what follows, I focus on some difficulties of reading posed by the novel and their ethical resonance.

### Interpreting *La Peste*

The epigraph to *La Peste*, taken from the preface to the third volume of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, serves as an invitation to interpret: 'Il est aussi raisonnable de représenter une espèce d'emprisonnement par une autre que de représenter n'importe quelle chose qui existe réellement par quelque chose qui n'existe pas' (*La Peste*, in *Œuvres complètes II*, p. 33). We are warned or informed that what follows needs to be interpreted. The literal meaning of the work does not exhaust its potential to signify. This is in itself banal. The fundamental question is not whether the novel can be read in a variety of ways (it clearly can), but whether the potential meanings can be exhausted, totalized and reconciled.

The invitation to interpret is taken up within the text itself with the appearance of the rats in Oran. This gives rise to considerable, but inconclusive, hermeneutic activity. Rieux's initial observation that 'ce rat n'était pas à sa place' (p. 38) leads him to consider its presence as 'bizarre' (p. 38); for the concierge, on the other hand, it constitutes a 'scandale' (p. 38) and can only be explained as a practical joke: 'Bref,

il s'agissait d'une farce' (p. 38). According to the old asthmatic, the appearance of the rats is due to hunger: 'c'est la faim!' (p. 39); and Rieux discovers that 'tout le quartier parlait des rats' (p. 39). Rambert declares that 'cela m'intéresse' (p. 42) and is echoed by Tarrou, who describes the appearance of the rats as 'une curieuse chose': 'Mais je trouve cela intéressant, oui, positivement intéressant' (p. 42). Initially, Rieux pays little attention to the rats. When asked by his wife: 'Qu'est-ce que c'est que cette histoire de rats?' (p. 40), he replies: 'Je ne sais pas. C'est bizarre, mais cela passera' (p. 40). To Judge Othon's enquiry about the rats, he replies that 'ce n'est rien' (p. 41). Rieux's mother seems equally unconcerned: 'Ce sont des choses qui arrivent' (p. 43).

It is possible to read the varied reactions to the rats in the opening pages of the novel as a *mise en abyme* of reading itself, oscillating between sanguine indifference and the tendency to naturalize the unfamiliar by accommodating it to expected patterns; and the *service de dératisation* that Rieux calls upon (see p. 43) corresponds to the desire to disambiguate the text, to rid it of its troubling enigmas as the city must be rid of its rats. The rats eventually disappear, but the need for interpretation persists. In key passages, the text picks up the invitation to interpret made in the epigraph and signals that the story of the plague should not be understood only in literal terms. In particular, this purpose is served by the discussions between Rieux and Tarrou, Paneloux's two sermons and some of the narrator's interventions. These passages indicate that the hermeneutic activity set in motion by the appearance of the rats continues even when they are no longer present in Oran or the text. They can be seen as attempts both to extend and to restrict the interpretation of the novel as a whole, since they illustrate the presence of non-literal meanings while placing controllable parameters on them.

*La Peste* can be understood, then, as the endeavour to put the rat back in its place, that is, to control the disturbance of meaning, by understanding, explaining and overcoming its unwarranted appearance, in short by making out of it a narrative which will lead to the rats' expulsion (albeit, as the final sentence of the novel concedes, their *provisional* expulsion) from a now properly tidied textual space. The rats need to be interpreted (see Davis, 'Interpreting *La Peste*'); and in the current chapter I want to add that they are something to be interpreted *ethically*. They represent a residue or semantic excess through which the questions of ethical choice and action are posed. Yet the novel shows, and to some extent epitomizes, the failure to respond adequately.

Tidiness is preferred to mess, even if the imposition of narrative order comes at the cost of simplification and repression. The novel can be read as an act of containment, in which what is at stake is how to eradicate the threat of the unwanted other.

*La Peste* oscillates between a sense that no interpretation or ethical choice can have guaranteed precedence over any other and an endeavour nevertheless to establish some sort of hierarchy of options: it is better to face up to the truth than to avoid it, better to call things by their name than to lie, better to resist the plague than to consent to it. The hesitation between a potentially dizzying insecurity and actually reassuring stability has been reproduced in critical readings of the novel, which have often conceded its openness only in order then to tie it down to relative interpretive certainties.<sup>2</sup> John Krapp's 'Time and Ethics in Albert Camus's *The Plague*' illustrates this in discussion of the novel's ethical ambiguities, as it ends up confirming a critical consensus which it purports to contest. Contrary to those who see the novel as a more or less disguised sermon about solidarity and revolt, Krapp finds in it 'a vital moral dialogue among competing ethical positions' in which 'no single ethical position is permitted to dominate the others' ('Time and Ethics', pp. 655, 662).<sup>3</sup> Even so, Rieux's views are given particular weight. His moral voice '*successfully* promotes solidarity through an experience of shared, material conditions and serves as an ethical position that resonates *compellingly* in the text's moral dialogue' ('Time and Ethics', p. 668; emphasis added).<sup>4</sup> So the novel establishes a dialogue in which no voice dominates others, yet one character's viewpoint is more successful and more compelling than those which disagree with it. Krapp concludes: 'While no single voice ever obviates all its competition in a moral dialogue [...] some moral voices are nevertheless more potent, more persuasive, than others' ('Time and Ethics', p. 669). No one is absolutely right, but some characters are more right than others, and Rieux is more right than anyone else. The dialogue that the novel was supposed to stage in fact turns out to be pretty much settled in advance, and readers have only to allow themselves dutifully to be compelled and persuaded.

2 For discussion of this, see Davis, 'Interpreting *La Peste*', especially pp. 125–27.

3 A revised version of the article is published in Krapp, *An Aesthetics of Morality*, pp. 70–98.

4 The revised version of Krapp's article slightly tones down the claims made here: the word 'compellingly' is omitted from the quoted passage; see Krapp, *An Aesthetics of Morality*, p. 90.

This tension between pinning down the novel to a particular reading and conceding its resistance to interpretive certainty emerges in a different form in Shoshana Felman's provocative and brilliant discussion of the novel in her and Dori Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. Felman describes *La Peste* as 'a transparent allegory for the massive death inflicted by the Second World War and for the trauma of a Europe "quarantined" by German occupation and desperately struggling against the overwhelming deadliness of Nazism' ('Education and Crisis', p. 8). She goes on to identify the plague even more specifically with the Holocaust, bringing out the resonance of some passages and issues in the novel, such as the link between the quarantine camps and the Nazi concentration camps and the difficulty of bearing witness to unprecedented, unspeakable trauma. This reading, like Krapp's, gives particular authority to Rieux; and, like Krapp, Felman also overlooks problems arising from his dual position as character and narrator. Subsequently in *Testimony* (as will be discussed in the second half of this chapter) Felman goes on to show how *La Chute* would later dramatize the disintegration of the integrity and authority of the witness. Felman seems not to discern that this disintegration can already be observed in the earlier novel, emerging for example through Rieux's unexplained decision to mask the fact that he is the novel's narrator until its closing pages. Felman does, however, acknowledge at the end of her chapter on *La Peste* that there is an element in the novel which does not fit easily with its status as 'a transparent allegory'. The scene at the end of the text where Cottard shoots at the crowd is 'a residue of violence and madness' and an 'incongruent episode' which is not accounted for in Rieux's testimony; it represents the 'residue of a radical and self-subversive question' ('Camus' *The Fall*', p. 118) about the ability of the doctor's testimony to exhaust the lesson of the plague and of the novel that describes it. Rieux wants to speak for all, but he does not speak for everyone. The central issue in the current discussion of *La Peste* concerns the extent and significance of the 'residue' which Felman recognizes, and which the critical heritage has tended to tidy away. Perhaps, if the mess is removed too quickly, something is lost which might have been worth preserving.

## Camus and Hegel

The rejection of mess in *La Peste* can be related to the repudiation of otherness in Camus's ethics and aesthetics. The stakes of Camus's thinking in these areas are shown up through his hostility towards Hegel, to whom (I shall suggest) he is nevertheless closer than he might appreciate. In his chapter on Hegel in *L'Homme révolté*, Camus describes the dialectic of the master and slave as a struggle to destroy the other which has played an important role in the development of both modern nihilism and left-wing totalitarianism (see *Œuvres complètes III*, pp. 174–87). The Hegelian battle for supremacy takes place in a world without transcendence, so that there are no values other than the norms of the given historical moment. Each consciousness seeks to be recognized in order to be complete, so it attempts to impose itself upon other consciousnesses and thereby gain acceptance as a master among slaves. To be triumphant, consciousness must be ready to kill or to be killed, so that the search for recognition is a life and death struggle. Each consciousness wants the death of the other, even if the other's death would curtail her ability to recognize my ascendancy over her. According to Camus, Hegel's nihilist heirs aspired to become masters of their own lives by killing and dying outside society's laws; his Marxist heirs sought to overcome the masters by revolutionary means, justifying killing by the ends it served. In both cases, Hegel is the godfather of violence.

Camus's account of Hegel clearly owes a great deal to the anthropological interpretation promoted in the 1930s by Alexandre Kojève and echoed in the conflict of consciousnesses described in Sartre's *L'Être et le néant* and the existentialist ethics of Beauvoir's *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*.<sup>5</sup> Camus concedes that the reading of Hegel which takes the German philosopher to be justifying murder and death overlooks important aspects of his work. Even so, Camus's own discussion of Hegel does little to correct partial and schematic misreadings. It is true that Hegel describes consciousness as engaged in a life-and-death struggle with the other, staking its own life and seeking the death of its opponent; but only in a very literal reading is this tantamount to endorsing killing and dying

5 For Kojève's interpretation of Hegel, see Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*. Kojève's lectures, delivered in Paris between 1933 and 1939, were attended by some of the most promising young intellectuals of the day, and influenced a generation of French thinkers.

(see *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 113–14). Moreover, by insisting solely on the *negation* of the other, Camus neglects the central point of the Hegelian dialectic, which is to negate and to conserve at the same time. In Hegel's account, self-consciousness is both affirmed and changed through its encounter with the other:

First, it must proceed to supersede the *other* independent being in order thereby to become certain of *itself* as the essential being; secondly, in so doing it proceeds to supersede its *own* self, for this other is itself. This ambiguous supersession of its ambiguous otherness is equally an ambiguous return *into itself*. For first, through the supersession, it receives back its own self, because, by superseding *its* otherness, it again becomes equal to itself; but secondly, the other self-consciousness equally gives it back again to itself, for it saw itself in the other, but supersedes this being of itself in the other and thus lets the other again go free. (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 111; emphasis original)

Self-consciousness returns to itself *as other*; it does not overcome otherness so much as find itself changed by the encounter with it. As Jean-Luc Nancy explains, 'Soi est précisément sans retour à soi, soi ne devient pas ce qu'il est déjà: devenir: c'est être hors de soi – mais pour autant que ce dehors, cette ex-position, est l'être même du sujet' (*Hegel*, p. 86; emphasis original). Self-consciousness comes to know itself by venturing outside itself and then returning to itself transformed by its expedition. So the encounter with the other is a self-loss which is also a self-discovery. Fundamentally bound up with the other's desire and the desire for the other, the struggle of consciousnesses is not a justification of violence; rather, it is, as Nancy provocatively puts it, the reality of love (*Hegel*, p. 93).

Camus's interpretation of Hegel overlooks the extent to which otherness is necessary to the operation of the dialectic; and although he condemns the destruction of alterity in the actions of Hegel's nihilist and Marxist heirs, Camus strikingly reproduces this destruction in his conception of solidarity, which subsumes the whole of humanity in a seamless unity.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the endeavour to tidy and to unify is reproduced in Camus's aesthetics as formulated in *L'Homme révolté* and to some extent instantiated in *La Peste*; and here again the comparison with Hegel is informative. Hegel's aesthetics entail an excursion into

6 For further discussion of the denial of otherness in *L'Homme révolté* and other texts by Camus, see Davis, *Ethical Issues in Twentieth-Century French Fiction*, pp. 64–85.

otherness, which may seem initially unwelcome but which turns out to play a positive role in mankind's self-production. In his *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel describes man's aim 'to strip the outer world of its stubborn foreignness', and in the process to produce and to recognize himself (p. 36). Art is a means of achieving this, and as such its role is akin to that of thought. In art, the mind ventures outside itself into the external, material world, and by exploring what lies outside itself it undergoes what Hegel calls 'an alienation from itself towards the sensuous' (*Introductory Lectures*, p. 15). But the mind then recognizes itself in its alienation and is restored to itself. This is not a self-forgetting or surrender of the self; rather, in art, that which is other than the self is comprehended and brought back to the self, so that consciousness recognizes itself *better* and *differently*. This entails neither a simple negation nor a blunt denial of the world's messy otherness. Rather, alienation contributes to the work of self-production and self-possession. As in the struggle for recognition by other consciousnesses, the journey into otherness is indispensable. In *L'Homme révolté*, Camus describes the artist's relation to the external world as more ambivalent. Creation is 'exigence d'unité et refus du monde' (*Œuvres complètes III*, p. 278); fiction implies 'une sorte de refus du monde', even though this refusal can never be 'une simple fuite' (p. 284). Unable to escape or negate the world entirely, the artist instead *corrects* it, turning life into destiny: 'Voici donc un monde imaginaire, mais créé par la correction de celui-ci, un monde où la douleur peut, si elle le veut, durer jusqu'à la mort, où les passions ne sont jamais distraites, où les êtres sont livrés à l'idée fixe et toujours présents les uns aux autres' (p. 288). In this corrected world, 'l'homme peut régner et connaître enfin' (p. 280).

In the aesthetics of revolt described in *L'Homme révolté*, the world is not negated but its otherness is cleansed from it. Everything about it which resists our desires is transformed so that love and grief, for example, do not diminish with the passing of time. This corrected creation resembles the tidied world to which aspects of *La Peste* aspire. When Rieux takes a night-time swim with Tarrou, they occupy for a moment a world entirely cleansed of otherness. They swim 'dans le même rythme', 'avec la même cadence et la même vigueur', and they share 'le même cœur' (*Œuvres complètes II*, pp. 212–13). The hostility of the external world and the impenetrability of other selves have been temporarily overcome. The repeated use of 'même' insists that there is no trace of difference or conflict here. This is nothing like the Hegelian model of alienation and self-recovery because otherness has disappeared rather than being



dialectically superseded. The rest of this discussion questions whether *La Peste* aims more generally for the triumph of sameness achieved briefly in Rieux and Tarrou's night swim, or whether it preserves, perhaps despite itself, some trace of the other's messy presence.

### Cleaning up the rats

Rieux's initial discovery of a rat raises from the very beginning of the novel much of what is at stake here, so it is worth quoting the paragraph in full:

Le matin du 16 avril, le docteur Bernard Rieux sortit de son cabinet et buta sur un rat mort, au milieu du palier. Sur le moment, il écarta la bête sans y prendre garde et descendit l'escalier. Mais, arrivé dans la rue, la pensée lui vint que ce rat n'était pas à sa place et il retourna sur ses pas pour avertir le concierge. Devant la réaction du vieux M. Michel, il sentit mieux ce que sa découverte avait d'insolite. La présence de ce rat mort lui avait paru seulement bizarre tandis que, pour le concierge, elle constituait un scandale. La position de ce dernier était d'ailleurs catégorique: il n'y avait pas de rats dans la maison. Le docteur eut beau l'assurer qu'il y en avait un sur le palier du premier étage, et probablement mort, la conviction de M. Michel restait entière. Il n'y avait pas de rats dans la maison, il fallait donc qu'on eût apporté celui-ci du dehors. Bref, il s'agissait d'une farce. (p. 38)

From the beginning, the rat is a curious and paradoxical beast. Rieux initially pays scant attention to it and the concierge denies its existence ('il n'y avait pas de rats dans la maison'). It is nevertheless, as I have suggested, something which calls for interpretation. It is 'insolite' or 'bizarre', or perhaps more significantly, 'un scandale' or 'une farce'. The paragraph even wavers over whether or not it is dead. At first it is described confidently as 'un rat mort', but a few lines later it is only 'probablement mort'. Are we to assume that the narrator has changed his mind, and that having at first decided it was dead he now thinks it may be only asleep, wounded or resting? Even Rieux's view that 'ce rat n'était pas à sa place' calls for explanation. Rieux seems to believe that rats have their place, and that they should stay there; and wherever such a place might be, it certainly isn't on the landing outside his office. Moreover, the phrase 'ce rat n'était pas à sa place' echoes the opening sentences of the novel: 'Les curieux événements qui font le sujet de cette chronique se sont produits en 194., à Oran. De l'avis général, ils n'y

étaient pas à leur place, sortant un peu de l'ordinaire' (p. 35). The events described in the novel, like the rat on the landing, are not where they should be. But then again, what is the proper place for curious events to occur? Like the rats, they are out of place as soon as they become conspicuous. As long as they remain unseen, they need not trouble the course of the everyday world.

Rieux's first response on seeing the rat is to brush it aside: 'il écarta la bête sans y prendre garde'. Rieux's action is then reproduced by the attitude of the concierge who, Rieux's testimony notwithstanding, is categorical that 'il n'y avait pas de rats dans la maison'; or alternatively, 'il fallait donc qu'on eût apporté celui-ci du dehors. Bref, il s'agissait d'une farce'. The suggestion of a logical process conveyed by the word *donc* is misleading here, since the inference that the rat had been brought in from outside flatly contradicts the insistence that there is no rat at all. At the very least, for his reasoning to make sense the concierge would have to concede that there might, after all, be a rat in the building, contrary to his refusal to countenance such a possibility. But in any case, he is following the dictates of his desire rather than rational reflection. Adopting a version of what is known in French as *le raisonnement du chaudron*,<sup>7</sup> the concierge mounts incompatible defences: it's a scandal that there is a rat in the building; there are no rats in the building; the rat in the building was brought there by someone as a practical joke. The point is not the truth or falsehood of any of these claims; rather, each of them serves the same purpose, which is to deny that the concierge could have any responsibility for the rodent's presence. The rat constitutes a potential reproach for not doing his job properly, so he denies its potential significance to him by all available means. Like Rieux, in his way he pushes it aside.

The rat is out of place, and as such it demands to be explained and thereby tidied away. Yet this opening paragraph to the narrative itself exhibits some of the untidiness which the rat represents, with its

7 The *raisonnement du chaudron* is described by Freud: 'A. borrowed a copper kettle from B. and after he had returned it was sued by B. because the kettle now had a big hole in it which made it unusable. His defence was: "First, I never borrowed a kettle from B. at all; secondly, the kettle had a hole in it already when I got it from him; and thirdly, I gave him back the kettle undamaged"' (*Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, p. 100). Freud observes that each of the defences is valid in itself but that taken together they contradict one another. From the standpoint of the unconscious, this mutual exclusion is irrelevant, because in the unconscious contradictory thoughts do not cancel each other out.

contradiction, denial and resistance. So what we have here is an early instance of the text representing the endeavour to dismiss the rat while itself becoming a vehicle for the intractable messiness which it figures. The following pages reproduce this process, as dead and dying rats appear throughout Oran and become the talking point of the whole city. The *service de dératisation* is called upon to get rid of them, but the more they are countered, the more they proliferate:

Le matin, dans les faubourgs, on les trouvait étalés à même le ruisseau, une petite fleur de sang sur le museau pointu, les uns gonflés et putrides, les autres raidis et les moustaches encore dressées. [...] Nettoyée à l'aube de ses bêtes mortes, la ville les retrouvait peu à peu, de plus en plus nombreuses, pendant la journée. [...] On eût dit que la terre même où étaient plantées nos maisons se purgeait de son chargement d'humeurs, qu'elle laissait monter à la surface des furoncles et des sanies qui, jusqu'ici, la travaillait intérieurement. (p. 44)

At moments, the description of the dying rats is starkly realistic; yet there is also the persistent implication in the text that some sort of elemental or even moral significance lies behind their appearance. So the rats are not just rats; they are bearers of meaning, though no one can quite settle what that meaning might be. Despite all attempts to clear them away, they keep on returning because they embody something which resists and defeats physical or intellectual attempts to be rid of them definitively; until, that is, they disappear as abruptly and as senselessly as they had appeared: 'Mais, le lendemain, l'agence annonça que le phénomène avait cessé brutalement et que le service de dératisation n'avait collecté qu'une quantité négligeable de rats morts. La ville respira' (p. 45). My suggestion here is that the rats represent the *residue* to which Felman refers in her chapter on *La Peste*, which might also be conceived as an excess of meaning or the messiness of the real which will not be cleared away. Felman seems to think that the residue in Camus's novel is quite restricted in extent, and that the rats can be explained in terms of the overall allegorical framework; I would argue that, on the contrary, the residue is much more widespread. If the rats disappear from the novel after its early stages, it is not because the challenge to security and authority has been overcome, but because it is now all-pervasive. The rats' thematic presence is no longer necessary.

Rieux's rejection of residue is made explicit in his first encounter with the journalist Rambert. Rambert asks Rieux for information about the living conditions of Arabs, but Rieux is unwilling to help:

Mais il [Rieux] voulait savoir, avant d'aller plus loin, si le journaliste pouvait dire la vérité.

— Certes, dit l'autre.

— Je veux dire: pouvez-vous porter condamnation totale?

— Totale, non, il faut bien le dire. Mais je suppose que cette condamnation serait sans fondement.

Doucement, Rieux dit qu'en effet une pareille condamnation serait sans fondement, mais qu'en posant cette question, il cherchait seulement à savoir si le témoignage de Rambert pouvait ou non être sans réserves.

— Je n'admets que les témoignages sans réserves. Je ne soutiendrai donc pas le vôtre de mes renseignements.

— C'est le langage de Saint-Just, dit le journaliste en souriant.

Rieux dit sans élever le ton qu'il n'en savait rien, mais que c'était le langage d'un homme lassé du monde où il vivait, ayant pourtant le goût de ses semblables et décidé à refuser, pour sa part, l'injustice et les concessions. (p. 41)

Rieux's language is uncompromising. Telling the truth means being able to make a *total* condemnation, even if it isn't justified in the circumstances. Only testimony 'sans réserves' is acceptable to him, and concessions are rejected. We might be inclined to see this passage as evidence of Rieux's stoical honesty, yet Rambert's comparison of him to Saint-Just is telling. Rieux is as categorical as the concierge when the latter denies that there can be rats in his building. Curiously, for someone who does not appear to believe in absolutes, Rieux insists on the whole truth or nothing at all. He will not help Rambert if the journalist does not have total freedom of expression. Despite the fact that he does not condemn others, for example when Rambert is eager to escape from Oran rather than to join in the struggle against the plague, Rieux implicitly claims for himself a position of moral authority. This is replicated in his role as narrator. From the opening sentence he asserts for his text the objectivity of a chronicle; he subsumes the voices of others when he takes upon himself the right to speak 'au nom de tous' (p. 81), and he brings the experiences and words of disparate characters such as Tarrou, Paneloux, Grand and Cottard into a narrative which leaves him with the final word. The novel's polyphony is in the end contained in the discourse of a single authoritative narrator. Rather than what he calls Tarrou's 'écarts de langage ou de pensée' (p. 51), he insists on clarity, resoluteness and a simple moral principle: 'L'essentiel était de bien faire son métier' (p. 62). In his hands, the whole narrative can be read as reproducing the concierge's denial of the incommensurable

rat. Having spoken the truth and done his duty, he presides over a neatly tidied text: there are no rats in Oran.

And yet, Tarrou's 'écarts de langage ou de pensée' are also the stuff of *La Peste*. To put it another way, the novel is made up as much by mess, approximation, residue and equivocation as it is by the effort to clear them away. The inconsistencies of the concierge's *raisonnement du chaudron* (there are no rats in the building/the rat in the building was put there as a joke) are reproduced in its treatment of some of its central themes. These are not so much antinomies in the strict sense as instances of how the text's clarities appear less clear when placed alongside one another:

- (i) It is important to stand up for the truth<sup>8</sup>/sometimes no one can be sure what the truth is.<sup>9</sup>
- (ii) Some things are known for certain (two and two are four, for example)<sup>10</sup>/the state of our knowledge is uncertain.<sup>11</sup>
- (iii) People should speak clearly and call things by their name<sup>12</sup>/human language is ambiguous and inadequate to the task of self-expression.<sup>13</sup>
- (iv) Some responses to the plague are preferable to others<sup>14</sup>/no one has a secure basis on which to condemn other people's decisions and beliefs.<sup>15</sup>

8 'Je n'admets que les témoignages sans réserves' (p. 41); 'Rieux répondit qu'il n'avait pas décrit un syndrome, il avait décrit ce qu'il avait vu' (p. 68); 'lui, Rieux, croyait être sur le chemin de la vérité, en luttant contre la création telle qu'elle était'(p. 121).

9 'C'était la peste et ce n'était pas elle. Depuis quelque temps d'ailleurs, elle semblait prendre plaisir à dérouter les diagnostics' (p. 195); 'Mais en matière de peste, leurs connaissances étaient à peu près nulles' (p. 106).

10 'La question est de savoir si deux et deux, oui ou non, font quatre. Pour ceux de nos concitoyens qui risquaient alors leur vie, ils avaient à décider si, oui ou non, ils étaient dans la peste et si, oui ou non, il fallait lutter contre elle' (p. 125).

11 'Mais il est vrai que nous avons encore tout à apprendre à ce sujet' (p. 123).

12 '[J]'ai compris que tout le malheur des hommes venait de ce qu'ils ne tenaient pas un langage clair' (p. 210); 'Il faut appeler les choses par leur nom' (p. 62).

13 'Pendant des semaines, nous fûmes réduits alors à recommencer la même lettre, à recopier les mêmes renseignements et les mêmes appels, si bien qu'au bout d'un certain temps, les mots qui d'abord étaient sortis tout saignants de notre cœur se vidaient de leur sens' (p. 80).

14 'Plus exactement, la terreur lui [Cottard] paraît alors moins lourde à porter que s'il y était tout seul. C'est en cela qu'il a tort' (p. 170).

15 'Il ne faut pas juger. [...] Si vous pouvez vous tirer de cette affaire, j'en serai profondément heureux' (p. 93).

- (v) There are no heroes<sup>16</sup>/some people are more heroic than others.<sup>17</sup>
- (vi) On balance, there is more to admire in people than to despise<sup>18</sup>/on balance, people are selfish, ignorant and have short memories.<sup>19</sup>
- (vii) Everyone should join in the struggle to defeat the plague<sup>20</sup>/the plague cannot be defeated.<sup>21</sup>

Sometimes these inconsistencies can be seen only when different parts of the text are juxtaposed. Sometimes, though, they emerge through the text's readiness to display the validity of contrary views, as when the narrator argues that 'Les hommes sont plutôt bons que mauvais' (p. 124). He precedes his statement by acknowledging the opinion that 'la méchanceté et l'indifférence sont des moteurs bien plus fréquents dans les actions de l'homme'. Although this is immediately qualified as 'une idée que le narrateur ne partage pas', it is nevertheless expressed and held before the reader as a tenable view, and one which receives a certain amount of support from the text. It is made clear, for example, that the actions of the 'formations sanitaires' are by no means typical of the people of Oran, and that the story of the plague should also tell of the black market, violence and rioting. The text becomes a space in which

16 'C'est pourquoi le narrateur ne se fera pas le chantre trop éloquent de la volonté et d'un héroïsme auquel il n'attache qu'une importance raisonnable' (p. 124).

17 '[S]'il faut absolument qu'il y en ait un [héros] dans cette histoire, le narrateur propose justement ce héros insignifiant et effacé [Grand]' (p. 128); 'Ce qui m'intéresse, c'est d'être un homme' (p. 211).

18 '[I]l y a dans les hommes plus de choses à admirer que de choses à mépriser' (p. 248).

19 'Car ces couples ravis, étroitement ajustés et avarés de paroles, affirmaient au milieu du tumulte, avec tout le triomphe et l'injustice du bonheur, que la peste était finie et que la terreur avait fait son temps. Ils niaient tranquillement, contre toute évidence, que nous ayons jamais connu ce monde insensé où le meurtre d'un homme était aussi quotidien que celui des mouches, cette sauvagerie bien définie, ce délire calculé, cet emprisonnement qui apportait avec lui une affreuse liberté à l'égard de tout ce qui n'était pas le présent, cette odeur de mort qui stupéfiait tous ceux qu'elle ne tuait pas, ils niaient enfin que nous ayons été ce peuple abasourdi dont tous les jours une partie entassée dans la gueule d'un four s'évaporait en fumées grasses, pendant que l'autre, chargée des chaînes de l'impuissance et de la peur, attendait son tour' (p. 240).

20 '[I]l fallait faire ce qu'il fallait pour lutter contre elle [la maladie]' (p. 124); 'Il n'y avait pour cela qu'un seul moyen qui était de combattre la peste' (p. 125).

21 'Mais j'imagine alors ce que doit être cette peste pour vous. — Oui, dit Rieux. Une interminable défaite' (p. 122).

opinion and counter-opinion, evidence and counter-evidence, are held together in strange proximity. One side of the argument may be given greater emphasis, but its contrary persists as an unrefuted alternative.

To observe this coexistence of contraries in the text entails an attentiveness to its frailty and unevenness, an acknowledgement of the weakness of some of the arguments which are deployed within it, and an awareness of its hesitations and unresolved contradictions. These sometimes appear in brief moments which can be all too easily overlooked, as when Rieux and Grand discuss the naming of the plague:

— Allons, dit Rieux, il faut peut-être se décider à appeler cette maladie par son nom. Jusqu'à présent, nous avons piétiné. Mais venez avec moi, je dois aller au laboratoire.

— Oui, oui, disait Grand en descendant l'escalier derrière le docteur. Il faut appeler les choses par leur nom. Mais quel est ce nom?

— Je ne puis vous le dire, et d'ailleurs cela ne vous serait pas utile.

— Vous voyez, sourit l'employé. Ce n'est pas si facile. (p. 62)

This exchange reflects the view shared by Tarrou and Rieux that people should speak clearly and use appropriate language rather than words which distort or mask reality. Here, though, the apparently unquestionable dictum 'Il faut appeler les choses par leur nom' comes adrift. Rieux's reply to Grand's enquiry about the name of the plague ('Je ne puis vous le dire, et d'ailleurs cela ne vous serait pas utile') is opaque. Why can't he tell Grand the name? Has he been forbidden to do so, or does he not know it? On what authority does he insist that knowing the name would not be *useful* to Grand, and in any case why would its lack of usefulness constitute a reason for withholding it? Rieux wants to call things by their name, but then refuses to do just that with only cursory explanation. Moreover, this exchange echoes the central interpretive tension of *La Peste* as a whole: the text makes clear from its epigraph that its account of the plague should not be read (only) literally; but, in that case, quite what is named by the plague remains open to inconclusive speculation. The book's very title constitutes a call for interpretation. Like Rieux, it promises to give a name to things, but then teases or frustrates us by hinting that the proper name is withheld or unavailable.

The point here is that the drive in the novel for simplicity and clarity never succeeds in overcoming a contrary drive towards ambiguity and uncertainty. Even an aphoristic slogan such as 'L'essentiel était de bien faire son métier' (p. 62) delivers less than it might seem. In its context, it may refer only to Rieux's resolve to do his best as a doctor ('son métier' = *his* job); yet it also has the appearance of a more general

axiom ('son métier' = *one's* job). But then the injunction that everyone should endeavour to do their job well is both relatively uncontroversial and functionally meaningless. It might urge us to solidarity in the fight against the plague, or it might encourage us to the most fascistic social conformism. So when it seems to be at its most confident in stating simple truths, the text risks saying nothing at all, or nothing that can be readily understood in an unambiguous way. This is particularly the case when the narrator formulates axioms for moral behaviour. Refusing to make heroes out of the members of the 'formations sanitaires', the narrator suggests that their function was to show the citizens of Oran how to act in a time of plague: 'puisque la maladie était là, il fallait faire ce qu'il fallait faire pour lutter contre elle' (p. 124). It is hard to argue against such a statement because, while apparently offering a moral principle, it actually says next to nothing. The tautological 'il fallait faire ce qu'il fallait faire' asserts that there are duties and obligations, but says nothing about what they might be.

*La Peste* begins with things (events, rats) which are not in their place. From its opening pages, it is driven by the desire to put things back in order, to explain and clear away the enigma of the rats' emergence into a tidy world. But the mess returns with a vengeance: 'Sur les trottoirs, il arrivait aussi à plus d'un promeneur nocturne de sentir sous son pied la masse élastique d'un cadavre encore frais' (p. 44). This reflects the experience of reading the novel. The drive for clarity, for a meaningful space not infested by ambiguous vermin, founders when not even the simplest things can be formulated without some trace of hesitation or uncertainty. So it might be true that 'il fallait faire ce qu'il fallait faire', but this does little to help us understand what it is that 'il fallait faire'.

### Messy ethics

The ethical problem posed by *La Peste* concerns the tension between the drive for order (settled principles, secure knowledge) and the residual messiness that won't quite go away. This can be elucidated by what, in ethics, is sometimes called the theory of prima facie duties, developed in the 1920s and 1930s by W.D. Ross.<sup>22</sup> This theory attempts to cope with

22 See Ross, *The Right and the Good*, and *Foundations of Ethics*. For excellent overviews of Ross's ideas, see Stratton-Lake, Introduction to *The Right and the Good*, pp. ix–lviii, and Dancy, 'An Ethic of Prima Facie Duties'.



the fact that, as Jonathan Dancy summarizes the situation, ‘in ethics everything is pretty messy’ (‘An Ethic of Prima Facie Duties’, p. 219). The theory of prima facie duties denies that there is any single overriding ethical principle which commands all others or from which they can be derived. Kant’s categorical imperative is an explicit target here, as it endeavours to establish a law able to resolve any moral conundrum. Instead, according to the theory of prima facie duties, there are a number of possibly conflicting duties that we should try to follow: to help others, to keep our promises, not to lie, to repay acts of kindness, to avoid harm and to promote wellbeing, and so on.<sup>23</sup> None of these duties is inherently more or less important than any of the others, as Dancy explains:

There is no general ranking of the different types of prima facie duties, and since different moral principles express different prima facie duties, there is no general ranking of moral principles. There is just a shapeless list of them, which is no more than a list of the things that make a moral difference, a difference to what we should do. (‘An Ethic of Prima Facie Duties’, p. 221)

In Kantian ethics, if something is wrong it is always wrong; it can never be right to tell a lie, for example. In the theory of prima facie duties, it will *usually* be wrong to lie, but sometimes it will be right.<sup>24</sup> In actual situations, different duties may be in conflict with one another, and the theory of prima facie duties offers no principle for resolving decisively which course of action should be taken in such cases. Rather than being offered a device for cleaning up the mess, we are left to confront it anew each time.

In *La Peste*, Rieux and Tarrou are barely confronted with the necessity of making difficult ethical choices because their duty seems immediately apparent to them. Rieux knows exactly what to do from the beginning: ‘Là était la certitude, dans le travail de tous les jours’ (p. 62). Similarly, Tarrou, who claims to ‘tout connaître de la vie’ (p. 123), shows no sign of doubt or hesitancy when he risks his life by setting up the ‘formations sanitaires’. Because they have no real decisions to make, or at least because they do not give much indication that decision-making is difficult, Rieux and Tarrou are ethically the *least* interesting characters

23 For Ross’s division of the prima facie duties, for which he does not claim completeness or finality, see *The Right and the Good*, pp. 21–22.

24 See for example Ross, *Foundations of Ethics*: ‘our answer will sometimes be “yes” and sometimes be “no”, so that we cannot maintain with Kant that it is *always* wrong to tell a lie or break a promise’ (p. 134; emphasis original).

in the novel. They encounter little of the moral *risk* which is inherent in Ross's theory of prima facie duties. Rambert and Paneloux are more interesting because they are forced to decide between conflicting values: Rambert's desire to be with someone he loves is at odds with the duty to combat (and to not risk spreading) the plague; Paneloux's horror at the suffering caused by the plague sits uneasily with his belief that it is the will of God. They both ultimately decide to work with the 'formations sanitaires', but their commitment to the struggle does not derive from the secure, unwavering resolution represented by Rieux and Tarrou. Moreover, the presence of Cottard in the novel ensures the survival of a minor yet important counter-voice to its more dominant certainties. Rather than joining in a perhaps futile attempt to eradicate the plague, he revels in the new disorder it creates and finds in it a kind of freedom. He may be wrong in the eyes of the sanctimonious duo Rieux and Tarrou but, if nothing else, his choices show the persistence of judgements other than theirs.

The circumstances surrounding the death of Judge Othon's son give perhaps the best example from *La Peste* of the conflicting duties which have to be negotiated in the process of decision-making. In consideration of whether or not to treat the boy with an experimental serum, the duty of beneficence (to do good to others, to foster their well-being) is in conflict with the duty of non-maleficence (to do no harm to others): the serum may do harm in order to do good (to save the boy's life); but if it does not work it will have done harm with no compensatory positive result. In the event the boy's death is delayed and his agony prolonged. When Othon expresses the hope that his son did not suffer too much, a further element is brought into play: should one tell the truth, or save the judge's pain by lying? Tarrou chooses compassion over honesty: 'Non, dit Tarrou, non, il n'a vraiment pas souffert' (p. 201). The episode shows that the difficulty of ethical decision-making may not come from a lack of principles so much as from a surfeit of them. What is missing is a ready-made means of ranking them in order of importance, so that there is no shortcut or easy solution to taking a decision. This effectively evacuates knowledge from ethics, as Dancy explains Ross's argument:

Ross wants to say that we often know for certain what our prima facie duties are, but we can never *know* what our duty proper is. Put another way, this means that we have certain knowledge of moral principles, but no knowledge of what we ought overall to do in any actual situation. (p. 223)

Rieux endeavours to clear up the messiness of ethics, producing a unified discourse governed by knowledge and certainty (or at least by a high degree of self-confidence) with a fixed hierarchy of moral responses. *La Peste* as a whole is complicit with this aspiration for tidiness, yet it never entirely frees itself of its uncertainties, as it strains for a clarity and simplicity it cannot achieve; and through its hesitations, inconsistencies and equivocations it poses before its reader the possibility of a more fraught, ambiguous and risky ethics, a messy ethics to contend with a conflicted text and a messy world.

Camus's notion of art as the correction of reality fails to appreciate that something of value may be lost when the world is unified and rendered coherent. *La Peste* seems both to know and not to know that order is not the only thing we want. The novel struggles against itself, wanting to clarify and to disambiguate, to call things by their proper name, but also stumbling at every stage, finding strangeness and ambiguity seeping into its fabric. Earlier, we saw that Camus criticizes Hegel for endorsing the negation of otherness, even while the elimination of the world's intractability remains the aspiration of his own aesthetics. Yet Camus's achievement in *La Peste* turns out to be more Hegelian than his theory insofar as, however reluctantly, it lingers over the traces of that which resists recuperation to a tidy, totalizing perspective. Contrary to what Camus seems to think, Hegel's dialectic needs otherness to maintain its vigour; Camus himself may not want otherness, but his novel shows that it will not and should not readily be dispensed with. And this has important implications for the ethical significance of the work. Through its tensions and ambiguities, it allows one to suspect that ethics might do best to make accommodations with mess rather than to seek ways of clearing it away. The clutter of our lives, our relationships and our world may after all be what is most precious in them.

### Witnessing trauma in *La Chute*

The 'messy ethics' of *La Peste* are, I would suggest, one of the most powerful, deceptively placid ethical statements to emerge from the Second World War, and certainly a rival for the never-completed ethics announced by Sartre at the end of *L'Être et le néant* and the two philosophical volumes published by Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* and *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*. And Camus is more interesting when immersed in the self-contesting, self-undermining domain of ethical

mess than in the role of the dour moralist of moderation in which he is sometimes cast. After *L'Étranger* and *La Peste*, *La Chute* is the third great fictional publication of Camus's lifetime, and unapologetically inhabits a semantic and moral world where nothing can be taken for what it seems. Its interest in the context of the Second World War, and in particular in relation to trauma studies, has been demonstrated in important texts by Shoshana Felman and Dominick LaCapra.<sup>25</sup> *La Chute* refers explicitly to the killing of Jews during the Second World War and it revolves around questions of memory, narratorial reliability and the entanglement of personal and collective histories. The rest of this chapter examines the issues of trauma and witnessing in *La Chute* principally by analysing Felman's essay 'Camus' *The Fall*, or the Betrayal of the Witness',<sup>26</sup> which appears as a chapter in her and Dori Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. Felman's discussion of *La Chute* is exemplary both as a committed reading and as an instance of how Camus's novel entices its readers into the pitfalls of misreading. What interests me here is the ways in which the novel both encourages and resists Felman's reading, implicating her – as it has perhaps implicated all its best readers – in a complex interplay of blindness and insight through which the text itself remains stubbornly opaque. Felman's interpretation of *La Chute* tells about the nature of reading in general and about the specific difficulties of producing a persuasive, comprehensive reading of Camus's most wilfully disorientating novel.

Felman makes an irresistible case for relating *La Chute* to the problems of witnessing and representation raised, in particular but not uniquely, by the Holocaust. The invitation to read the novel in the dark light of the Holocaust is issued in its opening pages when Clamence tells his interlocutor that he lives in the former Jewish quarter of Amsterdam.

25 LaCapra's chapter on *La Chute* in his *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, entitled 'Rereading Camus's *The Fall* after Auschwitz and with Algeria', is in part an engagement with Felman's reading of the novel in her 'Camus' *The Fall*, or the Betrayal of the Witness'. LaCapra makes a number of criticisms of Felman, some of which are more persuasive than others. I do not think it is correct, for example, that Felman identifies Clamence with Camus, as LaCapra claims (pp. 74–76). On some points, though, LaCapra's criticisms are well made. Later notes comment on some aspects of LaCapra's reading of Felman and *La Chute*.

26 I use the title of Felman's chapter as it appears on the contents page of her and Laub's *Testimony*. A slightly different title is used at the head of the chapter itself: 'The Betrayal of the Witness: Camus' *The Fall*'.

This establishes Amsterdam, and Europe more generally, and the text of *La Chute*, as spaces which are marked by an indelible crime:

Moi, j'habite le quartier juif, ou ce qui s'appelait ainsi jusqu'au moment où les frères hitlériens y ont fait de la place. Quel lessivage! Soixante-quinze mille juifs déportés ou assassinés, c'est le nettoyage par le vide. J'admire cette application, cette méthodique patience! Quand on n'a pas de caractère, il faut bien se donner une méthode. Ici, elle a fait merveille, sans contredit, et j'habite sur les lieux d'un des plus grands crimes de l'histoire. (*La Chute*, in *Œuvres complètes III*, p. 701)

Although there is no reason to believe that Clamence is directly or indirectly a victim of the Holocaust, he can readily be seen as suffering the effects of some kind of trauma, acting out an experience which is not fully recalled and assimilated. This could explain, for example, his sense of doubleness and falseness, his dissociation from his own acts, his sense that he is playing a game or performing a role, and the oscillations between forgetting and partial remembering which recur throughout his narrative. It might also help to explain the self-consciously unreliable nature of his narrative. As Cathy Caruth explains, trauma narratives almost invariably raise the question of their own truth: 'The problem [of truth] arises not only in regard to those who listen to the traumatized, not knowing how to establish the reality of their hallucinations and dreams; it occurs rather and most disturbingly often within the very knowledge and experience of the traumatized themselves' ('Introduction', p. 5). Clamence anticipates Caruth's analysis when he describes his time in a German prison camp: 'Je sais ce que vous pensez: il est bien difficile de démêler le vrai du faux dans ce que je raconte. Je confesse que vous avez raison. Moi-même ...' (p. 752).

So Clamence looks like or can be made to look like a victim of trauma. One of the many questions that remain unresolved in the text concerns the origin of this trauma: is it actually his own, buried and irretrievable in the flood of words that pour from him, or does he arrogate for himself the status of victim which little in his prehistory might justify? He may be an example of what LaCapra calls 'the posttraumatic cynicism of the implicated bystander', unsettled by events but evading them though 'a false, ironic façade and a discourse of suspect indirection' (*History and Memory after Auschwitz*, p. 76). *La Chute* is undoubtedly about trauma, but whose trauma does it (fail to) register?

It is not difficult, then, to make a case for the relevance of *La Chute* to trauma studies; but is this enough to support the importance accorded

to the Holocaust in Felman's reading of the novel? In a sentence from his 'Prière d'insérer' to which I shall return, Camus warns that Clamence holds up a mirror to his listener and his readers: 'Le miroir dans lequel il se regarde, il finit par le tendre aux autres' (p. 771). Clamence's endeavour is to give an image of his interlocutor rather than to engage in an act of pure confession or self-revelation. What is crucial here is the operation of transference through which the narrator's story becomes implicated in the story of the listener, and vice versa, to the point that it becomes impossible to say what comes from one and what from the other. The mirror reflects back the eye of the beholder. My suggestion here is that this transferential relation between narrator and interlocutor is reproduced in Felman's relation, and perhaps the relation of any attentive reader, to *La Chute*.<sup>27</sup> The novel gives its readers an occasion for self-formulation, but something of the work's elusive core is missed in the process.

### The woman on the bridge

At what is almost exactly the mid-point of *La Chute*, Clamence offers us what appears to be a key to his ambiguous and confusing narrative when he tells of an incident on a bridge over the Seine. According to Clamence, this incident lies 'au centre de [sa] mémoire' and it is, he says, his 'découverte essentielle' (p. 728). Felman's chapter on *La Chute* begins with this episode and returns to it repeatedly. In her summary, Felman describes how 'the narrator was the chance witness

27 LaCapra raises the question of the transferential relation between critic and object of study by underlining the link between Felman's reading of *La Chute* and her discussion of Paul de Man in the preceding chapter of *Testimony*. The chapter on *La Chute* is, he suggests, heavily inflected by Felman's transferential investment in de Man, with whom, he claims, 'Felman herself remains bound or even identified in a process of arrested mourning' (*History and Memory after Auschwitz*, p. 75). I do not intend to discuss the links between the chapters on de Man and *La Chute* or to speculate on psychological issues which do not concern me. My focus is on Felman's reading of *La Chute* in all its brilliance and, as I suggest, its blind spots. It is nevertheless of interest that LaCapra suggests how one of the key issues of *La Chute* – the transferential imbrication of self and other – spills over into the critic's relation to the novel and her use of it in her broader intellectual project. The same is no doubt true of LaCapra's reading of the novel and my own, in ways that I am not able to elucidate.

of a suicide: a woman he had just passed by suddenly jumped off the bridge into the Seine' ('Camus' *The Fall*, p. 165). Clamence continues on his way, informs no one of what he has witnessed and does not read the following days' newspapers. The event becomes what Felman calls 'a missed encounter with reality, an encounter whose elusiveness cannot be owned and yet whose impact can no longer be erased' ('Camus' *The Fall*, p. 167). This scene prompts Felman to draw a contrast between *La Chute* and Camus's previous novel *La Peste*, which she had analysed in an earlier chapter of *Testimony*. In *La Peste* a narrator records the events he had witnessed for himself, adopting a secure, relatively reliable and conventional testimonial stance; in *La Chute*, on the other hand, 'the event is witnessed insofar as it is *not experienced*, insofar as it is literally *missed*' ('Camus' *The Fall*, p. 168; emphasis original). In the later novel, the witness and his narrative disintegrate. The incident on the bridge becomes the novel's 'primal scene' ('Camus' *The Fall*, pp. 187, 193–94), in which something unrepresentable is recalled and avoided. Evoking the Holocaust, it entails a failure of witnessing; more fundamentally, it suggests the impossibility of giving a historical narrative of 'an event without a witness, an event eliminating its own witness' ('Camus' *The Fall*, p. 200).

Paying careful attention to textual detail, Felman draws out the importance of the Holocaust and the problem of historical testimony to *La Chute*. There are nevertheless signs that Camus's text is being enlisted to support a reading which it does not fully endorse. The woman's suicide on the bridge is central to Felman's interpretation, but one might question whether the event should actually be understood as a suicide. In Clamence's account, he sees a woman on the bridge, walks past her and then, when he is about a hundred metres away, he hears the sound of 'un corps qui s'abat sur l'eau' followed by 'un cri, plusieurs fois répété, qui descendait lui aussi le fleuve, puis s'éteignit brusquement' (p. 728). He does not turn around, so he sees neither the fall itself nor whatever or whoever is the source of the 'cri'. Most readers, like Felman, simply assume that the woman has taken her own life, but we should be aware that this is, precisely, an *assumption* which the text allows but does not confirm. LaCapra observes quite rightly that there is no textual evidence to support the claim that the woman jumped from the bridge and committed suicide (*History and Memory after Auschwitz*, p. 78). She might have fallen by accident or someone might have pushed her; or, since Clamence has walked some distance away from her, it may have been someone else entirely who jumped into the water.

*La Chute* teases its addressee and its reader by its partial revelations, which allow us to make assumptions without realizing we are doing so.<sup>28</sup> The strength of Felman's reading lies not in her avoidance of assumptions but in her willingness to take the gains of her assumptions as far as she can. It might be argued that Felman's reading does not actually depend on the interpretation of the incident on the bridge as a suicide. Since she relates the unwitnessed event on the bridge to the Holocaust and to what she calls 'the space of the annihilation of the Other' ('Camus' *The Fall*', p. 189), it might actually strengthen her argument to keep open the possibility that the woman was pushed rather than taking it for granted that she jumped. The primal scene would then become the scene of a murder, which would resonate better with genocidal echoes in the novel. However, even if the insistence on suicide does not serve the overall reading of *La Chute* particularly well, it is symptomatic of a tendency in Felman's chapter to pin down Camus's novel more confidently than the text itself allows. She tells us what *La Chute* is 'profoundly all about' (p. 184) and what is 'the real subject of the novel' (p. 189) even though the work slyly resists any such hermeneutic dominance. Just as Clamence fails to witness the fall from the bridge, any reader who claims to have penetrated the novel's inner core risks failing to witness *La Chute* in all its unsettling ambiguity.

### Camus versus Sartre

In the central sections of her chapter 'Camus' *The Fall*, or the Betrayal of the Witness', Felman revisits the quarrel between Sartre and Camus which began with the controversy over Camus's *L'Homme révolté* and

28 LaCapra attempts to avoid an assumption routinely made by readers when he questions the gender of Clamence's interlocutor: 'One tends to assume that Clamence's interlocutor is a man. It would be interesting to speculate how *The Fall* and one's reading of it would be transformed if one imagined the interlocutor to be a woman' (*History and Memory after Auschwitz*, p. 90; emphasis added). The proposed thought experiment is indeed an interesting one, but it is certainly not an *assumption* to identify the interlocutor as male. In only the third word of the text, Clamence addresses him as *monsieur* ('Puis-je, monsieur, vous proposer mes services, sans risquer d'être importun?', p. 697). Since there is no indication that the interlocutor is either surprised or offended by this address, it is reasonable for readers to take for granted that he is a man. Where Felman may assume too much, LaCapra may be trying to find ambiguity where there is none.



caused a definitive split between the two great post-war intellectuals. Felman's account of the quarrel revolves around the witnessing/failure to witness dichotomy which motors her reading of *La Chute*, and which she regards as the central concern of Camus's novel. In Felman's version of events, Camus spoke out against the Stalinist concentration camps, but Sartre kept silent about them and can therefore be portrayed as having 'betrayed the testimonial task [...] since he chose not to acknowledge Russian concentration camps and not to look at history from hell' ('Camus' *The Fall*', p. 186). Sartre, then, is guilty of the failure of testimony which Camus diagnoses in *La Chute*: he colludes in silencing both the victim and the witness of atrocity.

Felman's account of the differences between Camus and Sartre is rather thin on historical context, lacking in detail about the moral and political issues involved, and surprisingly unproblematized in its condemnation of Sartre as witness-traitor. Narratives of the Camus-Sartre controversy tend, even today, to be written from strongly partisan perspectives, so it is not easy to get an impartial account of what actually happened. It is nevertheless hard to justify the claim that Sartre 'chose not to acknowledge Russian concentration camps'. Towards the end of 1949, Sartre's journal *Les Temps modernes* was preparing to publish and analyse Soviet documents which showed the abuse of human rights in the Soviet Union. However, in November their publication was pre-empted in *Le Figaro littéraire* by the Buchenwald survivor and former communist David Rousset, who denounced the Soviet labour camps and compared them to Nazi concentration camps.<sup>29</sup> Rousset's article immediately gave rise to what Sartre regarded as a concerted right-wing condemnation of the Soviet Union which focused only on its shortcomings and simultaneously distracted from repressive acts perpetrated elsewhere in the world. The January 1950 edition of *Les Temps modernes* published an article entitled 'Les Jours de notre vie' which had been written by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and which Sartre co-signed in a show of political and editorial solidarity.<sup>30</sup> The article

29 See Rousset, 'Au secours des déportés dans les camps soviétiques: Un appel de David Rousset aux anciens déportés des camps nazis'.

30 For discussion of the circumstances surrounding this article, see Birchall, *Sartre against Stalinism*, pp. 109–19. Birchall writes: 'It is clear that Sartre's position was open to some criticism, and that it lacked clarity. But it is also clear that he openly and unambiguously condemned the Russian labour camps, and that nothing he said was likely to bring comfort or assistance to the defenders of Stalinism' (p. 112).

denounces the Soviet concentrationary system whilst also condemning the hypocrisy of those who attack human rights abuses in a communist country but say nothing about no less flagrant abuses in Greece, Spain and colonized countries, or about the unjust condition of black citizens in the US. Sartre might be accused of failing to make a full-blooded attack on the Soviet Union, but by co-signing Merleau-Ponty's article he certainly clears himself of the charge that he refused to acknowledge the existence of Soviet concentration camps. Quite the opposite, he was one of the first to bring them to the attention of the French public, however difficult that was for his political allegiances at the time.<sup>31</sup>

Felman does not refer to these circumstances. They make it difficult to sustain her distinction between Sartre's betrayal of the duty to bear witness and Camus's valiant resistance to prevailing political pressures. She seems to need Sartre's failure as a contrast to the accomplishments of Camus's novel. The distortion of Sartre that this involves becomes most significant when she goes on to claim that his failure to acknowledge the existence of the Soviet camps is matched by his failure to acknowledge the Holocaust in his *Réflexions sur la question juive* (1946). Like the Western allies who refused to register the magnitude of the destruction of the European Jews during and after the Second World War, Sartre allegedly draws a shroud of silence over the issue in his book:

It is doubtless no coincidence if, even in his militant dismantling of the ideology of anti-Semitism in the magnanimous, momentous book he publishes immediately after the war, Sartre still unwittingly continues to maintain the Allies' silence and to look away from hell: *Réflexions sur la question juive*, published in 1946, launches a war on anti-Semites and defends the Jews against their venom, but neglects to mention, even in one word, the Holocaust. ('Camus' *The Fall*', p. 191)

As if taking his cue from Felman, LaCapra makes the same allegation in his comparison of Camus and Sartre:

Albert Camus's 1956 novel *The Fall* (*La Chute*) seems especially remarkable as a case in which a major postwar intellectual and writer attempted to address the Holocaust. Even Sartre, Camus's principal contender for the role of intellectual guide in France and elsewhere in the West, said virtually nothing about the specific nature of the Holocaust and its bearing on the Jews. In his well-known postwar study, *Antisemite*

<sup>31</sup> See Beauvoir's account of this incident in *La Force des choses*, I, pp. 277–82. On the split between Sartre and Camus, see also Aronson, *Camus and Sartre*, and Forsdick, 'Camus and Sartre: The Great Quarrel'.

and Jew [the English-language title of *Réflexions sur la question juive*], Sartre did not even mention the Holocaust. (*History and Memory after Auschwitz*, p. 4)

Both Felman and LaCapra contrast Sartre's failure to mention the Holocaust with Camus's attempt to register its impact. This distinction underlies and justifies their praise for Camus's endeavour in *La Chute*. It is, however, simply untrue to say that Sartre fails to mention the Holocaust in *Réflexions sur la question juive*, except in the most trivial sense that he does not use the word itself.<sup>32</sup> Sartre's book is a virulent, uncompromising attack on French anti-Semitism, and in particular on French complicity in the deportation of Jews during the Second World War. The very first sentence of the book condemns those who are in favour of solving the problem of Jewish elements in society 'en les exterminant tous' (p. 7), a phrase which undoubtedly and unmistakably alludes to the German extermination camps. Later Sartre refers to Majdanek, the camp on the outskirts of Lublin where 59,000 Jews died; and he describes the plight of the Jews who escaped murder during the war:

Aujourd'hui<sup>33</sup> ceux d'entre eux [les Juifs] que les Allemands n'ont pas déportés ou assassinés parviennent à rentrer chez eux. Beaucoup furent parmi les résistants de la première heure; d'autres ont un fils, un cousin dans l'Armée Leclerc. La France entière se réjouit ou fraternise dans les rues, les luttes sociales semblent provisoirement oubliées; les journaux consacrent des colonnes entières aux prisonniers de guerre, aux déportés. Va-t-on parler des Juifs? Va-t-on saluer le retour parmi nous des rescapés; va-t-on donner une pensée à ceux qui sont morts dans les chambres à gaz de Lublin? Pas un mot. Pas une ligne dans les quotidiens. C'est qu'il ne faut pas irriter les antisémites. Plus que jamais la France a besoin d'union. Les journalistes bien intentionnés vous disent: 'dans l'intérêt même des Juifs, il ne faut pas trop parler d'eux en ce moment'. Pendant quatre ans, la Société française a vécu sans eux, il convient de ne pas trop signaler leur réapparition. (p. 86)

32 Indeed, it would have been surprising if Sartre had used the word 'Holocaust', since it was not yet commonly used to refer to the murder of the European Jews at the time he was writing *Réflexions sur la question juive*. On the same basis, seminal testimonial works such as David Rousset's *L'Univers concentrationnaire* (1946) and Robert Antelme's *L'Espèce humaine* (1947) could also be accused of not mentioning the Holocaust, even though they discuss the concentration camps in great detail.

33 A footnote specifies that Sartre wrote this in October 1944.

It is tempting to conclude, simply, that Felman and LaCapra had not (re)read *Réflexions sur la question juive* to check the accuracy of their claim that Sartre fails to mention the Holocaust. What is striking in Felman's case, though, is that the point Sartre makes here *precisely anticipates* Felman's criticism of 'the protracted postwar silence on the Holocaust of both the European and the American intellectuals' ('Camus' *The Fall*', p. 191). Felman ranks Sartre among those who engaged in a 'conspiracy of silence' (p. 192), though the above quotation shows that on the contrary he denounced the conspiracy from its earliest days. Felman's failure to recognize Sartre as a precursor of her own argument looks, then, more like a necessary blind spot than a simple error of reading. She does not acknowledge the evidence which contradicts her construction of a robust opposition between Sartre and Camus. Later in this chapter we shall see further instances of her failure to register material which might call her interpretation into question.

### Failures and radical failures

Felman's discussion of *La Chute* is built around oppositions: between the confidence in the witness of *La Peste* and the disruption of witnessing in *La Chute*, and between Sartre's betrayal of the duty of the witness and Camus's refusal to abdicate that duty. While she roundly criticizes those who fail to bear witness, one of Felman's aims is also to problematize the very opposition between witnessing and not witnessing. The importance of *La Chute* in this context lies in the fact that it does not merely recount a failure of witnessing; it recounts a *radical* failure of witnessing. *Radical* is an important word in Felman's vocabulary: *La Chute* shows how the Holocaust consisted in 'a radical failure of witnessing' (p. 194); the novel 'enacts the Holocaust as a radical *failure of representation*' (p. 197; emphasis original); modern narrative and art as exemplified by *La Chute* bear testimony 'to the *radical historical crisis in witnessing* the Holocaust has opened up' (p. 201; emphasis original).

What is the difference between a failure of witnessing and a *radical* failure of witnessing? To say that witnessing has merely failed implies that it might have succeeded. Events could have been experienced and represented in a fully adequate manner. A *radical* failure of witnessing, on the other hand, undercuts the very possibility of being present to and making present the experience of trauma. Although Sartre is accused of betraying his testimonial responsibility, it turns out that he had little

prospect of actually fulfilling it either, at least according to what Felman discovers in her account of *La Chute*. The novel revolves around a radical failure which is also an impossibility: *La Chute* 'inscribes the Holocaust as the impossible historical narrative of an event without a witness, an event eliminating its own witness' ('Camus' *The Fall*', p. 200); and it becomes 'the very writing of the impossibility of writing history' (p. 200), partaking of the 'historical impossibility of writing a historical narration of the Holocaust' (p. 201).

Felman observes what appears to be a contingent failure of witnessing and then raises the stakes of this incident by arguing that it marks the radical impossibility of narration and representation. The process of generalization is precisely anticipated in *La Chute*. Clamence's role as judge-penitent consists in turning his sense of his own shortcomings into a declaration of universal guilt. Clamence knows this to be a rhetorical device which eases his sense of personal failure and serves to entrap the unwitting other. Felman reproduces Clamence's generalizing impulse while divesting it of its knowingly deceptive irony. In her reading, the missed encounter between Clamence and the woman signals what now becomes an insurmountable situation: 'Rather, with the chance of rescue missed through a missed historical encounter with the real, the event seems to consist in the *missing* of salvation and, henceforth, in its radical historical and philosophical impossibility' ('Camus' *The Fall*', p. 177; emphasis original).

So Clamence's failure escalates into a universal condition. This reading nevertheless omits the clear indication in Camus's text that Clamence's failure to witness the event entails deliberate choice rather than historical or philosophical compulsion. In his initial response he loses control of his movements: 'Je voulais courir et je ne bougeai pas. Je tremblais, je crois de froid et de saisissement. Je me disais qu'il fallait faire vite et je sentais une faiblesse irrésistible envahir mon corps' (*La Chute*, in *Œuvres complètes III*, p. 728). His subsequent actions, though, are entirely under his control: 'Puis, à petits pas, sous la pluie, je m'éloignai. Je ne prévins personne. [...] Ni le lendemain, ni les jours qui suivirent, je n'ai lu les journaux' (p. 729). He could have turned around; at the very least, he could have informed the police or read the newspapers. This suggests that although the fall from the bridge is unwitnessed, it is not theoretically unwitnessable. Clamence does not rescue the woman or achieve his own salvation; and his final words in the novel indicate that he would not wish to be tested again. But this does not inevitably turn his failure into Felman's 'radical historical and philosophical impossibility'. Indeed,

such a reading risks absolving him of any responsibility for his failure: if salvation is impossible, he cannot be blamed for giving up on it.

Felman, then, makes Camus's text bear a burden of meaning which it only partly supports. The minimal distortion of the text has significant interpretive consequences, as can be seen in Felman's discussion of another passage from the novel. Towards the end of his first meeting with his interlocutor, Clamence compares the concentric canals of Amsterdam to the circles of hell in Dante's *Inferno*:

Quand on arrive de l'extérieur, à mesure qu'on passe ces cercles, la vie, et donc ses crimes, devient plus épaisse, plus obscure. Ici, nous sommes dans le dernier cercle. Les cercles des ... Ah! Vous savez cela? Diable, vous devenez plus difficile à classer. Mais vous comprenez alors pourquoi je puis dire que le centre des choses est ici, bien que nous nous trouvions à l'extrémité du continent. (pp. 702–03)

Noting that Clamence is interrupted or interrupts himself as he speaks, Felman observes that 'The last circle of hell remains unnamed' ('Camus' *The Fall*, p. 186). Felman then goes on speculatively to link the *concentric* canals with the *concentrationary* universe, and to suggest that the German concentration camps, 'like the innermost circle of hell, are implicitly at the center of the novel: a center that remains, as such, *unspeakable*' (pp. 188–89; emphasis added).

In Felman's account, the final circle of hell is at first 'unnamed'; it then becomes 'unspeakable'. This transition replicates the move of turning Clamence's failure of witnessing into a *radical* failure marking the impossibility of historical narration. However, once again this slightly but significantly distorts Camus's text. Clamence does not name the final circle, not because he cannot but because he does not need to. In fact, the final circle of Dante's hell is the circle of traitors. The interlocutor already knows this, and perhaps the reader is presumed to know it as well (even if in practice some of us must consult the notes to compensate for our ignorance). By identifying the final circle with the concentration camps, Felman puts the Jewish victims of crime at the centre of hell; Camus's novel in fact follows Dante in putting *traitors* at the centre of hell. They are not named here, but they are entirely nameable. The traitors evoked here could be the bystanders, such as Clamence, who look on, or look away, while others are suffering, and thereby share some of the guilt of the perpetrators of crime. LaCapra astutely suggests that:

the idea that *The Fall* attests to a collapse of witnessing obscures the possibility that the text may be read more pointedly as a critique of the

position of the bystander, a position that Clamence occupies when he fails to come to the assistance of the woman who falls into the Seine. (*History and Memory after Auschwitz*, p. 76)

This suggests that the novel may not be solely or primarily about the radical failure of witnessing; rather, it is concerned with the betrayal of the responsibility to others by those who knew what was happening but took no action.

### The primal scene

When Clamence does not name the final circle of hell, there is a gap in the text that Felman fills in. In doing so, she attempts to disambiguate a work that continues to frustrate any demand for clarity. This occurs again in the designation of the episode on the bridge as the novel's 'primal scene': 'In some ways, it is the suicide scene which could be thought of as the center of the narrative, a sort of primal scene around which the narrative's concentric movement keeps precisely turning and returning' ('Camus' *The Fall*, p. 187). Later, Clamence's 'radical failure of witnessing' when the woman jumps or falls off the bridge evokes a parallel with the Holocaust: 'The Holocaust in Western history functions, thus, in much the same way as a *primal scene* functions in psychoanalysis. It is a witnessing that cannot be made present to itself, present to consciousness' ('Camus' *The Fall*, p. 194; emphasis original). Clamence's failure to witness the woman's death is thus his, the novel's and everyone's failure to witness the Holocaust, an event which both must, and cannot, be witnessed. In Felman's argument, the attempt in *La Chute* to deal with the problems of post-Holocaust narrative, historiography and testimony is established in large part through this link between the Holocaust and the scene on the bridge.

Felman's references to the psychoanalytical primal scene give pause for thought, since analysts and critics from Freud onwards have accepted that the role and status of the primal scene are problematic. As Peter Brooks has demonstrated, Freud's case study of the Wolf Man ('From the History of an Infantile Neurosis') is fascinatingly equivocal on this issue. Freud considers a number of problems regarding the primal scene. Is its effect delayed, or retrospectively constructed? Is it a genuinely witnessed event or the phantasy of the patient, or even of the analyst? In the first draft of the case study, written in 1914, Freud argues for the historical reality of the primal scene. However, in a passage added

in 1918 he reverses this view and suggests instead that the child's 'memory' of seeing its parents engaged in intercourse may be a displaced recollection of seeing copulating animals ('From the History of an Infantile Neurosis', p. 292). The primal scene may in fact be a primal phantasy, or even part of our phylogenetic inheritance. Freud concludes, provisionally, that there are no clear answers to the questions he asks (p. 295). In analysing this passage, Brooks contrasts the neat solutions discovered by Sherlock Holmes with Freud's layered, self-questioning text which offers 'a proliferation of narratives with no ultimate points of fixity' (*Reading for the Plot*, p. 278). The narrative of the primal scene raises as many questions as it answers. To some extent, Felman acknowledges this by insisting that the Holocaust as primal scene 'cannot be made present to itself, present to consciousness' ('Camus' *The Fall*', p. 194). But even to identify the primal scene as the Holocaust pins it down to a historical reality, however ungraspable and unrepresentable that reality might be. I take it for granted that while Freud considers that the primal scene may never have occurred, Felman would have no truck with the arguments of the Holocaust deniers.

Brooks describes how Freud's case study entails 'suspicion and conjecture, a structure of indeterminacy which can offer only a framework of narrative possibilities rather than a clearly specifiable plot' (p. 275). My suggestion here is that this description is equally appropriate for Camus's *La Chute*. The novel holds open the prospect of solutions to its raging ambiguities, such as the one suggested by Felman, in which there is a significant equivalence between the scene on the bridge and the Holocaust; but *La Chute* is too fluid and self-questioning to allow any final resolution of its pervading secretiveness. Regarding the scene on the bridge, for example, we might ask how much its status as primal scene actually explains. Clamence certainly describes it as his essential discovery, but it may be a screen memory or an invention. It certainly may be associated with the Holocaust: the novel refers to the deportation and murder of the Jews of Amsterdam, and to Buchenwald (p. 733). But it also alludes to other atrocities or global problems such as the murder of the innocents at the birth of Christ, the detonation of the first hydrogen bomb in 1952 or France's difficult colonial situation. Other incidents in Clamence's personal biography may also have as much or as little explanatory power as the incident on the bridge, for example when he is publicly humiliated in the incident at the traffic lights, when he is unsettled by the sound of laughter, when he believes he sees a body floating in the sea or when he is in an internment camp in



Africa. Each of these may be connected to the others, or they may have no link; one may be the central event in his life, or each may be a screen for something unnamed. Clamence himself pours scorn on the reduction of human actions to single motives: 'Ils [les hommes] croient toujours qu'on se suicide pour une raison. Mais on peut très bien se suicider pour deux raisons' (p. 731). In Clamence's view and in his narrative, everything is or may be at least double, and in any case nothing is what it seems. Any attempt to disambiguate the novel is a search for solutions that the text doggedly refuses to provide.<sup>34</sup>

### The missing mirror

Felman brilliantly demonstrates the relevance of *La Chute* to modern trauma studies. However, the price to be paid for this is a neglect of those aspects of the novel that do not readily fit in with her interpretation. To draw attention to Felman's blind spots is not to discredit her argument, but to show how the text's resistance to exhaustive interpretive dominance may help us to understand the nature of this particular work's commitment to ambiguity. There are some things that Felman misses. In terms of the interdependence of blindness and insight, an

<sup>34</sup> LaCapra differs from Felman in his account of the role of the Holocaust in *La Chute*, but his explanation serves equally to pin down the novel's elusiveness. Camus's turn to the Holocaust may be read, according to LaCapra, 'as functioning to displace or even obscure the problem of the Algerian war and his response to it' (*History and Memory after Auschwitz*, p. 89). So the Holocaust is a kind of screen in the novel, deflecting attention from a more pressing reality: the Algerian war and Camus's inability to work through his ambivalence towards the demand for Algerian independence. It is not certain, though, that reference to the Holocaust in *La Chute* actually obscures the Algerian war, as LaCapra twice suggests (pp. 73, 89). To any reader of Camus's previous works, the absence of Algeria in the novel is glaringly obvious, so that the War of Independence is ever-present even if it is not mentioned. The year of *La Chute*'s publication, 1956, also saw the release of Alain Resnais's documentary on the German concentration camps, *Nuit et brouillard*. It is perfectly clear – though never made explicit in the film – that for Resnais to depict the Holocaust was *also* to refer to the Algerian war, however problematic the link might be. I would suggest that the same is true in *La Chute*, which refers to Algeria only once (p. 754). The novel does not obscure the Algerian situation; rather, that situation is constantly evoked by its literal absence, as a source of pain and perplexity. For trenchant discussion, see Sanyal, *Memory and Complicity*, especially pp. 83–98.

especially intriguing instance when she quotes Camus's 'Prière d'insérer' to the novel. Rather than referring directly to the original text, Felman quotes from its translation in Herbert Lottmann's biography of Camus. Here is the passage as it appears in Felman's chapter:

The man who speaks in *The Fall* delivers himself of a calculated confession. Exiled in Amsterdam in a city of canals and cold light, where he plays the hermit and the prophet, this former attorney waits for willing listeners ... Thus he hastens to try himself but he does so so as to better judge others.

Where does the confession begin, where is the accusation? Is the man who speaks in this book putting himself on trial, or his era? Is he a particular case, or the man of the day? A sole truth, in any case, in this studied play of mirrors: pain, and what it promises. ('Camus' *The Fall*', p. 173, quoting Lottmann, *Albert Camus*, p. 593)

It is already surprising that Felman chooses to quote Lottmann's text rather than the original. In fact, though, Felman does not even accurately reproduce Lottmann's text. Lottmann quotes the 'Prière d'insérer' in its entirety, whereas Felman omits two sentences. The first omission is signalled by the ellipsis in the above passage, which at least shows the reader that something is missing. The omission of the second sentence is not marked in any way, so that readers unfamiliar with the original text might reasonably assume that nothing had been left out. This second omission occurs at the end of the second paragraph, where Camus draws attention to the deceptive nature of Clamence's self-portrait: 'Le miroir dans lequel il se regarde, il finit par le tendre aux autres' ('Prière d'insérer', in *Œuvres complètes III*, p. 771).

What Felman fails to see here, as if she literally could not see it, is the text's designation of itself as a mirror pointed outwards to its reader. Clamence's confession is calculated so that it tells us more about his interlocutor than it does about himself. The text warns us that it offers little that we can rely on. Instead, it gives us chaotic material which we partially ignore in order to find in it what we can recognize as our own. If the reader fails to see the mirror, it is because she is looking straight into it and seeing herself reflected back. Felman omits the text's knowing indication that what we will find in it is our own image.

Felman is entirely persuasive in showing how *La Chute* resonates with themes that can be traced to the Holocaust. And yet in her desire to make this its profound subject, she underplays its reluctance to yield its final secrets. As Sanyal argues, *La Chute* is now 'canonically read and taught as a meditation on the Shoah', and yet it 'resists any singular

historicization of its eddying figures' (*Memory and Complicity*, pp. 83, 85). The novel refuses to be quite the work Felman wanted it to be. Perhaps, though, there is no alternative to such acts of partial misreading if we are to find anything useable in a work such as this, which revels in its proficiency to confuse. *La Chute* certainly bears what look to be unmistakable signs of trauma; but the real or fantasized source of that trauma is never reliably revealed. Instead of confronting his singular failures, Clamence finds too easy comfort in an unwarranted generalization of his own situation. In a nice formulation, Caruth says that literary language 'defies, even as it claims, our understanding' (*Unclaimed Experience*, p. 5). *La Chute* exemplifies this to an extreme degree. It may be that its secrets are inscrutable; or it may be that in fact it has nothing to hide, except the unnerving confidence that it knows more about its readers than they know about themselves.



SECTION C

**Prisoners of War  
Give Philosophy Lessons**



## CHAPTER SIX

# Life Stories

## Ricœur

The chapters in the previous section discussed how war is a lingering and also problematic reference point in the works of those who lived through it. How it should be understood, represented and emotionally processed remains unresolved. Just as trauma is all the more disturbing when it goes unnamed in a life or text, the Second World War inflects post-war experience and writings when it is not explicitly present. The chapters in this section discuss three men – Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Ricœur and Louis Althusser – who in many respects were very different from one another. Levinas was Jewish, and is best known for his work in ethics; Ricœur was Christian, and is best known for his work in hermeneutics and narrative theory; and Althusser was a Marxist, and is probably best remembered today for killing his wife. Yet all three have in common that they spent most of the Second World War as prisoners of war. When they returned from captivity they were profoundly changed; and each of them would go on to rank among the key thinkers of their generation. The issue here is: where are the traces of war in their post-war thinking and writing? I begin with the case of Paul Ricœur.

### Whose life story is it anyway?

Ricœur was born in to a Protestant family in 1913. His father was killed only two years later in the First World War, so war played a defining part in his life from its earliest stages.<sup>1</sup> He proved to be a brilliant student and

<sup>1</sup> For further details of Ricœur's biography, see Reagan, *Paul Ricœur: His Life and his Work*, and Dosse, *Paul Ricœur: le sens d'une vie*.

was on the verge of an academic career when he was conscripted in 1939, despite his pacifist convictions. He was taken prisoner in 1940 and spent the rest of the war as a POW. After the war he resumed his academic career, establishing himself as one of the most prolific and influential philosophers of the twentieth century. At a time when hermeneutics was out of fashion and largely misunderstood in France, his work in the area made him one of the world's leading thinkers in the philosophy of interpretation, rivalled only (perhaps) by Heidegger and Gadamer. His astonishingly wide-ranging writings dealt with virtually every area of importance in philosophy; and he also wrote hugely important work on narrative and its role in the construction of the self. This aspect of his work is particularly relevant here, as I want to discuss how it relates to Ricœur's account of his own time as a prisoner of war.

For Ricœur, as for other important philosophers of narrative, such as Arendt, Cavarero, Kristeva and MacIntyre, telling stories about our lives is one of the most fundamental aspects of the lives about which we tell stories. The three volumes of Ricœur's monumental *Temps et récit* establish narrative as a means of organizing the chaos of experience into the order of sense. Plot, or emplotment (*la mise en intrigue*), is conceived as a basic human need and reality. Through plots, we reconfigure what Ricœur calls 'notre expérience temporelle confuse, informe et, à la limite, muette' (*Temps et récit*, I, p. 13). Experience is confused, ambiguous, maybe even wordless. Through emplotment, we give it form and meaning. For Ricœur, this entails a suspension of the distinction between truth and falsehood because plots do not exist objectively in the natural, observable world; but emplotment also brings with it a restoration of referentiality, because the stories we tell about our lives nevertheless tie them back to the real people we really are. Stories may not be 'true' in any simplistic sense; but without them, there is nothing true we can say about ourselves. To put it slightly differently, the stories we tell may create a part of the truth even if they are not *uniquely* true. This can be linked to what Ricœur calls 'narrative identity' (*l'identité narrative*). Towards the end of the nearly one thousand pages of the three volumes of *Temps et récit*, Ricœur tells us that 'l'histoire d'une vie ne cesse d'être refigurée par toutes les histoires véridiques ou fictives qu'un sujet raconte sur lui-même. Cette refiguration fait de la vie elle-même un tissu d'histoires racontées' (III, p. 356). Narrative identity is identity insofar as it is available to us. There is no fixed, eternal, immutable essence of the self either inside or outside language, only an ongoing self-construction through the unstable, changeable autobiographical, autofictional stories



we tell to ourselves and others. Narrative identity is always unfinished, in process and subject to radical dispute and revision. Judith Butler echoes Ricœur's analysis in her account of her own self-narrations:

I would have to say that I can tell the story of my origin and I can even tell it again and again, in several ways. But the story of my origin I tell is not one for which I am accountable, and it cannot establish my accountability. At least, let's hope not, since, over wine usually, I tell it in various ways and the accounts are not always consistent with one another. Indeed, it may be that to have an origin means precisely to have several different versions of the origin – I take it that this is part of what Nietzsche meant by the operation of genealogy. Any one of those is a possible narrative, but of no single one can I say with certainty that it alone is true. (*Giving an Account of Oneself*, pp. 37–38)

In relation to Ricœur, I take this to mean that the plots which inform the narratives of our lives are always largely preinterpreted, because they omit or give form to the contradictory disorder of experience; but while their form pre-inscribes how we should interpret the story, it also allows, at a deep structural level, for the possibility of different narrativizations. Narrative, here, is hermeneutic because it implies meaning but does not impose it, suggesting avenues of interpretation without foreclosing others. In other words, narrative identity is always *unfinished*, in process and subject to radical revision.<sup>2</sup>

So what does this mean for Ricœur's own self-narrative, and in particular his account of his experience of the Second World War? In 1995 Ricœur published, first in English then in the original French, an essay in intellectual autobiography which makes up the largest part of his book *Réflexion faite*. The essay includes a short account of his wartime experiences. The account begins with a one-sentence summary of the years from 1939 to 1945: 'Je fus tour à tour civil mobilisé, puis combattant vacant, enfin combattant vaincu et officier prisonnier' (p. 20). This minimal account of events constitutes a plot of sorts, though as a summary of six years of a person's life it is surprisingly rapid. The sentence is followed by a paragraph which describes Ricœur's five years as a prisoner of war. It begins with a brief overview of those five years: 'La captivité passée dans différents camps de Poméranie fut l'occasion d'une expérience humaine extraordinaire: vie quotidienne, interminablement partagée avec des milliers d'hommes,

2 For penetrating analysis of narrative hermeneutics, see Brockmeier and Meretoja, 'Understanding Narrative Hermeneutics'.

culture d'amitiés intenses, rythme régulier d'un enseignement improvisé, lecture inentravée des livres disponibles dans le camp' (p. 21). Ricœur goes on to describe how, as a prisoner of war, he studied the works of Karl Jaspers, which would later lead to his first book, jointly written with fellow prisoner Mikel Dufrenne. He also read Heidegger, began work on a translation of Husserl's *Ideen I* and ran courses which later developed into his *Philosophie de la volonté*. Ricœur refers to this period as his 'retraite forcée de cinq ans' (p. 21), echoing words we have already seen in Sartre's *Carnets de guerre*. At the end of the paragraph, he gives a single-sentence summary of his five years of captivity: 'Ces années de captivité furent ainsi fort fructueuses tant au point de vue humain qu'intellectuel' (p. 21). And that's all he says. The following paragraph refers to his return from captivity, the joyous rediscovery of his family (including a daughter born during the war whom he had never met) and his first years of post-war teaching.

Ricœur's account of his five years as a prisoner of war surprises both for its brevity and its placidity. There is no obvious trace of trauma here. In fact, in most respects, captivity appears to have been a positive experience. Ricœur emphasizes friendship, teaching and the possibility of uninterrupted study. For an aspiring scholar, the 'retraite forcée' of the camp sounds remarkably like an extended sabbatical. It laid the foundation for his future success, with his work on Jaspers, Husserl and the philosophy of will. The paragraph begins by referring to 'une expérience humaine extraordinaire' and concludes by describing the years as 'fort fructueuses'. It all sounds quite pleasant, almost enviable. We might recall Beauvoir's comment that it was 'charmant' (*La Force de l'âge*, p. 674) to escape from Paris and stay with friends in the troubled days of the Liberation.

Those of us trained in the hermeneutics of suspicion might nevertheless already be wondering what may be concealed behind Ricœur's sanguine account of captivity. Can it really have been so unambiguously enriching? What happened to the experience of cold, hunger, deprivation, brutality, fear of death, loss of freedom and separation from one's loved ones with which we are familiar from other wartime narratives? Could it really have been such a rich, humanly rewarding and intellectually stimulating period for Ricœur? What *aren't* we being told?

The fact that there is, as I have said, no *obvious* trace of trauma here does not mean that there are no signs of profound disturbance beneath the calm surface of Ricœur's self-narrative. Indeed, the context in which Ricœur recounts his years as a POW – if not his explicit self-analysis

– places the Second World War in a sequence of terrible losses. Only a few pages earlier, he had referred in parenthesis to the deaths of his parents:

Orphelin de père et de mère (ma mère était morte peu après ma naissance et mon père, professeur d'anglais au lycée de Valence, avait été tué en 1915 au début de la Première Guerre mondiale), j'avais été élevé à Rennes, avec ma sœur un peu plus âgée que moi, par mes grands-parents paternels et par une tante, sœur cadette de onze ans de mon père et restée célibataire. (*Réflexion faite*, p. 13)

It feels as if too much information is crammed into this sentence, and in particular into the parenthesis: why mention that the aunt remained unmarried, how did the mother die and what were the lasting consequences of being orphaned so early? Like Camus, whose father died in 1914 as a result of wounds suffered in the Battle of the Marne, Ricœur's life is blighted almost before it had begun by the events of the Great War. Moreover, the parenthesis in which he refers to the deaths of both his parents is suspicious for its brevity: we might wonder whether its almost casual tone serves to mask a deeper sense of personal catastrophe. The context suggests that perhaps also the tragedy of the First World War is reawakened by the events of the Second. Moreover, war becomes the intellectual grid through which Ricœur understands his own development in his early years as a student of philosophy, dealing with the competing demands of rational enquiry and Christian belief: 'j'appris à mener, d'armistice en armistice, une guerre intestine entre la foi et la raison, comme on disait alors' (*Réflexion faite*, p. 15). Forged in the period between two armistices (1918 and 1940), Ricœur's identity becomes the site of an unfinished, unresolved war.

This sense that the war and its catastrophic losses are not over, that they continue to form the developing intellectual who would become a world famous philosopher, is intensified by a further loss. Ricœur's father had died for his country in 1915; but Ricœur would subsequently lose faith in the cause for which his father sacrificed his life:

la découverte précoce – vers les onze-douze ans, de l'injustice du Traité de Versailles avait brutalement inversé les sens de la mort de mon père tué sur le front en 1915; privée de l'auréole réparatrice de la juste guerre et de la victoire sans tache, cette mort s'avérait mort pour rien. (*Réflexion faite*, pp. 18–19)<sup>3</sup>

3 See also Ricœur's comments in an interview with Charles Reagan: 'it was not [my father's] loss as such which was the shock, but the meaning which it was given

In this account, the father dies – as it were – for a second time: the first death is his literal demise; the second is the perhaps even more traumatic collapse of the moral framework which gave sense to his actual loss. Ricœur becomes a pacifist, and his father dies again. Moreover, further personal disasters are not far off, as Ricœur shows with what is, once again, suspect understatement: ‘Je n’oublie pas non plus que plusieurs deuils – la mort de mes grands-parents qui m’avaient élevé et, plus cruelle encore, celle de ma sœur Alice, emporté par la tuberculose – avaient déposé au préalable la marque du *momento mori* sur la réussite sociale et le bonheur familial’ (*Réflexion faite*, pp. 19–20). A few lines later, Ricœur describes how ‘La guerre [le] surprit’ (p. 20). In the context, though, the war hardly comes as a surprise, partly because we as readers know full well it is on the horizon, and partly because it appears in this account as merely another in a series of personal catastrophes presented with casual, perhaps self-protective rapidity.

So one aspect of Ricœur’s self-narration is the hint that events in his personal biography conceal an element of trauma even if it remains unexplored or underexplored. But there is another dimension to what is not said here. Ricœur’s short account of his five years as a prisoner of war was published, as I have said, in English and French in 1995. A couple of years earlier, a philosophy teacher named Robert Lévy had discovered three articles which were attributed to Ricœur but not included in his official bibliography. They had been published in 1941 in a collaborationist journal entitled *L’Unité française*. There is no suggestion that in these articles Ricœur said anything that could reasonably be construed as pro-fascist or anti-Semitic. Nevertheless, here was evidence that, during the first year or so of his captivity, Ricœur had lectured on behalf of the ‘Cercle Pétain’, which supported Marshal Pétain’s policy of collaboration with the Nazi occupiers. Copies of the articles attributed to Ricœur were sent to him; and in 1994, he submitted a paper to the historian Henry Rousso, in Rousso’s role as president of the Institut d’Histoire du Temps Présent, responding to the articles and explaining his position.<sup>4</sup> Ricœur insisted that he knew nothing about the publication of the articles in *L’Unité française* before he was made aware of them in the 1990s. Of the three articles, one was taken out of

by my family. That is, that he had died for a just cause and, even though dead, he was a member of the victorious army. It was this conviction that was shattered all at once when I was ten or twelve years old’ (Reagan, *Paul Ricœur*, p. 126).

4 See Ricœur, ‘Note sur certaines “Paroles de prisonniers”’.

context from a journal originally published in 1936; in relation to the other two, Ricœur could not say exactly what was genuinely his own work. Of one, he said that he was ‘incapable d’y démêler [sa] propre contribution’. And of the other, although he did not deny some part in it, he insisted categorically that it was published without his knowledge or consent: ‘je déclare ne pouvoir assurer que ce texte n’a été ni coupé, ni surchargé, ni en aucune façon manipulé: de toutes façons, je ne l’ai pas *publié*’ (emphasis original).

The stress on *publié* is significant here. Many years after the war, Ricœur could not be sure exactly what he had or had not written; but he was adamant that he had not authorized publication of the material in question. It is as if authorization to publish is as important to authorship as the actual drafting. One only becomes an author, in the sense of a subject responsible for the text which appear under one’s name, at the point where one assents to publication. Ricœur did not deny having been a member of the Cercle Pétain for a period or having lectured in support of its beliefs; but he did not accept responsibility as author of two of the texts in question. He did not recognize what was and was not from his own hand, and he stated that he had neither known nor approved of their publication. In fact, it seems that the articles attributed to Ricœur and other prisoners were published from notes brought back from captivity by a fellow POW who was himself pro-collaborationist; it remains unclear to what extent the articles contained reliable quotations from the attributed authors and to what extent they were deliberately or inadvertently altered. Even so, admitting to his temporary allegiance to Pétainist policies, Ricœur went on to explain why someone from his background, belonging to the socialist, antimilitarist, pacifist left could for a period have supported Pétain. In part, he felt guilty for the possibility that his own beliefs had to some extent contributed to the disastrous French defeat of 1940. He conceded the same point in an interview with Charles Reagan: ‘When I was a prisoner of war in 1940, I felt guilty for this defeat, thinking that my pacifism during the preceding years was, in large part, responsible for the failure of France to sufficiently rearm itself in the face of German rearmament’ (Reagan, *Paul Ricœur*, p. 127). This sense of guilt underlies his Pétainist period, for which he expressed shame and regret.

It is important to be clear: in my view, Ricœur’s account of this episode is dignified and persuasive. There certainly remain some unresolved questions. His criticism of the failed democracy of the Third Republic began before the Second World War, so it could be – and has been

– suggested that he was pre-inclined to support the Pétainist National Revolution before the defeat of 1940; and it is not certain quite when his allegiance to the Cercle Pétain began and ended. But Ricœur's lack of precision on these matters, more than half a century later, is not particularly surprising. I have long admired Ricœur both as a man and as a thinker, and I do not respect him any less for knowing that, for a period, he held views that he would later come to regret.<sup>5</sup>

And yet, it still seems odd that, a year after giving an account of his Pétainist period to Henry Rousso, Ricœur completely omitted any reference to it in a document intended for more public dissemination. This context encourages the sense that Ricœur's account of his experience as a prisoner of war is only one possible configuration of events. In *Réflexion faite*, Ricœur makes his time as a POW sound like a surprisingly positive period in his life. We might suspect that his experiences could have been narrated very differently. Moreover, and this is the real intellectual crux of the current discussion, the view of the text as subject to quite different interpretations and narrativizations from the one foregrounded by its author-narrator is precisely in line with the hermeneutic theory which Ricœur himself would develop throughout his mature work. In his discussions of literary interpretation, Ricœur adamantly, consistently and persuasively argues that texts should not be understood as the partially realized instantiation of authorial intentions or desires. In the important article, 'Le Modèle du texte: l'action sensée considérée comme un texte' (in *Du texte à l'action*, pp. 183–211), for example, he argues that:

la carrière du texte s'échappe à l'horizon fini vécu par son auteur. Ce que dit le texte importe davantage que ce que l'auteur a voulu dire; désormais toute exégèse déploie ses procédures au sein de la circonscription de signification qui a rompu ses amarres avec la psychologie de son auteur. (p. 187)

5 More surprising (or disappointing), perhaps, is the reticence of biographers in discussing the episode. Reagan touches upon Pétainist sympathies among the POWs, but does not discuss the extent of Ricœur's involvement (see *Paul Ricœur*, p. 10). Dosse discusses the period at greater length, but explains Ricœur's involvement only in general terms. Ricœur himself did not seek to deny the episode, even if he was reticent and cautious in reference to it. See for example *La Critique et la conviction*: 'Je dois à la vérité de dire que, jusqu'en 1941, j'avais été séduit, avec d'autres – la propagande était massive –, par certains aspects du pétainisme. [...] Mais je regrette mon erreur de jugement, pendant la première année' (pp. 31–32).

And Ricœur concludes that ‘seule l’interprétation est le “remède” à la faiblesse du discours que son auteur ne peut plus “sauver”’ (p. 188).

In Ricœur’s account, discourse needs interpretation; and interpretation cannot be bounded by what authors wanted, meant or thought they meant. And this must be as true of autobiographical works as it is of overtly fictional ones. I may have a strong investment in believing that the story of my life, as I tell it, is the truest possible version but, hermeneutically speaking, I have no justification for any such belief. Others may understand me better than I understand myself; and the stories others tell about me may be more true, or at least more compelling, more persuasive, than the ones I tell about myself. Ricœur concedes this or, to be more precise, he *draws attention* to it, he *insists* on it, in the second paragraph of the main text of *Réflexion faite*: ‘j’admets bien volontiers que la reconstruction que j’entreprends de mon développement intellectuel n’a pas plus d’autorité que telle autre effectuée par un biographe autre que moi-même’ (p. 12). This could not be clearer: an author does not know more about himself or his text than a reader; an autobiographer’s configuration of his life story should not be regarded as truer than that of a biographer. And as Ricœur insists elsewhere, a life story is never fixed. It can be recounted in different, sometimes contradictory ways: ‘de même qu’il est possible de composer plusieurs intrigues au sujet des mêmes incidents (lesquels, de même coup, ne méritent plus d’être appelés les mêmes événements), de même il est toujours possible de tramer sur sa propre vie des intrigues différentes, voire opposées’ (*Temps et récit, III*, p. 358). We can never assume that the narration of a life is definitive and finished.

In Ricœur’s account of his wartime experiences, there is a discomfiting tension between the acknowledgement that other ways of configuring the narrative are possible, and a palpable desire to direct the interpretation of the autobiographical subject’s life story. In general terms, I would hazard to say that texts contain within themselves instructions about how they *wish* to be read. I stress how they *wish* to be read, not how they *must* be read. Such instructions appear, for example, both explicitly in the text’s self-interpretation and through effects of juxtaposition. In the current case, Ricœur’s narrative of the war years stresses that they were ‘fruitful’ (*fructueuses*). The surrounding context implies his moral credentials in this period. The preceding paragraphs refer to the death of his father in the First World War, the later intensification of this loss by his realization of the injustice of the Versailles Treaty and his subsequent commitment as a Christian pacifist socialist.

The following paragraph describes his joyous rediscovery of his family in 1945, and his employment at the Collège Cévenol, which, we are reminded, had sheltered numerous Jewish children during the war. The understanding urged upon us by these juxtapositions is that Ricœur was a man of clear moral principles and integrity, and that his work at an institution which saved Jewish lives is of a piece with such integrity.

In this instance, Ricœur wants to underline positive aspects of the war years, the continuity of his moral principles despite changing political positions and the survival through the war of human, humane values. However, Ricœur's own hermeneutic positions, as echoed at the beginning of *Réflexion faite*, allow equal priority to be given to different readings. In the context of what has now become public about his involvement in the Cercle Pétain, an alternative version of events is possible, in which the foregrounded account is partial and evasive, emphasizing the continuity of Ricœur's principles and values rather than the suffering and compromised realities of the war. Ricœur argues, decisively in my view, that we do not own our life stories, that the way we emplot our life narratives entails a creation of meaning and order which is always subject to revision and reconfiguration. The story of our lives is important and real, but also unfinished and liable to radical reinterpretation and retelling. Yet, entirely understandably, while arguing this, Ricœur does not want to relinquish interpretive control of his own life narrative. He wants his war years, and those preceding and following them, to be a story of positive achievement, the survival of what is good in the human spirit and reconciliation with a traumatic past.

### Towards an ethics of reconciliation

What does this have to do with Ricœur's thought? As in subsequent chapters which discuss Althusser and Levinas, there is no question here of asserting a direct, causal link between what Ricœur experienced in the 1930s and 1940s and what he thought from the 1950s onwards. I nevertheless want to suggest that the issues which are at stake in Ricœur's brief narrative of his time as a POW reverberate through his later thought and writing. The great themes of Ricœur's thought all have direct relevance to the questions raised by his account of the war years, even if they do not broach them directly: history, time, truth, narrative, the configuration of the self, forgetfulness, amnesty and forgiveness. The war helps delimit an agenda for Ricœur's post-war thought, and



that of post-war French philosophy more broadly. And the urgency of interpreting the meaning of conflict becomes specifically for Ricœur the need to understand the conflict of interpretations. *Le Conflit des interprétations* is the title of Ricœur's 1969 collection of hermeneutic essays. French poststructuralism was vitiated by a surprising misunderstanding of hermeneutics, which it tended to characterize naively and simplistically as the belief in a single and recoverable sense. If the poststructuralists had read Ricœur with even the minimum care, they would have known that this is a complete falsification of the hermeneutic tradition. Conflict, or the undecidability of competing interpretations, is at the heart of hermeneutics, and particularly of Ricœur's version of it. His great work of 1965, *De l'interprétation* – a work which has a compelling claim to be the most important contribution to hermeneutics written in French in the twentieth century – turns this conflict into war: Ricœur refers to 'la guerre des herméneutiques' (p. 50). War, I want to suggest, has permeated the very fabric of his thought. It is what Ricœur *experiences*, as a Christian, socialist, pacifist subject who spent five years as a prisoner of war; and it is also what defines, at the most fundamental level, what it means to be a post-war philosopher, and specifically a philosopher of hermeneutics. Thinking is conflict; hermeneutics is war.

But there is another twist here. Ricœur's *De l'interprétation* is well known for its brilliant, instructive distinction between two competing approaches to interpretation. On the one hand, we have interpretation as the restoration of sense. Its purpose is to discover what the author and the text properly mean, what their message to us might be. On the other hand, we have the 'hermeneutics of suspicion', most importantly represented by Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, which looks for unquestioned, occluded and denied meanings behind the intended messages conveyed by authors and texts. This is hermeneutics at war with itself. So what is our job as readers and interpreters: to find out what the text really means, or to uncover what it didn't know it meant? The key point for Ricœur is not to dwell on this conflict, but to overcome it. In his account, the *apparent* conflict within hermeneutics is resolved when one gets rid of the notion of a single, stable consciousness which regulates the meaning of a work. Once that is jettisoned, we can find 'l'unité profonde' (*De l'interprétation*, p. 61) of the two superficially opposed hermeneutics. Both are engaged in a search for meaning, which is understood now as inherently open and ambiguous. At the risk of appearing reductive, we might observe that this appeal to *unity* recalls the underlying, doomed and ultimately disastrous aspiration of Pétain's

collaborationist politics after the defeat of 1940: the journal in which the wartime articles attributed to Ricœur were published was, after all, entitled *L'Unité française*.

This attempt to bring together conflicting positions is absolutely fundamental to Ricœur's manner of thought and writing. The number and length of the books he published borders on being incomprehensible, without even considering the range of authors and topics he discusses. It is as if he wanted to omit no one and nothing, to bring everything together not so much in a grand synthesis as in a peaceful dialogue. This can be briefly illustrated with reference to the article 'Le Modèle du texte', which has already been quoted. Just in terms of its breadth of reference, it is impressive. Among others, Ricœur refers to great European thinkers (Kant, Hegel), representatives of the German hermeneutic tradition (Schleiermacher, Dilthey), Anglo-American speech act theorists (Austin, Searle), specialists in linguistics (Saussure, Hjelmslev, Benveniste, Chomsky) and structuralists (Lévi-Strauss). At no point does he give a sense that there might be irreconcilable differences between these thinkers and positions. Everyone can be brought together in a generous, all-encompassing discourse.

The references to E.D. Hirsch are particularly striking in this endeavour to find agreement. In his work on literary theory, Hirsch is associated more than anyone with the re-establishment of authorial intention as a regulative principle for literary interpretation. Against the prevailing view represented (very differently) by Wimsatt and Beardsley for the American New Critics and by Barthes for French structuralists and poststructuralists, Hirsch insists that the author is 'the only compelling normative principle that could lend validity to an interpretation' (*Validity*, p. 5). As we have seen, this is entirely contrary to Ricœur's view. In the latter's hermeneutics, the text is interesting precisely because it escapes the author's horizon. Yet when Ricœur refers to Hirsch in 'Le Modèle du texte', one might get the impression that they are in complete agreement on fundamental questions. Ricœur endorses Hirsch's insistence that 'il n'existe pas de règle pour faire de bonnes conjectures. Mais il y a des méthodes pour valider les conjectures' (*Du texte à l'action*, p. 200, quoting Hirsch, *Validity*, p. 25). And later, referring to the procedures of validation by which we might test our interpretive guesses, he writes: '*je tiens comme Hirsch* que [les procédures de validation] se rapprochent plus d'une logique de la probabilité que d'une logique de la vérification empirique' (*Du texte à l'action*, p. 205; emphasis added). 'Je tiens comme Hirsch': this is striking *not* because Ricœur *doesn't* agree with Hirsch

on this particular issue, but because he has endeavoured to find an issue on which he does agree with him in the face of so much underlying, fundamental disagreement. Rhetorically at least, Ricœur has succeeded in drawing even Hirsch into the consensual fold of his all-encompassing discourse.

At the level of argument, this quest for the compatibility of incompatibles is mirrored throughout 'Le Modèle du texte'. The article concludes with a discussion of the relationship between structuralism and hermeneutics. The two are typically seen as fundamentally different in approach and aim: the first looks for general underlying structures, the second searches for particular meanings. Ricœur chooses Claude Lévi-Strauss's analysis of myth to analyse the structuralist procedure. Lévi-Strauss describes *mythèmes*, which are the minimal units which can be combined to produce myths, in the same way that phonemes can be combined to produce words and sentences. This process is supposed to be anything but interpretive. Conceding this point, Ricœur nevertheless argues that structuralist analysis is a starting point not a conclusion: 'En fait, nul ne s'en tient à une conception des mythes et des récits aussi formelle qu'une algèbre d'unités constitutives' (*Du texte à l'action*, p. 212). Even for the arch structuralist Lévi-Strauss, mythemes bear meaning and reference; they are vehicles for reflections on birth and death, blindness and lucidity, sexuality and truth. Using the hermeneutic terms *explanation* and *understanding*, Ricœur now demonstrates that structural analysis turns out to be in the service of hermeneutic understanding. It is, he suggests, 'un stade – un stade nécessaire – entre une interprétation naïve et une interprétation érudite, entre une interprétation de surface et une interprétation en profondeur' (*Du texte à l'action*, p. 213). This is why hermeneutics is better described as a benign arc than as a vicious circle: structural analysis is a vital tool which furthers the aims of critical depth-interpretation. Understanding requires explanation; hermeneutics requires structural analysis. Any opposition between them is merely apparent, as they belong to the same intellectual endeavour to promote the human search for meaning. And the whole discussion is conducted with such charm, generosity and intellectual comprehensiveness that no one need feel offended or excluded. Everyone and everything gets to be part of the great debate.

Ricœur's aim is to find the common ground between apparently conflicting positions. It turns out that the conflict of interpretations is not really a conflict. Rather, it bears witness to a generous, productive multiplicity. And I want to suggest here that this search for common

ground is absolutely fundamental to Ricœur's thought and writing, because he insists on the possibility of dialogue and reconciliation between apparently competing approaches. The consistent impetus of Ricœur's astonishingly voluminous, wide-ranging work – I would say its defining energy – is to refuse the choice between thinkers and movements which seem incompatible: at an individual level between, for example, Gadamer and Habermas; at a more general level between continental philosophy and analytic philosophy; phenomenology and hermeneutics; phenomenology and structuralism; structuralism and hermeneutics; narratology and hermeneutics; the hermeneutics of faith and the hermeneutics of suspicion. In all these cases, it turns out that differences, conflicts, are apparent rather than real. They can be overcome once we learn how to look at them properly. Conflict can be resolved once we understand that it is a mode of unacknowledged agreement.

Although Ricœur is perhaps best known as the theorist of the *conflict* of interpretations and the *war* of hermeneutics, his thought is driven by the search for the underlying agreement between manifestly warring positions. As he repeatedly, crucially, insists, the circle of hermeneutics is not vicious; it is better described as an arc or a spiral. By traversing it, we end up somewhere different from and better than where we started. Once they are understood from this generous, overarching philosophical perspective, war isn't war, conflict isn't conflict. The violence of interpretation isn't so violent after all; differences can be reconciled. Ricœur's endeavour of thought is to create complex contexts in which we do not have to choose between positions which might seem to be in conflict. But perhaps this covers over stark choices too readily. In relation to Ricœur's account of his wartime years, it really does matter – more than Ricœur wanted to concede – whether what is most important is that it affirms the warm, life-enhancing human experience of captivity or evades the compromises, errors and misjudgements that were also part of it. Sometimes perhaps conflicts really are conflicts; incompatibles really are incompatible. Sometimes perhaps you do have to choose.

Hermeneutics entails the realization that texts and people do not say or know exactly what they mean or everything that they mean. More compellingly than anyone else, Ricœur argued that the consequence of this is that authors cannot close down the meaning of their works and that lives can always be narrated differently. His brief references to his own experiences during the war exemplify these points dramatically. Ricœur certainly does not exhaust and cannot control the sense of his own self-narrative, however much – contrary to his own theoretical positions

– he might have found it desirable to do so. Indeed, I have suggested that the tantalizing, unsatisfactory nature of his short account may actually raise suspicion, drawing the alert reader’s attention to the possibility that something remains unsaid. Because of the loss of his father in the First World War, a loss compounded and made more disturbing by Ricœur’s later sense that his father had died for a misguided cause, war was part of Ricœur’s thinking well before the Second World War, as he dealt with the conflict between reason and faith in philosophy, and between pacifism and rising fascism in politics. After the Second World War, I have suggested, this reference to conflict – and, crucially, the conviction in the possibility of its resolution – remained a vital, driving component in his mature work. War haunts Ricœur’s life, his texts and his thought even when it is not mentioned. In the next chapter, I shall suggest that the same can be said of two other great philosophers of the post-war period who also spent the war as POWs: Louis Althusser and Emmanuel Levinas. Their thought is certainly not the same as Ricœur’s, and their experiences were not the same; but all three of them share an ongoing, unredeemable investment in the past that will not pass.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Afterlives

## Althusser and Levinas

I begin this chapter with two apparently unrelated facts. In 1961 the naturalized French philosopher of Lithuanian descent Emmanuel Levinas published *Totalité et infini*, a book which one might plausibly claim to be the single most important work of ethics to appear in France in the twentieth century. On 16 November 1980 Louis Althusser, the leading Marxist philosopher of his generation, strangled his wife Hélène. I say ‘strangled’ rather than ‘murdered’ because Althusser was never charged or tried for any crime relating to the incident. Instead, he was judged to be not legally responsible for his acts on the grounds of mental health. Most of the remaining decade of his life was spent in psychiatric institutions.

What is the link between Levinas’s book and Althusser’s act? There certainly does not appear to be much in common between a work of philosophical ethics and a fatal assault. Nevertheless, Levinas and Althusser are connected by at least one important biographical factor: both of them spent more or less all of the Second World War in German prisoner of war camps. Levinas had the good fortune to be mobilized at the beginning of the war, then taken prisoner early in the hostilities in 1940, and held in various POW camps until 1945. To call this ‘good fortune’ may appear to be in poor taste, to say the very least. But Levinas was a Jew of Eastern European origin, and if he hadn’t been a member of the French army at the time of his capture, instead of spending the war in a military prisoner of war camp, he would almost certainly have been arrested on racial grounds, deported and murdered in a death camp, like many of his family. So one might say that being a prisoner of war saved his life.

Like Levinas, Althusser was mobilized in 1939, taken captive in

June 1940 and spent most of the next five years in POW camps, mainly Stalag XA. It is not a matter here of using their five years of captivity to explain what the two great philosophers subsequently said, wrote, did or thought. But those years did either cause, or consolidate or crystallize fundamental changes in who they were. Before the war, Levinas was acquiring a reputation as a leading exponent of phenomenology in the wake of Husserl and Heidegger; after the war he made a decisive turn to ethics which would entail a partial, but never total, renunciation of his pre-war loyalties, especially to Heidegger. Before the war Althusser was a member of the Catholic Jeunesse Etudiante Chrétienne movement; by the time of his release from captivity, a process had begun which would lead him to become a Marxist and member of the French Communist Party. My suggestion here is that in the post-war writings of both these great thinkers, the war is something which is partially, discreetly narrated, and that it also informs and underpins their work even and especially when it is not mentioned. One of the central themes of the current book is that not mentioning the war is one means of ensuring that the war is never quite forgotten.

### Levinas at war

Levinas says little about the experience of being a prisoner of war between 1940 and 1945. Even the posthumous publication of his *Carnets de captivité* and some other texts about the experiences of captivity in 2009 tell us little about what it was really like for him. One short text which refers to his time as a POW has garnered significant attention. In 'Nom d'un chien ou le droit naturel', first published in 1975, Levinas discusses some biblical references to dogs. This leads to the recollection of his time as a POW working in a detail of 70 fellow Jewish prisoners. The French uniform they were wearing when they were captured saved them from the worst excesses of Nazi persecution: their status as serving soldiers afforded them some protection. Even so, for German onlookers, they were barely human: 'Nous n'étions qu'une quasi-humanité, une bande de singes' (*Difficile liberté*, p. 215). But then, for a few weeks a stray dog, nicknamed Bobby, accompanied them as they set off for work and returned in the evening, 'sautillant et aboyant gaiement' (p. 216). The consolation of Bobby's presence was that the dog recognized and reaffirmed the prisoners' humanity: 'Pour lui – c'était incontestable – nous fûmes des hommes' (p. 216).

Levinas's account of this encounter with Bobby has provoked a great deal of discussion about the relation between the human and the animal in his thinking. The underlying question here is whether animals may have the status of other or whether this position of privilege and vulnerability is reserved only for humans; but however one answers this question, we learn very little from the anecdote about the experience of imprisonment beyond the unsurprising implication that it was pretty awful. And we learn nothing about the impact of the war on Levinas's own life and thought. In his short self-presentation in the article 'Signature' he refers only fleetingly to his 'longue captivité en Allemagne' (*Difficile liberté*, p. 405). Nevertheless, in a much-quoted, single-sentence paragraph from this text, Levinas suggests that the war is the central event in his biography: 'Elle [i.e. his biography] est dominée par le pressentiment et le souvenir de l'horreur nazie' (*Difficile liberté*, p. 406). This says everything and nothing. It tells us that Nazism dominated his life; but Levinas says no more than that. The laconic, elliptical style demands of us that we use his encounter with Nazism as an important lens for interpreting everything that came before and after, but it gives us no real guidance as to what this might really mean. A similar provocation to interpret is announced at the beginning of Levinas's great work of 1974, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*. The book is dedicated to the memory of victims of Nazism and to other victims of hatred. Then, a few lines of text in Hebrew, and therefore in a language which only a very small proportion of the text's readers will be able to understand, give the names of some of Levinas's family members who were murdered during the war. So far as I can see, the rest of the book says nothing about the specific experience of the Second World War; yet this opening dedication invites us, almost insistently, to consider Levinas's ethics as a response to the war.

As observed in relation to other authors in previous chapters, Levinas's writing and thought suggest that the war is everywhere and nowhere. It is barely mentioned as an explicit, specific theme, while also being designated as crucial to the person and the thinker that Levinas would go on to be, and to the texts that he would produce. Sam Girgus underlines the importance of the war for Levinas: 'The general trauma that the world suffered during the war and the Holocaust undoubtedly was internalized in Levinas's own thought and feelings and became a permanent part of his being, influencing all aspects of his experience' (*Levinas and the Cinema of Redemption*, p. 1). In more detail, Robert Eaglestone has argued that 'The Holocaust saturates Levinas's work'



(*The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, p. 266), even though he rarely refers to it directly: it is present implicitly in his themes (sharing soup and bread as ethical acts as opposed to hatred and persecution), his aims (to establish a space of ethical possibility despite the knowledge of human cruelty), and in his philosophical practice, which explores ambivalence and doubleness in language which is ambivalent and double (for full discussion see Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, pp. 249–78). The Holocaust is rarely directly discussed by Levinas, but Eaglestone shows it to be at the centre of his thinking.

If Levinas is taciturn when it comes to discussing his own experiences of the Second World War, he has more to say about war in general, particularly in *Totalité et infini*. From the second paragraph of Levinas's major work, the Preface inaugurates a strange and opaque reflection on war. This begins with a question which appears on the surface to be rhetorical, but may not be: 'La lucidité – ouverture de l'esprit sur le vrai – ne consiste-t-elle pas à entrevoir la possibilité permanente de la guerre?' (p. 5). This echoes the Hobbesian characterization of human existence as the war of all against all, or the Sartrean designation of human reality (discussed in Chapter 3) as essentially grounded in conflict. But the interrogative form is more teasing than affirmative: it cannot be easy for the reader to know at this stage whether we are expected to reply yes or no to Levinas's question. The following sentence is a little clearer, but only a little: 'L'état de guerre suspend la morale; il dépouille les institutions et les obligations éternelles de leur éternité et dès lors, annule, dans le provisoire, les inconditionnels impératifs' (p. 5). It looks here as if what Levinas means by *la morale* is a form of Kantian ethics which insists on unconditional, unchanging categorical laws of ethical conduct. War makes a joke out of ethics, says Levinas: 'Elle la rend dérisoire' (p. 5). I don't want to simplify this extraordinarily bewildering opening to what will go on to be an extraordinarily difficult book.<sup>1</sup> Levinas's opening gambit seems to be to propose that war poses a challenge to universalist ethics, that is, the belief in absolute rights and wrongs. But the difficulty of defining quite what it is that Levinas is saying raises a fundamental problem of voice: in this opening passage it is, and it will continue to be, hazardous and perhaps impossible to distinguish assertion from irony. No author has yet emerged to take

1 I might add as an aside that some years ago I wrote what purported to be an Introduction to Levinas. Looking back at his work now, I don't know how I dared to write such a book, since I find myself utterly at sea here.

responsibility for what is being said; indeed, it is not yet clear quite what has been said and what has been set up as a position to be undermined later. The tension here is encapsulated in the suggestion that unconditional imperatives might be provisionally suspended by war. Well, no they can't. If they are unconditional, they cannot be suspended; if they can be suspended, they are not unconditional. Either Kant's categorical imperative applies to all situations, including war, or it is not categorical. Either it is always wrong to kill, or it is sometimes wrong to kill, but it cannot be sometimes always wrong to kill or always sometimes wrong to kill. I see no middle way here. Even so, Levinas's strange textual universe takes us to a place where impossible positions nevertheless begin to appear possible.

To disentangle all the threads of this unsettling reflection – even if it were theoretically possible – would take more time and brilliance than is available to me. All I can say for the time being is that war is a key reference point which seems to throw established positions and meanings into turmoil, including fixed ethical points and even the philosophical subject's ability to formulate any proposition with confidence and clarity. 'War' is a signifier which destabilizes everything else, semantically and ethically. As soon as it appears, the authorial subject is scattered, no longer knowing how to formulate its contradictory, self-contesting insights. Later in *Totalité et infini*, war appears again as something which is of course empirically terrible, but also philosophically welcome because it shatters the imperialism of the Same: 'Seuls les êtres capables de guerre peuvent s'élever à la paix. La guerre comme la paix suppose des êtres structurés autrement que comme parties d'une totalité' (p. 245). In war, my adversary transcends me, makes me realize that the world is not mine alone, that I share it with beings which experience it differently, which do not comply with my vision and understanding. We do not all bear witness to the same meaning in a single, coherent totality. War, then, is the discovery of otherness, and in Levinas's ethics that must be a positive achievement. So without war there is no peace, no ethics and no justice. We should perhaps almost be grateful for war because it makes us understand that otherness exists and therefore that justice might be possible.

The ambiguity of violence in all this lies in the fact that it both acknowledges and seeks to annihilate the transcendence of my enemy. Violence is the very form of the Levinasian paradox of the 'relation sans relation' (*Totalité et infini*, p. 79): I am bound to you in my desire to annihilate you. As Levinas puts it, 'La violence ne porte que sur un être

à la fois saisissable et échappant à toute prise' (*Totalité et infini*, p. 246). This directly picks up Levinas's reflection on murder. Murder is, Levinas knows, an everyday occurrence; he calls it 'Cet incident le plus banal de l'histoire humaine' (*Totalité et infini*, p. 217). And yet this historical banality is also an ethical impossibility. When I kill, what is it that I aim to destroy? Levinas's answer is that what I want to destroy is the other's transcendence, which is revealed to me through what he calls *le visage*, the face. 'Autrui est le seul être que je peux vouloir tuer', insists Levinas (*Totalité et infini*, p. 216). What I want to kill is the other or, to be more exact, the otherness of the other. But that is precisely what I cannot kill. Murder is banal but also, in Levinas's argument, impossible: I can kill you, but I cannot kill that within you which makes me want to kill you, that is, your transcendence, your otherness. Murder happens all the time, but it never achieves its true goal, which is to eliminate everything from the world which escapes me.

What emerges from this dizzying reflection on war, violence and murder is a tension between the knowledge that killing takes place and the disavowal of that knowledge. I can kill, but I cannot kill that which I want to kill; I can kill the other, but I cannot kill her otherness. Murder happens, and it always fails. Levinas dedicates *Autrement qu'être* to the victims of anti-Semitism, and then constructs an ethics according to which murder never achieves its aims, philosophically if not empirically. His thought is torn between the terrible knowledge that the Holocaust happened and an ethical aspiration to designate murder, and pre-eminently mass murder, as an inevitable failure. The Other survives, even if countless others do not. When the war occurs as a signifier in these oblique texts, it signals a semantic and ethical disturbance. Values and meanings are horribly damaged, so that even the text's propositional capacity appears to be impaired. Readers might sometimes wonder why Levinas doesn't state more clearly what he thinks; I would suggest in response that his texts do not know what it is they want to say.

### Post-war Althusser

The possibility and impossibility of murder brings us back to Althusser. I will get to his narrative of the death of his wife in a moment, but I want to talk first about Althusser's experience of the war. I will risk the claim that he didn't speak about the war, and that he never stopped speaking about it. The basis of this claim is the disparity between what

he published in his lifetime and works which appeared after his death. His *Journal de captivité*, published in 1992, runs to over 350 pages. In the same year, two autobiographical texts were also published: *Les Faits*, written in 1976, and *L'Avenir dure longtemps*, written in 1985. Both these works contain narratives of Althusser's experiences as a prisoner of war. Both accounts are characterized by a rapid, almost light-hearted tone. The later version refers to the terrible conditions in which the prisoners were kept, particularly during the first year, with insufficient food and forced labour in temperatures of -40 degrees (*L'Avenir*, p. 118). Yet the prevailing sense of the experience appears to be positive and untraumatic. This is Althusser's summary of the experience:

Mais de fait, je dois reconnaître que je me suis plutôt très bien installé dans la captivité (un véritable confort, car une véritable sécurité sous la garde des sentinelles allemandes et des barbelés): sans nul souci de mes parents, et j'avoue que j'ai même trouvé dans cette vie fraternelle, parmi de vrais hommes, de quoi la supporter comme une vie facile, heureuse car bien protégée. [...] [J]e m'y sentais en sécurité, protégé de tout danger par la captivité même. (*L'Avenir*, pp. 125–26)

Despite the hunger, cold and forced labour, Althusser describes life in the camp as 'fraternelle', 'facile' and 'heureuse'. This echoes Ricœur's rapid narrative of his five years as a prisoner of war, discussed in the previous chapter, which he characterizes as his 'retraite forcée de cinq années' (*Réflexion faite*, p. 21). All in all, it doesn't sound too bad, and certainly not traumatic.

In Althusser's accounts of his captivity, one episode stands out as being of particular importance. This concerns his escape, or rather his non-escape, from the POW camp. He realizes that the problem with escaping is that, as soon as a prisoner is discovered to be missing, the local army and police immediately dedicate all their forces to recapturing him. The solution is simply to hide in the camp for an initial period, fed and protected by comrades; then, after three or four weeks, you can simply walk out of the camp, secure in the knowledge that the intense search for you will have died down. Having dreamt up this idea, Althusser concludes that he no longer had the need to act on it: 'En somme j'avais trouvé le moyen de m'évader du camp *sans en sortir!* Et donc de rester en captivité pour y échapper!' (*L'Avenir*, p. 126; emphasis original). Althusser is aware of the broader resonance of this. It is linked to his later critical attitude towards the Communist Party, which allowed him to remain within it despite his dissident views (*L'Avenir*, p. 127). He acknowledges

that captivity suits him; he finds a way of escaping from the camp while remaining within it, of distancing himself from the Communist Party without leaving it. This in turn relates to his concept of ideology as something which inevitably contains us even as we analyse and criticize its workings. As Warren Montag puts it in a recent book, for Althusser ideology is ‘a necessary and inescapable by-product that accompanies and indeed envelops the activities required for the continued existence of a society’ (*Althusser and his Contemporaries*, p. 110). The use of the word *inescapable* is significant. Ideology holds us just as surely as a prison camp. Like it or not, we stay inside; and actually we probably prefer it that way. And this desire for and comfort in imprisonment can also be linked to Althusser’s years of incarceration, at the end of his life, in mental institutions. In the wake of Héléne’s death he can be seen as rediscovering, recreating the reassurance, the suspension of responsibility, found earlier in the experience of captivity in Stalag XA.

This brings us to the death of Héléne. I said earlier that Althusser wrote two extended autobiographical works, *Les Faits* in 1976 and *L’Avenir dure longtemps* in 1985, both published posthumously in the same volume in 1992. It is striking that the volume is given the title *L’Avenir dure longtemps* and, in a reversal of chronological order, that the later text appears first, and as the principal part of the book. It is as if the later account supersedes, replaces and almost makes redundant the earlier version. The explanation for this would appear to be that *Les Faits* was written before the strangling of Héléne, whereas *L’Avenir dure longtemps* was written after it. It describes Héléne’s death and meditates at length upon it. Given that the great period of Althusserian Marxism has now passed, if you know anything about him it is probably that he killed his wife rather than having any familiarity with his notions of interpellation, Ideological State Apparatuses or symptomatic reading. So *L’Avenir dure longtemps* is foregrounded as the principal account of Althusser’s life and illnesses because it is the one which incorporates the best-remembered moment of his existence: the killing of Héléne. The text begins with an account of Héléne’s death, and it’s that account I want to focus on now.

An introductory paragraph to *L’Avenir dure longtemps* concludes: ‘Voici la scène du meurtre telle que je l’ai vécue’ (p. 33). Althusser refers here to the strangling as a murder, even though, as I have said, he was never charged with any such crime. The next paragraph begins abruptly: ‘Soudain, je suis debout, en robe de chambre, au pied de mon lit dans mon appartement de l’École normale’ (p. 33). Here we have something much

more like a trauma narrative than Althusser's or even Levinas's accounts of their period as POWs: there is no cause or effect, no beginning or background, no smooth chronology which explains the origins and meaning of the event. This 'Soudain' recurs a few paragraphs later: 'Et soudain je suis frappé de terreur: ses yeux sont interminablement fixes et surtout voici qu'un bref bout de langue repose, insolite et paisible, entre ses dents et ses lèvres' (p. 34). Rather than a coherent, joined-up narrative, we are given a succession of disconnected moments. In fact, if we had not been forewarned that this was a murder scene, at first it might appear to be something quite different. One November morning, the speaker is in his dressing gown, as is his wife Héléne. She is facing him on the bed, her feet resting on the floor, and he is massaging her: 'Agenouillé tout près d'elle, je suis en train de lui masser le cou' (p. 33). The text insists at first that this is a massage: forms of the verb *masser* recur five times within two paragraphs. There is something gentle, even loving about the scene. The massage could be a husband's caring response to his wife's migraine, for example, or perhaps a prelude to sex. What could be nicer, on a dark winter morning, than a massage from the man who loves you?

However, if this starts well, it is because it is going to end badly. Abruptly, any affectionate, intimate or erotic implications of the massage scene disappear: 'Mais, c'est le devant de son cou que je masse' (p. 33). Rather than gently massaging the back of Héléne's neck, Althusser is pressing his thumbs against her throat. The various forms of the verb *masser*, to massage, are now replaced by forms of *étrangler*, to strangle. In fact, the five uses of *masser* are exactly matched by the five subsequent uses of *étrangler*. Three of them are in the same paragraph:

Certes j'ai déjà vu des morts, mais de ma vie je n'ai vu le visage d'une étranglée. Et pourtant je sais que c'est une étranglée. Mais comment? Je me redresse et hurle: j'ai étranglé Héléne. (p. 34)

The two remaining uses repeat the final words of this paragraph: 'j'ai étranglé Héléne'. The massage has become a killing.

This opening sequence in *L'Avenir dure longtemps* meets the expectations we might have of a trauma narrative, which Althusser's accounts of imprisonment during the war noticeably lack. Impressions and perceptions succeed one another without explanation and causal links. Things happen, meanings change. A tender act becomes a violent one.

What does this have to do with the war? Well, at a pivotal moment in his account of this scene, Althusser makes a surprising, apparently

irrelevant reference to his period as a prisoner of war. He tells us that he had often massaged Héléne. How did he know how to give a massage? He tells that he had learned how to do it in his POW camp: 'j'en avais appris la technique d'un camarade de captivité, le petit Cler, un footballeur professionnel, expert en tout' (p. 33). In Althusser's account of Héléne's death, this is the single sentence which I find most perplexing. Its importance is highlighted because this is the precise moment in the account where tenderness turns to violence. The next sentence marks the shift with the word 'Mais': 'Mais cette fois c'est le devant de son cou que je masse' (p. 33). Why does Althusser want to tell us, at this key moment in his account, when, and from whom, he learned the art of massage? Surely that is what matters least in this brutal scene.

I have been able to discover virtually nothing about the footballer to whom Althusser refers here. Cler is mentioned on one subsequent occasion in *L'Avenir dure longtemps* and once in *Les Faits*, but not at all in Althusser's *Journal de captivité*, so far as I can see. Louis Cler was captain of the football team AS Cannes, and the winning goal scorer on the only occasion that team has won the Coupe de France, in 1932. After that, he seems to have dropped out of history, emerging only briefly as a reference in Althusser's final, violent encounter with his wife. Cler, Althusser tells us, was a professional footballer who was 'expert en tout'. The use of 'tout' here is perhaps surprising. Cler was not just a cup-winning captain and goal scorer, and someone who could teach you how to give an effective massage, but an expert at *everything*. Maybe he also mastered the fine art of killing a wife by pressing one's thumbs against her throat? In any case, he appears to be an enviable figure, almost a role model, because he possesses the talents and virtues which Althusser perhaps perceived himself to be lacking.

On the occasions when Althusser refers to the footballer, he uses only his surname, Cler. He does not mention that Cler's first name, like Althusser's own, was Louis. It is a common enough first name for the coincidence to be unremarkable. We might nevertheless wonder whether there is some significance – perhaps an element of identification – in the fact that Althusser refers to Cler in the middle of his account of Héléne's death but does not reveal that their first names were the same. It may be important in this context that Louis is, for Althusser, a heavily charged name. This is because of another wartime story, this time related to the First World War. In a passage from *L'Avenir dure longtemps*, Althusser recounts how, before the Great War, his mother became engaged to a young man by the name of Louis Althusser. Louis was killed at Verdun,

and his mother entered into a disastrous marriage with his older brother, giving the name Louis to her son when he was born in October 1918. The second Louis Althusser comes to regard himself as an impostor, a second-rate substitute for the true love of his mother's life. This imposture is epitomized in the name Louis, in which Althusser sees an affirmation, *oui*, which is not his, and an alien presence, *lui*, which robs him of his own being (p. 57). The name constantly reminds him of his failure to achieve a satisfactory identity. In consequence, he describes Louis curtly as 'un prénom que très longtemps, j'eus littéralement en horreur' (p. 56). In this context, it is tempting to see some significance in the absence of reference to the fact that Cler, his companion in the Second World War, shared the detested forename which Althusser was given because of events in the First World War.

Another factor links Althusser to Cler, even though initially it might appear to separate them. In his own account, as discussed above, Althusser never tried to escape from his POW camp, being satisfied to have devised a scheme whereby he could *appear* to escape without ever actually leaving. On both of the two other occasions he refers to Cler, once in *L'Avenir dure longtemps* and once in *Les Faits*, the footballer is described as a serial escapee. Cler wants to get out while Althusser wants to stay put. Yet the fact that Cler escaped several times and was captured each time ensures that he remained a prisoner while endeavouring to escape. In a parenthesis, Althusser recounts how Cler escaped four times; he was captured on the Swiss border, which he had crossed but then inadvertently crossed again, back into Germany (p. 350). So he escaped but then returned to the place of his captivity. This, it seems to me, is not much different, in effect if not in intention, from Althusser's plan to escape without escaping by remaining hidden within the camp. And it also evokes again Althusser's 'revolving door' theory of ideology which dooms us to return to the place we thought we were leaving behind us. There is no escape from ideology, and no escape from the camps. Moreover, captivity – in ideology or in a camp – may be preferable to freedom, as the subject colludes in his subjection; 'je m'y sentais en sécurité', as Althusser says of Stalag XA (*L'Avenir*, p. 126).

My point here is that there is more to the reference to Cler in the account of Hélène's death than Althusser cares to spell out. There is at the very least some level of identification between Cler the footballer and expert in massage and Althusser the strangler. And as he becomes a killer, Althusser reaches back to his time as a prisoner of war, and to what he learnt in the camp. Perhaps what he learnt was a lesson in



violence, persecution and senselessness which his actual account of imprisonment noticeably elides, which his career as a political thinker and activist would seek to disavow, and which brutally re-emerges at the moment when he kills his wife. There is no escape from the camps; and by killing H el ene, Althusser replicates Cler's action of crossing the border back into Germany. He would be institutionalized for most of the rest of his life.

### Afterlives of Levinas and Althusser

The lives and thought of Althusser and Levinas, and of their contemporaries, were decisively marked by the war. The publication of *Totalit e et infini* and the killing of H el ene stand under the long shadow of the experience of captivity, though finding the connection requires patient teasing out of clues scattered through their works.

In Levinas's case, his ethical project can be seen as an attempt to turn the historical reality of the war, and the Holocaust in particular, into an ethical impossibility. War, or violence, is not, Levinas insists, 'le premier  v nement de la rencontre' (*Totalit e et infini*, p. 218). War presupposes the possibility of peace. The original encounter with the Other reveals to me both its vulnerability (the physical resistance which it opposes to me is practically nil) and its indestructibility (I can destroy others, in the sense of other people, but not the Other who is the true object of my violence). The first step towards peaceful coexistence is an acknowledgement of the Other's inaugural utterance, which is, according to Levinas, the phrase 'tu ne commettras pas de meurtre' (*Totalit e et infini*, p. 217), Thou shalt not kill. The French form of this is important for Levinas's understanding of the prohibition of murder. The founding communicative act does not transmit an order or a duty, as in the German *sollen*. The future tense in the French version of the commandment is more factual: you will not kill, because the Other cannot be killed. Your violence fails, it is pointless, you are always already dispossessed of the world, and you might as well accept it. In the face of the Other, the self sees a command and an appeal, both of which urge it towards peace, justice and responsibility. I recognize in the Other, using the biblical formula frequently repeated by Levinas, the widow, the orphan and the stranger, who calls for respect and care rather than hostility. The 'first event of the encounter' is not violence, but the enriching possibility of an ethical community based upon the acceptance of alterity.

For Levinas, the discovery of the Other is ethical from its very first moment. And in his version of the encounter between self and Other, I respond with respect, not violence. However, I do not find in Levinas's writing any compelling reason why the self *should* respond to the interpellation of the Other with respect, why peace is more fundamental than war or why violence is merely a derivative, secondary response. Eaglestone makes the point succinctly: 'One cannot prove logically that Good and peace underlies Evil and war, one can only believe it: this is both the strength and weakness of Levinas's work' (*The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, p. 271). The belief that peace is prior to violence is an act of faith or hope rather than a provable reality. Levinas writes in *Totalité et infini* that the effort of his book consists in showing how the discovery of alterity makes murder impossible (p. 38); but he also acknowledges that 'L'impossibilité de tuer n'est pas réelle, elle est morale' (*Difficile liberté*, p. 23). So the impossibility of killing the Other does not deny the reality of murder and genocide. 'Car, en réalité, le meurtre est possible', as Levinas curtly explains (*Difficile liberté*, p. 23). The invulnerability of the Other, in some abstract theoretical sense, does not stop murder from occurring in real encounters between human subjects, nor does it prevent the Holocaust and other atrocities. Levinas's ethics rely upon a simple core narrative for which no factual, empirical claims are made: the self encounters the Other in an ethical utopia, and peace reigns.

In Sartre's version of the same minimal narrative and the reading of Hegel which lies behind it, the encounter of self and Other erupts immediately into violence. The fundamental relation between consciousnesses is conflict, as each seeks recognition by – and, if necessary, the death of – the other. In comparison with this bleak description of war as endemic in human relations, Levinas's version of the encounter appears as a hopeful fantasy scenario, an enabling ethical narrative in which the Holocaust could not have taken place. The future tense of 'tu ne commettras pas de meurtre' acquires a predictive force. It expresses a hope as much as a commandment: the Other should and will be preserved, genocide is impossible – if only morally. Levinas's account of the encounter can be read, then, as a disavowal of the Holocaust, in the psychoanalytical sense: it blots it out, denies that it can have taken place, while also commemorating the traumatic event which founds and tears asunder the fantasy. These alternating rhythms of ethical optimism and the knowledge of real atrocity perhaps explain why, when the Holocaust does break through to the explicit level of the text, it does so with an urgency all the more shocking for having been kept at bay. This can

be seen, for example, in Levinas's breathless, distraught account of the twentieth century:

Siècle qui en trente ans a connu deux guerres mondiales, les totalitarismes de droite et de gauche, hitlérisme et stalinisme, Hiroshima, le goulag, les génocides d'Auschwitz et du Cambodge. Siècle qui s'achève dans la hantise du retour de tout ce que ces noms barbares signifient. Souffrance et mal imposés de façon délibérée, mais qu'aucune raison ne limitait dans l'exaspération de la raison devenue politique et détachée de toute éthique.

Que parmi ces événements, l'Holocauste du peuple juif sous le règne de Hitler nous paraisse le paradigme de cette souffrance humaine gratuite où le mal apparut dans son horreur diabolique, n'est peut-être pas un sentiment subjectif. La disproportion entre la souffrance et toute théodicée se montra à Auschwitz avec une clarté qui crève les yeux. (*Entre nous*, pp. 114–15)

For Levinas, the Holocaust provokes thought and impedes it (*Entre nous*, p. 115). His work echoes the Holocaust in its terminology and in the traumatized textuality of his writing. It also disavows its founding trauma through the utopian scenario of an ethical encounter in which otherness is respected and peace maintained. Murder is banal but also impossible in this account. Levinas's ethics teach us that we can harm others, but not the Other who is the real target of our violence. This isn't much use to Hélène, who died at her husband's hands.

As for Louis Cler, the little footballer, expert in everything, who taught Althusser the art of massage and never quite succeeded in escaping from captivity despite his repeated attempts: he deserves a final mention. Cler died in 1950, as the result of an illness contracted while he was a prisoner of war.<sup>2</sup> So, despite his best efforts to escape, even the end of the war did not release him from the Stalag.

<sup>2</sup> Information given at <[https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis\\_Cler](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_Cler)> [accessed 11/08/2017].

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# Levinas the Novelist

Comment admettre la guerre?

(Levinas, *Œuvres* 3, p. 39)

The previous chapter discussed how the Second World War and the Holocaust echo through Levinas's post-war writing even though he mentions them only sparingly. 'Levinas's philosophy is one of the cinders of the Holocaust', as Eaglestone puts it (*The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, p. 255). Levinas's texts do not theorize or seek to explain the Holocaust, but they bear its terrible imprint. This chapter brings together two issues in the understanding of Levinas's work: his reticence about the Second World War, and his much-discussed hostility to art. These issues come together because his posthumous archive gave unexpected evidence that he aspired to be a novelist even while condemning the mystifications of art; and, moreover, that the novels he attempted to write were concerned, precisely, with the experience of war.

In a nutshell, Emmanuel Levinas, perhaps the greatest philosopher of ethics in twentieth-century France, wanted to be a novelist. The publication of the third volume of his *Œuvres* in 2013 reveals that he drafted substantial fragments of two novels, both concerned with the experience of the Second World War, entitled (perhaps) *Éros* and *La Dame de chez Wepler*.<sup>1</sup> A number of questions immediately spring to mind. Why did he begin these novels, and why did he abandon them?

1 The title Levinas intended to give to the longest of the two fragments is unclear. For discussion, see Calin and Chalier, 'Préface', in Levinas, *Carnets de captivité et autres inédits*, in *Œuvres* 1, p. 15. For simplicity, I refer to the fragment throughout this chapter simply as *Éros*.

And why, to those of us who have been concerned with Levinas's work, is this so *surprising*?

There are a number of reasons why it *should not* be surprising. Literature played an important part in Levinas's education and intellectual development. Studying the dark metaphysical investigations contained in Dostoevsky's novels as a child in his native Lithuania initially awoke his interest in philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Levinas's early work on phenomenology suggested at least the possibility of a link between philosophy and literature. Levinas was instrumental in introducing Husserlian phenomenology into France, first with his thesis *Théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl* (1930) and then with his translation of Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* (1931), undertaken with Gabrielle Peiffer. Phenomenology, with its interest in the sensory experience of the material world, readily lends itself to fictional exploration, as Sartre had magnificently demonstrated in his novel *La Nausée* (1938). So the phenomenologist and the novelist are predisposed to be close allies. Levinas certainly entertained literary ambitions in his early years. After his death in 1995 it was discovered that he had carefully preserved a large body of poetry which he had written in Russian as an adolescent and young adult. His mature philosophical work abounds with literary allusions; and his *Carnets de captivité*, published in the first volume of his *Œuvres complètes*, show that, during his five years as a prisoner of War between 1940 and 1945 – years which were crucial to his personal and intellectual development – literature was constantly on his mind. His *Carnets* quote from, discuss or refer to, among others, Claudel, Ariosto, Dostoevsky, Proust, Balzac, Vigny, Rabelais, Tolstoy, Ibsen, Giraudoux, Baudelaire, Gide, Zola, Hugo, Céline, Montherlant, Conan Doyle, Dickens, Nerval, Goethe, Lamartine, Mallarmé, Bloy, Corneille, Racine, Poe, Lawrence and Shakespeare.

Literature, then, was Levinas's natural habitat; and for French-language philosophers of his generation, there was no necessary opposition between philosophy and literature. The philosopher Henri Bergson had won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1927; and even before the publication of *L'Être et le néant* in 1943, Sartre had already established himself as an enviable model of the philosopher-novelist who could navigate with ease between literary and philosophical worlds. Levinas saw himself in similar terms. In an entry in his *Carnets de captivité*, he anticipates three strands to his future work:

2 See Poirié, *Emmanuel Levinas: qui êtes-vous?*, pp. 69–70.

Mon œuvre à faire:

Philosophique: 1) L'être et le néant  
 2) Le temps  
 3) Rosenzweig  
 4) Rosenberg

Littéraire:

1) Triste opulence  
 2) L'irréalité et l'amour

Critique:

Proust

(*Carnets de captivité*, p. 74)

This indicates that, for Levinas the POW, there is no inevitable choice to be made between literature and philosophy. The *Carnets* refer to *Triste opulence* (the alternative title to *Éros*) and *La Dame de chez Wepler*, suggesting that both novels were already on his mind during his captivity. The third volume of his *Œuvres* gives both *versions continues* and *versions génétiques* of the surviving fragments of the two novels, which were found among Levinas's papers after his death. The longest text, that of *Éros*, focuses on a character named Paul Rondeau, beginning during the phoney war, and progressing through the defeat of France, captivity and liberation. Different names are used, and it is unclear whether the author was undecided over what name to give his protagonist or whether different characters are involved. In the shorter fragment, *La Dame de chez Wepler*, a character named Simon (or Roland) Riberat spends an evening in Paris before being sent to the front in May 1940. The manuscripts of both fragments are heavily corrected, leaving multiple inconsistencies, ambiguities, illegible passages and unexplained elements. There is no precise indication as to when these drafts were written or revised. Significantly, though, there is evidence that Levinas continued working on *Éros* at least until the early 1960s, during the period when he was finalizing what would become one of his most important philosophical works, and perhaps his defining book, *Totalité et infini* (1961).<sup>3</sup>

There is, then, plenty of scope for future research here. A number of important questions have hardly begun to be addressed:<sup>4</sup>

3 This dating is possible because Levinas recycled printed paper which sometimes referred to forthcoming meetings. See *Éros, littérature et philosophie*, p. 62.

4 Initial work on Levinas's wartime and war-related *inédits* was begun at a

- 1) First, there is a series of chronological and biographical questions. The evidence here is thin. *Éros* ends with the return of a POW to Paris after five years' imprisonment; there is reason to believe that Levinas was still working on the novel until the late 1950s and early 1960s. So on a minimal estimation, his work on the novel began during the 1940s and lasted at least until 1960. When did he begin, and when and why did he stop? Further investigation of Levinas's unpublished archive may shed more light on these matters.
- 2) Second, there is the question of the relation between these literary fragments and Levinas's philosophical trajectory. It is well known that Levinas published little original philosophical work from the late 1940s until 1961. Even so, during this period he lectured regularly at Jean Wahl's Collège philosophique; and he was developing the ideas which would culminate in *Totalité et infini* while also, in all likelihood, continuing to envisage a literary strand to his future career.<sup>5</sup> The ideas on sex and love in the two novel fragments do not simply repeat material from *Le Temps et l'autre* (1947) and *Totalité et infini* (1961), but nor are they separate from them.
- 3) Third, what is the status of literary fiction in Levinas's *œuvre* and his self-understanding? What are the differences and the intersections which join and separate a literary project from a philosophical one? In the passage from the *Carnets de captivité* quoted above, Levinas suggests that philosophy, literature and criticism were distinct but intertwined aspects of the same career plan. In his mature writing, there is still an element of criticism, but overt literary aspirations would disappear altogether, and all else would be overwhelmed by Levinas's growing, unstoppable momentum as a philosopher.

It is the third of these questions with which I am primarily concerned here. The publication of Levinas's novel fragments was so surprising because to associate Levinas with fiction now seems absurd. It is true that many of us have pondered over what a Levinasian approach to literature might be; but we have done this in the knowledge that it had to be attempted, to some extent at least, *despite* what Levinas said about literature rather than because of it. In the words of Jill Robbins, 'Levinas speaks very rarely about the literary, and when he does it is almost always

conference held in 2010. See Cohen-Levinas (ed.), *Levinas et l'expérience de la captivité*.

<sup>5</sup> Levinas's unpublished lectures at the Collège philosophique are now available in *Parole et silence et autres conférences inédites*, in *Œuvres* 2.

in dismissive terms' (*Altered Reading*, p. 39).<sup>6</sup> The stumbling block for literary scholars inspired by Levinas and aspiring to be Levinasian is the article he published in *Les Temps modernes* in 1948, 'La Réalité et son ombre'. The article attacks the mystification propagated by art; yet it was written – it now appears – during a period when Levinas still had ambitions to be an author of fiction.

### Fiction as mystification

The author of 'La Réalité et son ombre' has a low view of art. *Les Temps modernes*, founded in 1945, became one of the principal outlets of Sartre and Beauvoir's conception of the committed artist and intellectual. But Levinas's article pays no lip service to the artist's witting or unwitting commitment; nor is there a Heideggerian celebration of the world-revealing capability of the prestigious art work. Art is depicted, on the contrary, as ignorant, irresponsible and immoral. It creates a shadow world which bewitches and confuses. Only the critic can redeem this mad, boundless, borderless world by restoring it to the intelligible order of the self-possessed mind:

La critique, en interprétant, choisira et limitera. Mais si, comme choix, elle demeure en deçà du monde qui s'est fixé dans l'art, elle l'aura réintroduit dans le monde intelligible où elle se tient et qui est la vraie patrie de l'esprit. [...] L'interprétation de la critique parle en pleine possession de soi, franchement, par le concept qui est comme le muscle de l'esprit. ('La Réalité et son ombre', in *Les Imprévus de l'histoire*, pp. 147–48)

The critic does not enter fully and recklessly into the enigmatic, equivocal world of the art work, but chooses instead to interpret, limit and restrict so that order and intelligibility are reinstated. The problem for Levinasian-minded critics is that, in this account, the art work absolutely does not provide the occasion for a (good) encounter with alterity. A number of strategies have been adopted in order to argue that, in one way or another, Levinas did not mean what he says here. Levinas may have said it, but his work as a whole does not endorse it. His later philosophical texts are full of literary references, suggesting

6 On Levinas's relation to literature, see also Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism: Reading after Levinas*, pp. 98–128; and Davis, *After Poststructuralism: Reading, Stories and Theory*, pp. 81–102.



that his hostility to art was not as extreme as he presents it in 'La Réalité et son ombre'; or other essays, for example on Proust, Agnon, Celan or Jabès, are much more sympathetic to art and its ethical potential.<sup>7</sup> In *Le Temps et l'autre*, Levinas even suggests at one point that the whole of philosophy may be contained in the works of Shakespeare (p. 60). One way or another, a Levinasian art criticism is made possible by following the spirit of his work as a whole rather than the letter of 'La Réalité et son ombre'.

Another way of neutralizing the force of Levinas's essay is to suggest that its attack is on art rather than literature in particular.<sup>8</sup> This is not the case. Although Levinas refers through much of the essay to art, some passages refer specifically to literary fiction. He describes, for example, how characters in novels become 'êtres enfermés, prisonniers' (p. 140). They are seen from the outside, denied freedom, bound to the endless repetition of the same gestures. It may be no coincidence that Levinas refers here to Proust's *La Prisonnière*, the volume of *À la recherche du temps perdu* in which Marcel effectively imprisons Albertine in order to control her actions and proclivities more effectively; and, with the memory of his own five years of captivity no doubt still in his mind, the passage may invite a link between the prisoner of war and the character in Proust's novel. Both are subjects without freedom, their inherent otherness suppressed. Levinas's essay implicitly distinguishes between two forms of limitation, or indeed simplification: one good, and one bad. The bad limitation is what happens in fiction, which locks the free subject into a fixed destiny; the good limitation is achieved in philosophical criticism, which cuts through the equivocations of art to reassert the authority of the self-possessed mind over material which resists it. The false order of the novel is bad; the schematizing order of the intellect is good.

Levinas does make one concession to literature when, in the final paragraph of his essay, he describes a trend in modern writing:

La littérature moderne, décriée pour son intellectualisme et qui remonte d'ailleurs à Shakespeare, au Molière du *Don Juan* [sic], à Goethe, à Dostoïevski – manifeste certainement une conscience de plus en plus nette de cette insuffisance foncière de l'idolâtrie artistique. Par cet intellectualisme l'artiste refuse d'être artiste seulement: non pas parce qu'il veut

7 See the essays collected in Levinas's *Noms propres*.

8 See for example Cohen-Levinas, 'L'Instant littéraire et la condition d'otage: Levinas, Proust et la signification corporelle du temps', p. 62.

défendre une thèse ou une cause, mais parce qu'il a besoin d'interpréter lui-même ses mythes. ('La Réalité et son ombre', p. 148)

This concession is at best double-edged, however. Modern literature may show signs of breaking from idolatry, but it does so precisely insofar as the artist ceases to be (just) an artist: 'l'artiste refuse d'être artiste seulement'. In other words, to become a good novelist, you should stop being (just) a novelist and start interpreting your own stories, lifting them out of the morass of the equivocal into the light of the concept. The good novelist is good to the extent that s/he is no longer a novelist.

No one (so far as I know) agrees with or is persuaded by Levinas's argument in 'La Réalité et son ombre' (which is far from clear in any case). So why do we remain concerned by it? If Levinas had sunk into honourable obscurity after 1948, we would certainly not be bothering with the essay now. But because he became such a major figure in post-war ethics, his condemnation of art stands as a conundrum worth confronting, particularly when many of us are involved with considering what ethical criticism (and especially Levinasian ethical criticism) might entail. In the present context, Levinas's essay becomes even more problematic when we bear in mind that, during the precise period when he was condemning the mystificatory simplifications of fiction – its collusion with the imprisonment of the subject – we now know that Levinas himself was considering and actively working towards a career as a novelist. Levinas implicitly condemns his own literary ambitions. There is, he tells us, 'quelque chose de méchant et d'égoïste et de lâche dans la jouissance artistique. Il y a des époques où l'on peut en avoir honte, comme de festoyer en pleine peste' ('La Réalité et son ombre', p. 146). Artists and their audiences should be ashamed of themselves and recognize their social unacceptability. In Levinas's words, 'Le poète s'exile lui-même de la cité' ('La Réalité et son ombre', p. 146). There is no need for the poet to be banished from the city, as in Plato's *Republic*; if s/he has any moral conscience or sense of civic responsibility, s/he will leave of his or her own accord. The year 1948 is not the moment, Levinas suggests, to waste one's time irresponsibly in composing literature. So what kind of novels was Levinas planning to write at this most unpropitious moment?

## Towards a practice of fiction

*Éros* can be divided into three distinct parts. In the first, a character named Rondeau is called up to active service and then taken prisoner in the German offensive of June 1940. The second section, beginning in spring 1942, describes scenes from captivity, involving a character named Tromel, or later Tramuel. In the third section, a character named Jean-Paul arrives back in Paris after five years' absence, presumably because he has been a prisoner of war. There is no indication of whether Rondeau, Tromel, Tramuel and Jean-Paul are meant to be the same person, their author being provisionally undecided about his name, or whether they are supposed to be quite separate characters. *La Dame de chez Wepler* is more focused. In May 1940, Simon (or perhaps Roland) Riberat has been called to the front, three weeks after the internment of his wife on grounds of mental health. Spending an evening in Paris, he recalls an occasion some years earlier when he was attracted to a high-class prostitute but did not consummate his desire for her. His search for sex is curtailed when he unexpectedly encounters a junior employee from his office and spends time discussing work matters with him and his family.

Both these sketches share relatively precise dating which situates them in relation to the Second World War. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, one might risk the suggestion that there is something about the war which both provokes Levinas's experiment in fiction and stands in the way of its completion. One of the most interesting features of *Éros* and *La Dame de chez Wepler* is that they reflect on war, on the *experience* of war and on the *inability* to experience it, the impossibility of assimilating it to the subject's familiar world. 'Comment admettre la guerre?', asks the narrator of *Éros* (*Œuvres* 3, p. 39). This goes beyond suggesting that the war was unnecessary and avoidable; it also implies that it threatens fundamental world views. The use of *nous* in the following lines is particularly significant. It draws both the narrator and the reader into the situation; and, at a biographical level, we might recall that Levinas had been a naturalized Frenchman since 1931, and that, at the time of his capture in June 1940, he was defending his adopted homeland in French uniform:<sup>9</sup>

9 As discussed in the previous chapter, serving in the army at the time of the French defeat probably saved Levinas's life. He spent the rest of the war as a POW whereas, as a civilian, he risked being stripped of his citizenship, arrested, deported and murdered like other naturalized French Jews.

Nous ne manquions pas seulement de chars, d'avions et de plans d'état-major. Malgré la proximité de la guerre de 14 qui avait tué des millions d'hommes mais pas une habitude, il nous manquait la perception même de la guerre. Celle de 14 devait être la dernière guerre, même les plus réalistes, les plus hostiles aux rêveries pacifistes, le croyaient inconsciemment. (*Euvres* 3, p. 39)

The Great War of 1914–1918 led to innumerable deaths, but it did not destroy 'une habitude'. In other words, France survived, diminished but intact in its beliefs and its way of life. The war to end all wars killed individuals, but not the world to which they belonged and in which they believed. The opening pages of *Éros* contain a hymn of praise to a stable, immutable France capable of surviving anything that might befall it: 'Qu'est-ce que la France? Une immense stabilité. Toutes les formes de la vie arrivées à leur plénitude comme des fruits éternellement mûrs dans un verger miraculeux. Perfection d'un peuple sédentaire purifiée de tout souvenir de l'existence nomade' (*Euvres* 3, p. 38).

No less a figure than Jean-Luc Nancy has suspected these and following lines of embodying a Hugolian fantasy of a France that was fixed in time, belief and ideology.<sup>10</sup> They might also remind us of De Gaulle's invention, in his speech of 25 August 1944 marking the liberation of Paris, of the myth of 'la France éternelle': a timeless, unchanging entity unified in its struggle against Nazism. Crucially, though, what Levinas's fragment narrates is the collapse of this myth: it turns out to be illusory, as the war shatters the deep conviction in an unchanging, unchangeable idea of France. The opening line of *Éros* declares that 'En somme le front se stabilise' (*Euvres* 3, p. 37); but this turns out to be disastrously untrue: 'Depuis trois semaines le front ne se stabilisait pas. La vieille terre de France est devenue du sable mouvant. Le pied n'arrivait à trouver nulle part un point d'appui. L'ennemi s'infiltrait à travers les crevasses invisibles du sol' (p. 37). Continuity and order are falling apart in what is called 'ce bouleversement du cadre même de la réalité' (p. 37). What is occurring here is more than a military defeat. It is the collapse of the framework through which the world could be known and experienced. Rondeau's exposure to the fog of war and captivity illustrates this. He is a successful, respectable married man with three children, 'ce chef-d'œuvre de la création que l'on appelle

<sup>10</sup> See Nancy, 'Éros, le roman d'Emmanuel Levinas?', p. III. Nancy also provides an introduction to Levinas's literary work in 'Préface: "L'intrigue littéraire de Levinas"'.

le Français moyen' (p. 39), whose life makes perfect sense: 'Jusqu'à présent il trouvait des casiers pour ranger les choses qu'il voyait et des mots qu'il entendait' (p. 42). But, 'Depuis le 10 mai, Rondeau flairait le chaos' (p. 39). All of a sudden, the world he knew no longer exists: 'il a eu pour la première fois l'impression que la France sur laquelle reposait toute son humanité toute sa dignité, cette France dans laquelle la réalité s'ordonnait et se tenait que la France se défaisait' (p. 42).

What is at stake in this war and in this text is the epistemological, experiential, ontological and moral status of reality itself. The war threatens not only lives, but also every framework within which those lives can be lived and understood. What, though, has actually changed? At the end of *Éros*, Jean-Paul returns to Paris after five years' absence and finds it pretty much as he left it: 'Jean-Paul avait l'impression d'avoir rouvert un vieux volume de son enfance. [...] Les choses se dessinaient dans leur stabilité impassible' (p. 54). Everything has changed; nothing has changed. The war is an *event*, not just an occurrence, because it affects everything while allowing the appearance that everything remains just as it was.

*La Dame de chez Wepler* revolves around the same tension between order and disorder, freedom and (welcome) constraint. Soon to be sent to the front, Riberat spends an evening in Paris. He recalls an occasion three years earlier when he glimpsed and desired a woman he presumed to be a high-class prostitute, but did nothing about it for sensible financial reasons. Now, though, he feels a sense of liberation. Twice alluding to Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, he feels that 'tout est permis' (pp. 122, 123). Normal rules and normal considerations are suspended. Desire has been let out of the bag. To put it crudely, Riberat sets out in search of sex on the eve of his call-up which, he knows, may lead to his death. So he can now seek pleasure without conscience and without consequences: 'Riberat se sentit une jeunesse immorale, le pouvoir d'agir sans souffrir des contrecoups, le don des plaisirs sans mauvaise conscience' (p. 122). In the event, though, (perhaps unsurprisingly) the prostitute he glimpsed three years previously is no longer to be found at the same location. As desire flows freely, let loose in the streets of pre-Occupation Paris, Riberat is called back to order when he is addressed by a junior employee from the office where he works. He abruptly returns to a familiar, safer world:

On a parlé affaires de bureau, collègues mobilisés, progrès accomplis par l'œuvre. [...] Le chaos où Riberat se sentait jusqu'alors se dissiper s'évanouit. Une forme solide le revêtit de nouveau. [...] Maintenant, il

pourra rentrer, se coucher, lire au lit avant de s'endormir un poème de Leconte de Lisle. [...] Une douce tristesse l'envahit. Il pensa à sa femme, à la France, à lui-même si joliment détaché des choses, mais ayant tout de même une modeste fonction sociale et militaire à son petit poste. Ah qu'il était doux de se sentir encadré et intégré, aller quelque part. (pp. 126–27)

Riberat might die at the front; but this now seems to be a small price to pay if his death makes sense. Order has won out over chaos. Riberat can return to his habits, play his modest role in his little post and die if necessary. It is all worthwhile, he feels, if the 'cadre' has been restored ('il était doux de se sentir encadré et intégré'), giving him back a sense of belonging and direction.

As in *Éros*, war represents a radical, catastrophic disruption of an ordered, familiar, intelligible world. *La Dame de chez Wepler* adds to this an association with *madness*. The first sentence of the text states abruptly that 'La femme de Simon était folle' (p. 117). Before she was diagnosed as insane, Riberat had endeavoured to maintain his wife's secure place in a world which made sense to him. The second paragraph opposes his wife's 'extravagances', 'idées bizarres' or 'excentricités' with his own faltering 'raisonnement'; there should be a 'frontière' separating sanity from madness; and even though the wife is 'bouleversée', she is provisionally contained within 'le cadre de la maison familiale'; the couple are still engaged in 'un jeu où il existe des règles, porteur de toute la dignité d'une Madame Simon' (p. 117). The problem with madness is that it crosses frontiers, breaks frameworks and ignores rules. The quick transition from Madame Simon's madness to the context of war in Levinas's fragment suggests a link between them. Both pose the problem of an existence in which the norms of the familiar world no longer apply, with all the accompanying terror and exhilaration. Amidst all this, Riberat's freedom is double-edged: it is both a freedom *from* the constraints which he has accepted in the peacetime, conjugal world, but also a freedom *to return to* the familiar, known and knowable world from which the proximity to insanity had estranged him: 'Voici que de nouveau un arbre devenait un arbre sans équivoque, sans parenté avec ce qui n'est pas un arbre, le pain simplement comestible, le soleil brûlant, les femmes désirables ...' (p. 118). At last, a tree is just a tree again. Compared to the insanity of his wife, the madness of war seems intelligible and appealing: '[la guerre] faisait désormais partie des choses définies' (p. 118).

Both *Éros* and *La Dame de chez Wepler* contrast an ordered, intelligible world with an alluring, disturbing chaos in which 'tout est

permis'. The allusion to Dostoevsky is important here. The possibility that, in a valueless world, everything is permitted worries Levinas just as it worried Camus during the same period.<sup>11</sup> If there is no moral order, no divine or rational sense to the world, then how do we tell right from wrong? Camus would try to deal with this problem by evoking the values of revolt and solidarity; Levinas would resist it with his insistence on the subject's limitless responsibility to the Other. What is fascinating about fiction, for Levinas at least, is that it gives licence to explore the dizzying, terrifying moment when 'tout est permis': the moral rules and intellectual frameworks have vanished. In *Éros*, war entails not only the anecdotal 'malheurs des êtres' but, much more significantly, 'ce bouleversement du cadre même de la réalité' (p. 37). In *La Dame de chez Wepler* the madness of Riberat's wife confronts him with 'un vide peuplé de fantômes, de mots, de semblants de pensée' (p. 117). Philosophically speaking, the issue here is epistemological and ontological: the world of peace and sanity is stable and assured, knowable because it bows to concepts which constitute its sense. Madness and war force the subject to glimpse an incompatible (dis)order in which there are no fixed points.

The terms in which Levinas's two novel fragments conceive madness and (the madness of) war irresistibly evoke the characterization of art in 'La Réalité et son ombre'. In his article Levinas condemns art because it creates a shadow world which stands outside the order of knowledge, and which mimics and undermines the world we recognize. Only the critic can redeem art by limiting it and making it once more intelligible. The different roles assigned in 'La Réalité et son ombre' to the critic and the artist are replicated in the fragments by the opposition between the breakdown of order and the desire for its restitution. The crucial difference is that *Éros* and *La Dame de chez Wepler* know that the limiting schemas applied by the Levinasian critic are false, and even violently so, because they tell a lie about the real, preferring bourgeois bad faith to an encounter with radical mystery.

I would risk the suggestion here that Levinas's experiments in fiction were curtailed in part because they embody an insight which the Levinas of 'La Réalité et son ombre' was anxiously resisting, namely the suspicion that the disorder envisaged by the literary author may be more true, more fundamental and more compelling than the limiting

11 See for example, Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942), in *Œuvres complètes I*, p. 266, where Camus famously insists that 'Tout est permis ne signifie pas que rien n'est défendu'.

order found by the critic. At the same time, Levinas may have found a way of resolving this tension by incorporating the novelist's exploration of chaotic otherness into the texture of philosophy itself. It is likely that Levinas finally gave up his literary ambitions in the 1960s, perhaps because his astonishing first philosophical masterpiece, *Totalité et infini*, began to find means of overcoming the choice between the shadow-world of art and the conceptual clarity expected of philosophy.

### Philosophy and/at war

*Totalité et infini* was the culmination of Levinas's philosophical work during the 1940s and 1950s. My suggestion here is that it is *also* the culmination of his literary work undertaken during the same period. His two attempts at fiction both revolve around the war and the difficulty of making sense of it as it throws into doubt the subject's understanding of its own experience. This is an issue for both fiction and philosophy; accordingly, it is not long before war makes its appearance in *Totalité et infini*. The previous chapter attempted to show that war appears in the opening words of *Totalité et infini* as a key reference point which throws everything else into turmoil, including fixed ethical positions and even the philosophical subject's ability to formulate any proposition with confidence and clarity. War destabilizes everything, semantically and ethically; it is both a signifier of damage and a damaged signifier, unsettled and unsettling. As soon as it is mentioned, the authorial subject is scattered, no longer knowing how to formulate its contradictory, self-contesting insights.

Another way of putting this is to say that war condemns writing to the status of fiction. It disturbs the hegemony of reason and the distinction between art and philosophy. When Levinas states that war 'projette d'avance son ombre sur les actes des hommes' (*Totalité et infini*, p. 5), the use of the word *ombre* evokes 'La Réalité et son ombre' and its condemnation of art. In that essay, art is described as 'l'événement même de l'obscurcissement, une tombée de la nuit, un envahissement de l'ombre' (p. 126). Art suspends knowledge and belongs to an ontological order quite separate from the reign of reason. *Éros*, *La Dame de chez Wepler* and finally *Totalité et infini* suggest that the same can be said of war, and perhaps also of ethics. Art creates and inhabits a shadow world; war sheds darkness on the meaning of human acts; and now philosophy too must inhabit the obscure, ambiguous places where knowledge no longer



holds sway. If fiction is for Levinas, as Jean-Luc Nancy insists, a relation with mystery,<sup>12</sup> then from now on, philosophy will also occupy the place of fiction as a space of encounter with the unknown.

Levinas has become, perhaps, a little too familiar. Terms such as *le visage*, the face-to-face, the *il y a* and the ethical encounter with alterity have been made into useable concepts which roll off the tongue, separated now from the strange textual universe in which they originated. With so many introductions available, you don't need to read Levinas to know what he thinks. The great gain brought by the publication of Levinas's two novel fragments is that they restore an unfamiliar Levinas, one whose thought and writing have not yet been settled, simplified and assimilated. In the century before Levinas began work on his novels, Nietzsche expressed astonishment that Socrates, his great philosophical opponent, had turned to music at the end of his life (see *The Birth of Tragedy*, pp. 79–80). How could Socrates, who had banished the poets from the ideal city, himself aspire to be an artist? Perhaps – he nearly concedes – Nietzsche has not yet fully understood his implacable enemy. And Socrates the musician is akin to Levinas the novelist. The author of 'La Réalité et son ombre' condemned fiction because it turned living human beings into mere prisoners. In Levinas's fiction, meanwhile, characters prefer forms of imprisonment to the radical unknowability to which war, and madness, and the madness of war, expose them. If Levinas gave up on the project of writing fiction in the narrowest sense, his later writing endlessly endeavoured to explore the most unsettling, darkest places of human pain and aspiration which are also the domains of the novel.

The reference to war, and to the Second World War in particular, is vital and intensely problematic in Levinas's post-war practice. He attempts to show that peace is primary, that war is not the true meaning of the encounter between self and Other, that murder and *a fortiori* genocide always fail, ethically, in their aim to eradicate alterity. Yet his texts are also grounded in the terrible knowledge that murder is an everyday occurrence, and that the ethical failure of genocide does not outweigh its all-too-literal reality. It is, then, particularly striking that he envisaged writing about war in what was for him the self-censored medium of literary fiction. Fiction becomes for him a strange space, one which he publicly repudiated but privately pursued, as he worked on texts that would be unfinished, perhaps unfinishable, and certainly

12 Nancy, 'Éros, le roman d'Emmanuel Levinas?', pp. 123–24.

unpublished in his lifetime. Fiction is perhaps for him the ultimate trace of war because it is the only place where unspeakable things can finally be said.

SECTION D

**Surviving, Witnessing  
and Telling Tales**



## CHAPTER NINE

# Testimony/Literature/Fiction

Jorge Semprun

[Q]ui dit quoi à qui, au juste?

(Derrida, *Donner la mort*, p. 175)

When reading Semprun's prodigious literary output, it is hard to forget his remarkable life, from exile and imprisonment in Buchenwald to the clandestine struggle against Franco's regime, expulsion from the Communist Party, success as an author and a period as Minister of Culture in post-fascist Spain. His work is almost invariably, irresistibly treated as a form of testimonial life writing, tied to his experience, especially (though not exclusively) to his experience of Buchenwald, and also more broadly to his standing as a pre-eminent witness to European history and politics in the twentieth century. To dissociate the man from his work might seem, Régis Debray suggests, simply absurd ('Semprun en spirale', p. 9). Semprun was an extraordinary person whose traumatized and resilient engagement with the dense fabric of reality is reflected in his writing.

Semprun, then, is one of the great literary witnesses of the twentieth century, in particular to the experience and aftermath of the Second World War. He is comparable in stature to Elie Wiesel, with whom he published the book *Se taire est impossible*. And, as with Wiesel, his fictional output is sometimes overlooked because of the power and importance of his personal testimony. The next chapter will examine how, in Wiesel's case, fictional storytelling is integral to his literary production even though it sits uneasily with his commitment to bearing witness. This chapter examines Semprun's turn to literature in the 1960s, and then in particular his practice of fiction, which becomes a

tense space of witnessing and invention, telling and not telling, exposure and reticence.

### What can literature do?

To begin, I shall concentrate on two early texts, both produced before Semprun's expulsion from the Communist Party: the semi-fictional *Le Grand Voyage* and his contribution to the symposium 'Que peut la littérature?' What is at stake in both these texts are the capabilities, limits and value of literature at a transitional moment in Semprun's life and career as an author, and at a tense moment in French literary and intellectual culture.

In 1964 the French communist student newspaper *Clarté* organized a symposium in Paris with the title 'Que peut la littérature?' The aim was to encourage discussion of the role of literature in a specifically Western European, anti-capitalist context. In schematic terms, the symposium set proponents of committed literature, notably Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, against the champions of avant-garde literary experimentation such as Jean Ricardou. Sartre is undoubtedly the senior figure and the star of the show, but in 1964 his cultural capital was on the wane (though it would rise again during and following the events of May 1968). In philosophy, structuralism was replacing existentialism as the dominant intellectual force; and in literature, the experimentalism of the *nouveau roman*, associated with Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute and Michel Butor, was replacing the earnestness of Sartrean commitment. So the symposium attempted to confront this critical moment in French cultural history. How is the role of literature to be understood in a context where commitment and experimentation appear to be in dispute over the soul of art?

As a militant communist, Semprun is brought on as an advocate of committed literature, but he carefully avoids the polarized terms which the debate appears to invite. His initial answer to the question 'What can literature do?' is an abrupt 'nothing': '*la littérature ne peut rien*. Davantage même: son rôle, sa fonction, son sens, ne s'enracinent pas et ne débouchent pas non plus dans un pouvoir quelconque sur la société, sur l'histoire' (*Que peut la littérature?*, p. 29; emphasis original). Semprun goes on to defend formal experimentation in literature against Soviet and Chinese communist attempts to shackle it to utilitarian, political ends. He welcomes the rise of the *nouveau roman* as an attempt

to question the forms and nature of literature. The twist to his argument is that he does not envisage the formal experimentalism of the *nouveau roman* as being in any way incompatible with Marxist commitment; on the contrary, he sees the two as intimately bound together. A key thread to Semprun's contribution is the linkage between Marxism and literary experimentation. Alluding to the rigid rules of socialist realism, he objects to 'la suppression de tout débat culturel, de toute possibilité de contestation, de toute lutte idéologique. En somme, le contraire même du marxisme' (*Que peut la littérature?*, p. 40). He then concludes: 'Et le contraire aussi de la littérature, qui exige tout cela pour vivre' (*Que peut la littérature?*, p. 40). There is a strict correlation here between literature and Marxism, not in doctrine or belief, but in their shared commitment to contestation and struggle. Semprun's Marxism is not so much a political credo as a disposition to oppose the status quo; and this, once again, ties it to the practice of literature: 'Le marxisme, dans le même mouvement qui le conduit au dépassement de ses propres structures dogmatiques, doit retrouver ses véritables voies d'approche vers la littérature et la révolution' (*Que peut la littérature?*, p. 44). The path to literature and the path to revolution are rigorously bound up with one another.

This does not mean that Semprun envisages all literature as effectively Marxist even when its practitioners have quite different political and aesthetic allegiances. Having suggested both that literature has no power and that its contestatory impulse is revolutionary, he paints an ambivalent picture of its capabilities and its achievement:

Car le pouvoir de la littérature est immense, mais ambigu. Aussi bien mystificateur que démystificateur, dévoilant le monde ou le recouvrant de concepts chosifiés. Et ce n'est pas un pouvoir immédiat: il n'est pas en prise directe sur les événements, il est toujours en retard, ou en avance sur les exigences de la politique. (*Que peut la littérature?*, p. 44)

Literature may be reactionary or progressive. Moreover, the *bourgeoisie* – a term which Semprun uses with caution, but uses nonetheless – has found ways of taming the revolutionary potential of literature. By controlling the production and dissemination of culture, by assimilating artists and making them representatives of their society rather than leaving them as outsiders and opponents, it makes literature an organ of power. Semprun refers here to the Nobel Prize, and he is clearly alluding to Sartre's refusal of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1963. Sartre did not want to be the Nobel laureate because it would have made of him

a consecrated author, officially sanctioned by the agents of the state even in his opposition to them. Semprun implicitly approves of Sartre's rejection of the prize because it affirms the potentially revolutionary power of art and the artist against the bourgeois establishment's attempt to neutralize them.

Semprun's conclusion is mixed. Like all social constructs, literature has no timeless essence by which it can be defined. It is not *inherently* either reactionary or revolutionary, but it has the potential to be both. It may mask the truth, be assimilated by the ruling classes and be in league with the dominant ideology; or it may contribute to the struggle against the reigning ideology, anticipating different forms of social and ethical interrelation. There is no doubt as to which role Semprun would like to see it perform. The triumph of the *bourgeoisie* has been to deprive literature of its 'pouvoir de scandale' (*Que peut la littérature?*, p. 47). For the *bourgeoisie*, the real scandal would be the loss of power, and in Semprun's concluding words, 'Eh bien, camarades, faisons que ce scandale arrive' (p. 47). Literature is revolutionary insofar as it contributes to the communist project of overturning the dominance of the *bourgeoisie*; it is reactionary insofar as it fails to challenge the status quo.

Throughout his talk, Semprun speaks from a position which he identifies as Marxist. His support for formal literary experimentation over the rigidity of socialist realism is, he suggests, a properly Marxist position, even if it runs counter to the official positions of communist regimes. Semprun's Marxism is about struggle, contestation and renewal rather than dogma and doctrine. In November 1964, his failure to tow the party line would lead to his definitive expulsion from the Spanish Communist Party. So Semprun speaks as a Marxist, but one whose relation to Communist Party orthodoxy would soon be questioned, and was perhaps already wavering. His contribution to *Que peut la littérature?* gives a hint of this in his reference to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Solzhenitsyn's account of the Soviet Gulags had been published in France in 1963, the same year as *Le Grand Voyage*. In Chapter 2 of this book, I discuss how, as Semprun would elaborate in his later memoir *Quel beau dimanche!*, reading the book was deeply troubling because it completely transformed his understanding of his deportation to Buchenwald (see *Quel Beau Dimanche!*, pp. 382–85). For the young communist, deportation was the price to be paid for opposition to fascism. The liberation of the camps represented the victory of communism over fascism, right over



wrong: ‘Nous rentrions des camps nazis, nous étions bons, les méchants avaient été punis, la Justice et la Raison accompagnaient nos pas’ (*Que peut la littérature?*, p. 37). Knowledge of the Gulag camps destroyed that comforting self-conception because the communist system turned out *also* to be a force of oppression, building a camp system in which millions of people would die senselessly. *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* shows the Revolution turning bad: ‘Il n’y a plus d’innocence possible, après ce récit, pour quelqu’un qui essaie de vivre – réellement vivre – à l’intérieur d’une conception marxiste du monde’ (*Que peut la littérature?*, p. 37).<sup>1</sup> Semprun still speaks as a Marxist, but one whose complacent good conscience has been severely rocked, and who would soon find no further place within the official communist movement.

For Semprun, Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* is an example of a scandalous, revolutionary text because it challenges the most fundamental convictions of its communist reader. This raises the question – to which I shall return – of how far Semprun’s own literary writing is *scandalous* in the sense he describes in *Que peut la littérature?* His contribution to the symposium stages a superficially confident yet wavering Marxist voice, seeking the revolutionary potential of art in formal experimentation but also fearing that literature is toothless and reactionary even if, thematically, it embraces social progress. What, then, of his own literary work? In 1963 – the year before *Que peut la littérature?* – Semprun had made his literary début with the award-winning, well-received *Le Grand Voyage*, a partly fictionalized account of his deportation to and arrival in Buchenwald, mixed with memories of life before, during and after his time in the camp.

### *Le Grand Voyage*

*Le Grand Voyage* begins in disorder and confusion: ‘Il y a cet entassement des corps dans le wagon, cette lancinante douleur dans le genou droit. Les jours, les nuits. Je fais un effort et j’essaye de compter les jours, de compter les nuits. Ça m’aidera peut-être à y voir clair’ (p. 11). What is happening, who is speaking? There is a pain and there is a knee, but they

1 On the importance of this passage for Semprun, see Tidd, *Jorge Semprún*, p. 91. Tidd, like some others, uses the Spanish spelling of Semprun’s name. Here and elsewhere in this book I use the spelling without an accent, as it appears on the French-language original versions of the works I discuss.

are as yet impersonal. Neither is associated with a speaking subject. Not until the third sentence does an 'I' appear, still unnamed. The role of this 'I' will be to create order out of the opening confusion, to identify himself as a reasoning subject who has a body capable of feeling pain and a consciousness capable of making sense out of disorder.

It turns out that the narrator, later named as Gérard, is one of 120 men in a railway wagon on the slow journey to Buchenwald. Soon, Gérard will begin a dialogue with one of his companions *en route* to the camp, 'le gars de Semur'. The text wanders between past, present and future until their arrival in Buchenwald, and the companion's death. A short second section, narrated in the third person, describes Gérard's arrival in Buchenwald. On its publication in 1963, *Le Grand Voyage* was acclaimed as one of the first works to deal with the camps in a sophisticated literary form, drawing on Proust's treatment of memory, modernist stream of consciousness and the non-linear narratives of the contemporary *nouveaux romanciers*. It was awarded the Prix Formentor and the Prix littéraire de la Résistance, and immediately established Semprun as a literary figure to be reckoned with. In thematic terms, there is nevertheless not much that is *new* here, and little reason to find the work as shocking as Semprun would find *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. For French readers, the existence and brutality of the camps had already been documented from a communist perspective by David Rousset in *L'Univers concentrationnaire* (1946) and *Les Jours de notre mort* (1947), and by Robert Antelme in *L'Espèce humaine* (1947); Alain Resnais's short documentary film about the camps, *Nuit et brouillard*, had caused controversy in 1956; and aspects of the Jewish experience had been described by Elie Wiesel in *La Nuit* (1958), and widely reported because of the Eichmann trial in Israel in 1961. The revelation that the camps were terrible and the Nazis were bad is not going to surprise anyone; and although the guy from Semur is shocked when Gérard tells him about the existence of concentration camps in France, no reader in 1963 had any excuse for not knowing about them.

There may be no harm in reminding readers of these things, but there is nothing *scandalous* about them in the sense that Semprun would use the term in his later contribution to *Que peut la littérature?* We should recall, though, that in his contribution to that symposium Semprun insisted that what makes a work valid for a Marxist, or at least for the Marxist he was, is not its content. Content is imposed on writers by the world and their personal obsessions, and they can do little about it (*Que peut la littérature?*, p. 31). What makes a work valid as a vehicle

of Marxist critique is its formal innovation, its endeavour to find new ways of expressing content and thereby to transform the content that can be expressed. If *Le Grand Voyage* tells us little new about the camps, the experience of reading it is unlike that occasioned by the sometimes deliberately flat, stylistically unadventurous testimonies that preceded it. As an author steeped in literary modernism, Semprun takes for granted that no neutral, simple narrative access to the truth of experience is possible. If we are even to glimpse the reality of the event, it can only be through the most painstaking, tortuous formal means. If the truth is complex, then so must be the literary forms which endeavour to approach it.

*Le Grand Voyage* shares with contemporary examples of the French *nouveau roman* a deep self-consciousness and reflexivity about the possibilities and limits of narrative. It is as much concerned with the problems of storytelling, with the difficulty of ordering experience and memory into a coherent, meaningful whole, as it is with the specific theme of the deportation. Semprun takes for granted that it is impossible to separate thematic and formal issues. His text anguishes over its ability or inability to turn the memory of deportation into something communicable and intelligible. A key factor in this is the status of the narrator and his standing in relation to his text. As indicated above, the first person emerges in the third sentence of the book to bring clarity and order to the depersonalized chaos of sensation. The narrator embraces this function with a pedagogic assurance which borders on being irritating. He quickly establishes himself as the person who knows, understands and explains. The role of the guy from Semur is to be his uncomprehending stooge, to whom everything must be explained. From the beginning, the narrator asserts control over his narrative, insisting that it is up to him to decide what he will and won't explain, what he will and won't recount (p. 18). He is sovereign over his own story: 'Mais c'est moi qui écris cette histoire et je fais comme je veux' (p. 26). Like Semprun in *Que peut la littérature?*, the narrator grounds his authority in a Marxist understanding of the war, conceived in terms of class conflict rather than national enmities. The Germans are not *essentially* either better or worse than the French; both are the products of their culture and history. The communist *résistant* understands full well that he is being deported as a direct consequence of his anti-fascist beliefs and actions. How are we to overcome the hostilities which lead to world war? The narrator has his answer ready to hand: 'il s'agit tout simplement d'instaurer la société sans classes' (p. 56).

The narrator appears to be knowing and secure in his values, and hence in the values of the text over which he asserts sovereignty. As already discussed, in the later work *Quel beau dimanche!*, Semprun would speak more expansively than in *Que peut la littérature?* about how reading Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* completely transformed the communist perspective in which *Le Grand Voyage* was written. Semprun's first book corresponds to 'une vision communiste du monde' (*Quel beau dimanche!*, p. 384). That vision was severely shaken by the realization that Soviet communism had produced the Gulag system. In his later work Semprun renounces the political confidence which had underpinned the narrator's self-assurance in *Le Grand Voyage*. What I want to suggest here is that his self-assurance is *already* palpably crumbling in the earlier text. *Le Grand Voyage* is characterized by a mismatch between the narrator's insistence on narrative and interpretive control and a wayward textual drift which presages the collapse of his belief system.

A number of features of *Le Grand Voyage* support this suggestion. First, although the narrator sets himself up as the master of narrative and meaning, it is striking that he announces the need for explanations but does not ultimately provide them. 'Faudra que je lui explique', he says (p. 24); or, 'Il faudra que j'explique tout ça au gars de Semur, bien sûr qu'il comprendra' (p. 46). Or he might be reluctant to explain: 'Je n'ai pas envie de lui expliquer' (p. 119). Narration and explanation are deferred or refused. The narrator clings to his authority to recount and understand, but repeatedly fails to deliver. Moreover, there is a pressing sense that his text is less under his intentional control than he insists. He tells us that he narrates what he wants, as he wants and when he wants. The deferral of narrative is justified by the voluntary forgetting which the narrator says is necessary before a full recounting can take place. But the texture of the work suggests anything other than narrative command. It is repetitive and digressive, with disorientating leaps between past, present and future. The narrator insists that he alone decides what will be recounted and how it will be recounted, but the work itself gives the impression that the subject's control of memory and meaning is an illusion. Moreover, the voluntary forgetting of a traumatic past which makes survival possible can be interrupted at any moment by an experience akin to Proustian involuntary memory, but darker in its implications. An act as simple as eating bread with friends can suddenly transport the narrator and his text back to the near-starvation of the camps (see pp. 148–51). The whole text of *Le Grand Voyage*, I would

venture to suggest, is built around the losing struggle of an embattled subject to keep the chaos and trauma of memory at bay.

Referring to an earlier attempt to transcribe his experiences in Buchenwald, the narrator says that the book ‘ne servirait qu’à mettre en ordre mon passé pour moi-même’ (p. 149). He abandons it because he knows that it has no value: ‘je sais déjà qu’il ne vaut rien’ (p. 153). The attempt is worthless for two reasons: because it is written only for the narrator himself, and because its aim is to create an artificial, unsustainable order out of material which resists any such organization. Here, *Le Grand Voyage* designates the project of sense-making as doomed to failure, even as its sometimes over-confident narrator insists on his authority over his text. Who is this work written for anyway? The earlier version, the narrator implies, was written for himself. The later version creates a narratee, the guy from Semur, who is the willing recipient of the narrator’s superior understanding. Having invented the ideal narratee, however, the text also kills him off, leaving the narrator with no one capable of successfully completing the bond of storytelling which ties speaker to listener in a relation of reciprocal interdependency:

je pense que c’est moche que le gars de Semur soit mort. Il n’y a plus personne à qui je puisse parler de ce voyage. C’est comme si j’avais fait tout seul ce voyage. Je suis tout seul, désormais, à me souvenir de ce voyage. La solitude de ce voyage va me ronger, qui sait, toute ma vie. (p. 165)

The journey is impossible to forget and impossible to recount, and the only person capable of receiving the narrative is dead. The narrator is left with an untellable story and a missing narratee.

*Le Grand Voyage* is constructed around a stark contrast between the narrator’s display of moral and epistemological self-confidence and the unstable, digressive, repetitive text over which he purports to preside. The narrator knows his values and is secure in them; he understands what is happening to him, and he explains it to his narratee and reader. Yet his narrative control is pressingly at odds with the work we have before us, which wanders and jumps to a bewildering, disorientating degree. To put it schematically, it is as if an omniscient nineteenth-century narrator has been cast into a chaotic modernist narrative. The resulting blockage is encapsulated in an exchange between Gérard and his comrade Michel:

‘Au fait, tu ne m’as encore rien raconté’.

Je sais de quoi il veut parler, mais je ne veux pas savoir. [...] Je n’ai pas envie de raconter quoi que ce soit.

‘Raconter?’, je réponds, ‘qu’est-ce qu’il y a à raconter?’

Michel me regarde.

‘Justement’, dit-il, ‘je ne sais pas’.

Je découpe un petit carré de pain, je découpe un petit carré de fromage, je mets le pain sous le fromage et je mange. Ensuite, une gorgée de vin du pays.

‘Et moi, je ne sais plus ce qu’il y aurait à raconter’.

Michel mange aussi. Ensuite, il demande:

‘Trop de choses, peut-être?’

‘Ou pas assez, pas assez par rapport à ce qu’on ne pourra jamais raconter’.

Michel, cette fois, s’étonne.

‘Tu en es sûr?’, dit-il.

‘Non’, je dois reconnaître, ‘peut-être n’était-ce qu’une phrase’. (p. 209)

What we witness here is the whole narrative project in the process of breaking down. The narrator has narrated nothing; he does not know what there is to recount; he cannot demarcate the lines between what can be told and what will never be recounted. The text says too much or too little, but never the right amount. Moreover, in relation to Michel, the text once again underscores the disappearance of its proper narratee: ‘maintenant que ce passé revient plus fortement que jamais en mémoire, je ne peux plus le raconter à Michel. Je ne sais plus où trouver Michel’ (p. 210). Even if there were a story to be told, there is no one to whom it can be successfully narrated.

In part, *Le Grand Voyage* can be read as the story of the dissolution of its narrator, together with his authority over his own text; and in this respect, it anticipates a future crisis in the Marxist confidence which is still affirmed at this stage of Semprun’s literary and political career. The most striking indication of this comes at the end of the first and longest part of the work. After the terrible journey to Buchenwald, the guy from Semur dies. The narrator has lost his friend and listener. As narratee, the guy had occupied a vital place in the circuit of communication. His death signals more than a temporary breakdown in that circuit which might be repaired by the discovery of a substitute narratee. The disappearance of the narratee also fatally disrupts the identity of the narrator, as Gérard explains:

J’allonge son cadavre sur le plancher du wagon et c’est comme si je déposais ma propre vie passée, tous les souvenirs qui me relient encore au monde d’autrefois. Tout ce que je lui avais raconté, au cours de ces journées, de ces nuits interminables [...] tout ça qui était ma vie va s’évanouir, puisqu’il n’est plus là. (pp. 256–57)

The death of the other brings with it a transformation of the self, which also entails a loss of the speaker's ability to interpret and to narrate. This is dramatically marked in the final sentence-long paragraph of the first section of the book: 'Peut-être avait-il dit: "Ne me laisse pas, Gérard", et Gérard saute sur le quai, dans la lumière aveuglante' (p. 257). The confident first-person narrator has now vanished along with the guy from Semur, to be replaced in the short second section of the book by a more distant third person, as if something of Gérard's most intimate being has been destroyed by his entry into the world of Buchenwald. The work leaves Gérard at a point where the reality of the camps is still unknown and unimaginable:

Bientôt, quand ils auront franchi ces quelques centaines de mètres qui les séparent encore de la porte monumentale de cet enclos, ça n'aura plus de sens de dire de quelque chose, n'importe quoi, que c'est inimaginable, mais pour l'instant ils sont encore empêtrés dans les préjugés, les réalités d'autrefois, qui rendent impossible l'imagination de ce qui, tout compte fait, va se révéler parfaitement réel. (p. 278)

### The scandal of literature

Work in trauma studies has accustomed us to the notion that signs of trauma may become apparent years after the event or events which caused it. During a period of latency, the traumatized subject may seem to have survived his or her ordeal relatively unscathed. Only later, sometimes much later, does an unsettled past return to corrode the present. Moreover, Cathy Caruth (following Freud) argues that latency is inherent within traumatic experience: 'The historical power of trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is experienced at all' (*Unclaimed Experience*, p. 17). It would be a simple matter to use this lens as a means of understanding the opposition and interdependence of forgetting and remembering, survival and testimony, in Semprun's writing. What is more specifically interesting about his work, though, is the suggestion of how relatively untraumatic experiences become traumatic retrospectively, when the conceptual frameworks which had made them bearable start to fall apart. Part of what is fascinating about *Le Grand Voyage* is that it encapsulates a moment *just before* trauma breaks out. At the time of their deportation and for years after the war, Semprun and his communist colleagues retained a political framework

which gave their terrible experiences both context and meaning. As he wrote *Le Grand Voyage*, Semprun had not yet fully experienced the collapse of that framework, which is reflected in his narrator's intellectual confidence and claim to retain authority over the content and meaning of his narrative. At the same time, through its meandering, digressive, disorientating textuality and the abrupt disappearance of the first-person narrator, the work foreshadows an imminent catastrophe, which can be linked to Semprun's disillusionment with and expulsion from the Communist Party. This would be explored more explicitly in Semprun's later memoirs *Quel beau dimanche!* (1980), *L'Écriture ou la vie* (1994) and *Le Mort qu'il faut* (2001), and through the suicides and violent deaths which occur in his later fictional works.

In terms of the value and values of literature, this leads to an uncertain conclusion. In *Que peut la littérature?*, Semprun ties literature to the scandalous militant project of tearing power from the *bourgeoisie*. The narrator of *Le Grand Voyage* appears to share this project, as he calmly, pedagogically, explains the meaning of the war and the existence of the camps to his docile listener, thereby instructing him in the ways of Revolution. But the death of the narratee, the text's loss of its first-person narrator and the first glimpse of the unimaginable reality of Buchenwald shake the beliefs which underpin literature's militant mission. Moreover, it is important to recall that Semprun's career as a renowned literary author begins only at the point when his political convictions are wavering. During the period of his political activity he did not write literary works; indeed, he abandoned his initial attempt to write about Buchenwald as impossible and worthless. He insists that he didn't write because he did not wish to remember. Recounting the past would entail a reawakening of traumatic experiences which his political beliefs had succeeded in taming, albeit only temporarily. The title of *L'Écriture ou la vie* – writing or life – poses the dilemma for the traumatized author in stark terms: you can either live or write, but not both, because writing takes you back to the sites of death. This resonates with the final, desperate, repeated words of *Le Grand Voyage*: 'quitter le monde des vivants, quitter le monde des vivants' (*Le Grand Voyage*, p. 279). In 1993, Semprun described why he abandoned his initial plan to write about his experiences:

Il me fallait choisir entre l'écriture et la vie, j'ai choisi cette dernière. J'ai choisi une longue cure d'aphasie, d'amnésie délibérée, pour revivre. Ou pour survivre. J'ai choisi du même coup l'illusion d'un avenir, par le moyen de l'engagement politique, puisque l'engagement dans l'écriture



me ramenait à l'enfermement de la mémoire et de la mort. ('Préface', p. 14)

Writing, recounting, means remembering, which is the contrary of survival; living, surviving, requires forgetting. Political commitment replaces a literary career rather than underpinning it. In this account, literature appears not as an agent of militant action, but as a deadening immersion in trauma.

This brings us back to the first response Semprun offers to the question 'What can literature do?': '*la littérature ne peut rien*' (*Que peut la littérature?*, p. 29; emphasis original). He specifies that what he means by this is that, in the view of some authors, it has no power in the public domain, no ethical, political or historical influence. Although Semprun goes on to repudiate this opinion, his work perhaps gives it plausibility, as it equates literature with a personally disastrous, suicidal re-emergence of a traumatic past. An exponent of ethical criticism such as Martha Nussbaum takes the opposite view. For her, the best literature extends our experience, makes us more open to others and refines our empathy. By doing this it brings both private and political benefits, and therein lies the value of literature (see *Love's Knowledge*, p. 47). While even more radically endorsing the potential of literature to be a militant force for social change, Semprun also suggests a much bleaker view which consigns it to failure: for the author, it is irreconcilable with the wellbeing which only forgetting can confer; the people who would truly understand it are dead; and its actual readers may get nothing from it which will help them to live. In this account, literature is not so much a beneficial encounter with otherness as a dire exposure to unfathomable, unspeakable chaos and cruelty.

*Le Grand Voyage* shows a militant literary project being transformed into a record of failure. It is tempting to try to turn this failure into a mitigated success, by the process of *qui perd gagne* (loser wins), as Sartre did in his magisterial interpretation of the work of Jean Genet. According to Sartre, by refusing to communicate, Genet succeeded in communicating the part of incommunicability at the core of human beings (*Saint Genet*, pp. 645–90). His failure is his success. Sartre was aware, though, that this entailed a betrayal of Genet (p. 646); and in the case of Semprun and other Holocaust authors, I suspect that any such recuperation would involve betraying the texts we actually have in front of us. Finding value in a text's enactment of the corrosion of values may be a neat rhetorical trick, but it may have more to do with our desire as readers for comfort than any genuine encounter with the dark otherness

of trauma. Lawrence Langer is persuasive in arguing that we should desist from trying to find signs of hope where there are none:

If we go on using a discourse of consolation about an event [the Holocaust] for which there is none, it is partly because old habits of language cling like burrs to the pelts of civilization, and partly because no full-fledged discourse of ruin, more appropriate to our hapless times, has yet emerged. (*Admitting the Holocaust*, pp. 6–7)

To return to an earlier question, what is actually scandalous about a literary achievement such as Semprun's? For Semprun in *Que peut la littérature?*, the scandal of literature would be its alignment with a revolutionary project. His literary writing, however, depicts the disturbance of that project to the point where it becomes impossible, with nothing to replace it. It may be that many of the works which matter to us are not the ones which cultivate our empathy and refine our moral discernment. Semprun says – and resists believing – that literature can do nothing. But what is this 'nothing'? Insofar as literature matters to us, it may be because the 'nothing' it can achieve still fascinates us, not making us better people to any quantifiable or even ascertainable degree, but all the same letting us see a world which does not belong to us, which we cannot make ours, but which speaks to us in immeasurably unnerving ways. As I say this, have I succumbed to the temptation of *qui perd gagne*? That is not for me to say.

### Repetition, referentiality and fiction

Semprun is best known as the author of works which are autobiographical in some sense, rooted in the experience and memory of war: his first, partly fictional book, *Le Grand Voyage*, and then what Suleiman calls his 'Buchenwald memoirs' (*Crises of Memory*, p. 137), *Quel beau dimanche!* (1980), *L'écriture ou la vie* (1994) and *Le Mort qu'il faut* (2001). These books establish the standing of their author as a Buchenwald survivor struggling to represent and to understand his personal experience and its broader historical, philosophical and political significance. They may incorporate fictional elements. In *Le Grand Voyage*, the narrator is called Gérard rather than Jorge, and the 'gars de Semur' is not based on a single real person. Even so, encouraged by the knowledge that Semprun was known as Gérard in the Resistance, critics have generally treated the book as principally

testimonial. Semprun's most self-consciously *fictional* works are not so well known, almost to the point of being neglected. If they are discussed at all, it has most commonly been to the extent that they reflect and refract Semprun's more overtly testimonial works and, like them, deal with the difficulty of representing and understanding the experience of the concentration camps.<sup>2</sup>

So what is the place of fiction in Semprun's literary output? A much-quoted passage from near the beginning of *L'Écriture ou la vie* provides a ready answer. Here, Semprun expresses his distinctive view on the possibility of narrating the experience of Buchenwald. He rejects the claim that it is unnarratable. Everything can be said, so long as testimony can become 'un objet artistique, un espace de création. Ou de récréation. Seul l'artifice d'un récit maîtrisé parviendra à transmettre partiellement la vérité du témoignage' (p. 23). So narration is possible, but it will also be interminable, requiring art and artifice. And it will also inevitably entail falling into what Semprun calls 'la répétition et le ressassement' (*L'Écriture ou la vie*, p. 23). This conception of the attenuated speakability of experience explains and justifies the most characteristic formal features of Semprun's written style in both his novels and testimonial works: it is digressive and repetitive, constantly returning to key incidents and episodes, reviewing and renarrating them, teasing at language in order to draw out new strands of meaning, and flitting restlessly between different periods in time in order to convey the multilayered density of experience and memory. Artifice, and therefore fiction, further the overall purpose of approaching ever more closely, if never definitively fixing, 'la vérité du témoignage'.

In this account, then, 'la répétition et le ressassement' are textual devices which serve an identifiable end. What is repeated and endlessly reviewed is the truth of testimony, which can be stated *only* through that process of repetition and review. Fiction is justified, perhaps even necessary, because there is no simple, direct, natural, artifice-free means of communicating the complexity of the real. The key point here is that there is something preceding the repetition, something that is repeated: a reality which can be narrated even if it is never fully contained in any

2 There have nevertheless been some impressive attempts to read Semprun's work in other contexts. See in particular Tynan, 'Spectres of Patriarchy', and Omlor, *Jorge Semprún*. Omlor comments that 'Semprún's œuvre has too often been limited to the testimony of the concentration camps' (p. 3), and she sets out to redress the balance with insightful readings of some of his fictional works.

one version. In this chapter I suggest that this only partly explains the significance of fiction as it is explored in Semprun's novels. The view of repetition as the repetition of *something which precedes it, locatable in history and memory*, coexists – a little uneasily – with a quite different practice, in which what repetition repeats is dispersed and unlocatable. And this practice is bound up, as we shall see, with the practice of fiction itself, as it is instantiated in some of Semprun's work.

The question here is: *what does repetition repeat?* This also raises the issue of reference: is there something behind the text which precedes it and toward which it gestures, even if it cannot be fully communicated? Semprun's work as an author of fiction began in the 1960s, when the literary scene was dominated by the *nouveau roman*, which opposed the tenets of Sartrean committed literature by insisting on the autonomy of literature. In this context, what mattered most was the experimental adventure of writing rather than the sociopolitical responsibilities of the artist. Semprun's fiction is heavily marked by his sympathy for the aims and practices of the *nouveaux romanciers*; but unlike much of their work, it constantly foregrounds the historical and political contexts in which it is set. His characters are typically survivors or children of the survivors of the Nazi concentration camps, or victims of Stalinist repression, or exiles from fascist Spain, or some combination of all of these. In terms of literary history, Semprun's achievement as an author is that he occupies an intermediary position, negotiating the line – and showing that there is no necessary conflict – between formal innovation and political relevance.

Semprun's literary writing appears to be almost ideally suited to contemporary trauma studies. If hard-line poststructuralism in the 1960s and 1970s can be depicted (more by its opponents than its more nuanced supporters) as resolutely textualist and unhistorical, one of the gains of trauma studies has been to reinstate the referential function of art. Thomas Elsaesser describes trauma theory as '[a theory] of recovered referentiality' ('Postmodernism as Mourning Work', p. 201). It insists on a relation between the world of the text and something which precedes and lies outside it, even if that 'something' is not immediately available to consciousness and representation. According to the key concept of latency or deferred action, trauma entails a delayed response; it becomes apparent after – sometimes a long time after – the event(s) which inaugurated it. In such cases, the trauma may be difficult or even impossible to reconstruct and to communicate, but it remains indubitably, incontrovertibly *real*. This point is replicated in what have become the canonical texts of

trauma studies. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth refers to Freud's account of the railway accident (discussed in Chapter 2 of the current book) as showing 'not only *the reality* of the violent event but also *the reality* of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known' (p. 6; emphasis added). Discussing Camus's *La Peste*, Shoshana Felman suggests that 'the allegory seems to name the *vanishing of the event* as part of its *actual historical occurrence*' ('Camus' *The Plague*', p. 103; emphasis original). The founding traumatic event, whatever it might be, is *real*; its absolute, extra-textual reality is vigorously affirmed even if it cannot be known or narrated by the traumatized subject. Trauma studies, in these key works, entails a kind of *mitigated realism*: *mitigated*, because the 'reality' which lies behind it is never fully available; but *realism* because the actual historical truth of the underlying traumatic event is not doubted. Michael Rothberg's term 'traumatic realism' captures this conception. The works he discusses, for example by Charlotte Delbo and Ruth Klüger, are *traumatic* insofar as their subject resists direct representation and may therefore require nonrepresentational, nonreferential practices of writing; but they are also *realist* insofar as they refer to a reality which precedes and informs them. Traumatic realism, according to Rothberg, shares the modernist distrust of representation, but 'it nevertheless cannot free itself from the claims of mimesis, and it remains committed to a project of historical cognition through the mediation of culture. The abyss at the heart of trauma entails not only the exile of the real but also its insistence' (*Traumatic Realism*, p. 140). The Holocaust is no less real for being unspeakable.

Freud's famous account of a child's *fort-da* game in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is an important antecedent to this discussion of the loss and recovery of the vanishing referent. Freud observes a child (his grandson) repeatedly playing a game in which he discards an object and then (sometimes) retrieves it. As he discards it, he utters a sound interpreted as the word 'fort' (gone); and as he retrieves it, he says 'da' (there). Freud treats this repetitive behaviour as an enigma to be solved, and finally succeeds in finding an explanation which satisfies him: 'The interpretation of the game then became obvious' (p. 285). The child has found a way of mastering his distress when his mother leaves him by repeating it in the loss of the object ('fort'), then rewarding himself with the joy of its return ('da'). As in the versions of trauma studies discussed above, a mitigated realism underlies Freud's analysis of the game. The repeated *fort-da* enacts, negotiates and contains the child's real distress at the mother's real absence. The game has been understood when what

Freud calls its ‘true purpose’ (p. 285) has been uncovered. It does not directly express or represent the child’s experience, but it refers to such experience in an ultimately interpretable way.

This is not the place to attempt a review of the importance of the *fort-da* game in Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* or his subsequent thinking, or of the extensive discussion to which it has given rise. I will pause only to signal the significance, in the current context, of Derrida’s discussion *fort-da* in *La Carte postale*. In the repetitiveness of the repeated game, Derrida observes something which exceeds its final containment by the interpretation in terms of the mother’s absence. For Derrida, Freud becomes bound up in the game and its repetition by describing it and re-enacting it in his writing practice. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* plays with discarding (‘fort’) a key element of psychoanalytical theory – the pleasure principle – while also holding on to it (‘da’). Freud ‘rèpète la répétition de la répétition’ (*La Carte postale*, p. 322). This is not so much the repetition of something specific and identifiable in experience (the absence of the mother) as the characteristic movement of Freud’s speculative text, constantly wavering between the displeasure of loss and the pleasure of return. In this account, what is repeated is the gesture and momentum of repetition itself. The drama of loss and return described and enacted by Freud’s text cannot be fully contained by reference to the temporary absence of the child’s mother. So *fort-da* raises another series of questions about what is lost and what comes back. What does it mean to return? Is what comes back the same as what went away? Does repetition repeat identity or difference? I suggest that, in a nutshell, these are some of the fundamental questions raised in Semprun’s writing, and especially his fiction. To take the titles of two of his novels, *La Deuxième Mort de Ramón Mercader* (1969) and *Netchaïev est de retour* (1987), how can Ramón Mercader (the assassin of Trotsky) die twice, and how can Nechayev (a long-dead nineteenth-century Russian anarchist) come back?<sup>3</sup> The dead are gone, yet they do not die and they return to die again. If the novels answer these questions (to a degree), they also dwell incessantly on the twin enigmas of repetition and return.

3 Trotsky’s assassin, Ramón Mercader, did not in fact die until 1978, nearly a decade after the publication of Semprun’s novel. The Russian revolutionary Sergey Nechayev died in 1882. In this chapter, I use the English version of his name when referring to the historical figure, and the French version when referring to the character in Semprun’s novel.

### Repetition as revision

In her important reading of Semprun's Buchenwald memoirs, Suleiman refers to Freud's account of the *fort-da* game, and distinguishes between repetition as a desire for mastery and repetition as a sign of the death instinct. This in turn is related to the distinction between narrative memory and traumatic memory: the latter (using another set of Freudian terms) 'acts out' trauma (remaining obsessively trapped within its confines) whereas the other entails 'working through', moving towards (even if never fully achieving) understanding and reconciliation. Semprun's version of repetition is, she argues, more akin to working-through. In fact, she prefers to call it 'revision': 'a process whereby the memory of a traumatic past event is not merely repeated but continually reinterpreted in light of the subject's evolving preoccupations and self-understandings' (*Crises of Memory*, p. 140). Revision is, she says, 'Semprun's characteristic signature as a writer' (*Crises of Memory*, p. 141). This form of repetition permits – indeed it positively thrives on – variation and artifice. Examining different accounts of an incident which occurred shortly after his arrival at Buchenwald, Suleiman accepts differences between them because 'The witness can be mistaken, even though his account is given in good faith [...]. A testimony is always, necessarily, one incomplete version of an event' (*Crises of Memory*, p. 152). The use of artifice may seem to threaten the status of the relevant works as literal testimony, but Suleiman is nevertheless content that 'whatever liberties he may take with positive facts, Semprun reminds us that he is incontrovertibly a survivor and a witness' (*Crises of Memory*, p. 157). And so, Suleiman concludes, 'continuous revision is the literary performance of the working through of trauma, a performance that Semprun's Buchenwald memoirs enact brilliantly' (*Crises of Memory*, p. 158).

Suleiman's reading is based explicitly and exclusively on Semprun's testimonial memoirs. The question remains of whether the same can be argued of those of Semprun's works which are presented as novels. Is novelistic fiction just an extended version of the 'artifice' which Semprun judges to be necessary and Suleiman finds acceptable in testimony? The novels themselves give plenty of encouragement to interpretation in the light of Semprun's experiences. There is a family resemblance between many of his principal characters. They share the same cultural and historical references, effortlessly spotting and elaborating on each other's quotations and allusions. Many of them also share aspects of

Semprun's past: Rafael Artigas in *L'Algarabie* (1981) and Juan Larrea in *La Montagne blanche* (1986), for example, are both Buchenwald survivors and writers with Spanish origins. Despite differences between them, characters sometimes seem to merge with one another, so that after the death of Artigas in *L'Algarabie*, his friend Carlos finds that he is invaded by the private memories of his dead friend.

The novels can, then, be regarded as being populated by Semprun's *alter egos*, living out the lives and deaths that could have been his own. The fact that many of them are killed or commit suicide can also be understood through the Freudian lens of acting-out and working-through. In *La Montagne blanche*, Juan Larrea kills himself after recounting his experiences of Buchenwald. He thereby illustrates the alternative posited, and perhaps finally overcome, in *L'écriture ou la vie* between forgetting and surviving on the one hand or remembering and dying on the other. When Larrea is overwhelmed by his memories of Buchenwald, he can no longer carry on living. It is only a small step from here to conclude that, if so many of Semprun's *alter egos* are condemned to die, it may be so that their author can carry on living. They die in his place, or perhaps part of him dies with them and their death conveys something of the survivor's sense of never fully returning from the camps; but at least for the time being their death allows him to continue.<sup>4</sup>

The temptation to read Semprun's novels in the light of what is well known about their author is strong. Moreover, the relatively small body of criticism devoted specifically to the novels effectively relegates them to a secondary position in Semprun's *œuvre*. *Le Grand Voyage* is a revealing exception. It is usually described as a novel but treated as a testimonial text, as if its 'autobiographical' element justifies and redeems its fictional form. Lawrence Langer, for example, describes how 'Semprun's survivor-narrator [in *Le Grand Voyage*] acknowledges images rising from the soil of history, not myth, images which he can share with his reader's consciousness, insofar as the reader submits to their promptings. But they are literal promptings, not literary ones' (*Admitting the Holocaust*, p. 120). What matters here is the literal, historical truth made available to the reader, which subsists intact

4 This reading is encouraged by Semprun in *L'écriture ou la vie* (p. 255), when he reveals that Juan Larrea was a pseudonym he had used while involved in clandestine work in Franco's Spain and, at the end of *La Montagne blanche*, that Larrea 's'est suicidé, mort à ma place'.



through the trial of artifice and fiction. Semprun's later novels are generally not discussed at all; or they are mentioned insofar as they reflect issues from the memoirs and ignored to the extent that they do not. In both testimonial works and novels, Semprun's 'real' subject, this implies, is himself: the survivor-witness engaged in history, struggling to deal with the aftermath of Buchenwald.

There are certainly strong links between Semprun's fiction and the historical events which marked his life. However, his novels also exhibit a tendency to dissociate themselves from reality as we know it. Most obviously, *L'Algarabie* is set in a counterfactual world in which the events of May 1968 have resulted in the fragmentation of the French state. De Gaulle has been assassinated and parts of Paris are outside government control. The novel envisages what may be a *possible* world, but one which the reader knows full well to be *false*. The liminary note in *La Deuxième Mort de Ramón Mercader* similarly insists that readers should make no connection between the fiction and the world we think we know: '*Les événements dont il est question dans ce récit sont tout à fait imaginaires. Bien plus: toute coïncidence avec la réalité serait non seulement fortuite, mais proprement scandaleuse*' (*La Deuxième Mort*, p. 9; emphasis original). The instruction to the reader could not be clearer: do not attempt to tie this fiction to any pre-existing reality. Fiction is imaginary not real, artifice not testimony. And yet it is hard to escape the sense that Semprun is playing a complex, deadly serious game here: how can we *not* link his novels, populated as they are by characters marked by the traumas and tragedies of the twentieth century, to a history which we know to be all too true? Insisting that we should not make the link between these novels and real events may be an ironic means of ensuring that we cannot help but make that link. It may be, as Semprun suggests, 'scandalous' to see a coincidence between his novels and reality, but that may be no bad thing in itself. As we saw earlier in this chapter, in his contribution to *Que peut la littérature?*, he describes *scandal* as precisely what literature should aim to achieve. If we are scandalized by his invention of unreal events, then so much the better.

The easier reading of Semprun's fiction is implicitly realist and autobiographical, autofictional or even 'autothanatographical'.<sup>5</sup> Across these variants, the 'auto-' remains constant. Semprun's works are treated as being about his own life and death, however much he may fictionalize

5 On Semprun's 'autothanatographical' writing, see Tidd, 'The Infinity of Testimony and Dying in Jorge Semprun's Holocaust Autothanatographies'.

them. He pushes us in this direction in *L'Algarabie*, for example, with clear hints that Artigas may in fact be none other than Jorge Semprun. The kind of reading that this encourages does not – and does not attempt to – separate the novels from the presence, however attenuated, of their author. In terms of repetition, what is repeated here is the same (Semprun, the author), even if the same is complex, fragmented and postmodern. It's all about me, even if 'me' cannot be simply narrated. To read Semprun's fiction independently of what we know about him and his experience has barely been attempted to any significant degree. Another way of putting this is to say that so far critics have shown little interest in his fiction *as fiction*; we are interested in it because, and insofar as, it tells us more about the author and his experiences. Semprun's defence of artifice and fiction has been seen, overwhelmingly, only in the context of a broader testimonial project. David Carroll's discussion of Semprun is exemplary in this respect, in that it both gives a place to fiction but limits that place to its role in the service of testimony; 'fiction', Carroll writes, 'is not a weapon to be used to assassinate memory but rather a means to enrich and complicate it' ('The Limits of Representation', p. 78). Fiction plays a part in a literary practice which is understood as primarily, fundamentally autobiographical. The text tells us about its author even when it does so by indirect means. The critical reception of Semprun is a glaring refutation of Barthes's claim that the Author is dead.

### Repetition as repetition

To some extent, Semprun's novels invite and demand this kind of reading. But it is not the only possible reading of his work, and other interpretive avenues have hardly begun to be explored. In this section, I want to look more closely at *Netchaïev est de retour*, regarding it as an extended reflection on the issues of return and repetition. *Netchaïev* is a detective story which begins with a murder and then uncovers the circumstances which led up to it. The specific perpetrators remain unnamed, but they are vaguely specified as international terrorists, and by the end lots of bad people have been suitably dispatched even if there is also some collateral damage. So far, so generic. The novel begins with an enigma, which it then sets out to resolve. Its broader resonance comes from the linkage of the initial murder to post-1968 terrorist movements, and to philosophical and political questions about the measures that are justifiable when society is perceived as unjust. This is in turn related

to the experience of the Second World War, since all of the principal characters have connections to the Resistance and the concentration camps, either directly or through their parents. Across the different generations, the novel poses searching questions about the difference between legitimate resistance and wilful violence: what separates those who died in Auschwitz and Buchenwald because they opposed Nazism from those who took to terrorism in the wake of the failure of May 1968 to change society? The strength of the novel, and its moral import, derive from its readiness to take this question seriously, without glib answers.

*Netchaïev* is, then, resolutely rooted in its historical context, adopting the form of detective fiction to examine links between the Second World War and modern France, and between Resistance violence and modern terrorism. Three years before the publication of the novel, Didier Daeninckx had used the detective format to similar effect in his well-regarded *Meurtres pour mémoire* (1984), which connects French state crimes during the Occupation to the infamous deaths of peacefully protesting Algerians in Paris in 1961. What Semprun distinctively adds to the political dimension of his work is an element of uncanniness which both accompanies and unsettles the realism of the novel. As suggested above, this is already implied by the title, *Netchaïev est de retour*. The historical Sergey Nechayev died in 1882, so how can he return? The novel explains this impossible return by the fact that Netchaïev was the codename of a terrorist, Daniel Laurençon. So it is not the 'real' Nechayev who returns, but someone who has borrowed his name. Yet Laurençon/Netchaïev was also believed to be dead. His companions in his terrorist cell had decided to abandon their armed struggle in order to return to mainstream society. He was condemned to death because he opposed the decision to renounce violence, though actually he survived. Years later, he also decides to renounce terrorism, and he returns to France in the hope of freeing himself from the murderous organization to which he has belonged for many years. Strangely, his return is consistently described in the novel as a return from death: it is not that he was *believed* to be dead, but that he *was* dead, and he has come back. Netchaïev dies and returns; Laurençon dies and returns. The murder with which the novel begins may be explained, but the novel raises further enigmas (echoing those we have already seen in relation to Charlotte Delbo): how can the dead come back, what is the dividing line between the living and the dead?

These questions are further complicated by the interpenetration of the lives, stories and identities of different sets of characters. The terrorist group which Laurençon forms with his friends in the wake of May 1968

parallels the Resistance group to which his long-dead father and his stepfather, Roger Marroux (the detective who investigates the murder with which the novel begins), had belonged during the Occupation. Within the terrorist group, the four male protagonists share the same cultural, political and erotic tastes, as did the Resistance group of the earlier generation. Laurençon's mother slept both with his father, who died before his birth as a result of his incarceration in Buchenwald, and with Marroux, just as in the later terrorist group Adriana Sponti becomes a shared love object. Across generations and across history, the lives of each of the characters echoes and repeats the lives of all the others. This is not to say that the characters are identical – the novel resists that implication – but nor do they have discrete identities separate from one another. Each reflects the other without repeating him or her identically.

The repetition-with-difference extends beyond the characters to affect the novel as a whole in its aesthetic dimension. This can be seen at a small scale through Pierre Quesnoy, the former militant and photographer who is the first to stumble inadvertently across evidence of Laurençon/Netchaïev's return. One night, Quesnoy is awoken by a nightmare in which he participates in the torture of a woman named Thérèse, whom he knows to be the writer Marguerite Duras. The nightmare evokes memories of his time as a soldier during the Algerian War of Independence, when he had been present during the torture of Algerian prisoners. It also alludes to his recent reading of Duras's *La Douleur*, which had been published in 1985. One of the stories in *La Douleur*, entitled 'Albert des Capitales', narrates how a character named Thérèse presides over the brutal torture of a presumed collaborator. In a liminary note, Duras writes: 'Thérèse c'est moi' (*La Douleur*, p. 134; quoted *Netchaïev*, p. 95). In an example of Rothberg's 'multidirectional memory', or Silverman's 'palimpsestic memory', an incident from the Algerian War reflects one from the Second World War; Duras claims that her fiction reflects her life. Quesnoy's life repeats the fiction which repeats the life of another. Moreover, within Duras's 'Albert des Capitales', the torturers are themselves victims of torture, as is indicated when we are told that they have been imprisoned at Montluc, a prison used by the Gestapo during the war.<sup>6</sup> The victims become torturers, in life and literature; and fiction reflects the life which becomes a fiction which in turn reflects the life of another. The first term is lost in a vortex

6 See *La Douleur*: 'D. en choisit deux qui sont passés par Montluc et qui ont dérouillé' (p. 142).

of repetition. In this account, repetition does not preserve sameness across the vicissitudes of time; rather, it undermines the autonomy of self-contained identities by exposing them to a process of replication and fragmentation without governing principles.

The appearance of Duras's *La Douleur* is by no means the only reference to earlier texts in Semprun's novel. On the contrary, the text constantly manifests its debt to other works. If, for example, Netchaïev returns from the dead in the figure of Daniel Laurençon, he does so at least in part through the mediation of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Demons* (1872), which is partly inspired by Nechayev, as well as through Albert Camus's *L'Homme révolté* (1951). Camus's work discusses Nechayev and quotes the passage (albeit in a different translation) which forms the epigraph to Part 2 of Semprun's novel.<sup>7</sup> The most important point of reference is Paul Nizan's novel *La Conspiration* (1938), which describes the lives and loves of five would-be revolutionary students in the years before the Second World War. *Netchaïev est de retour* references Nizan's work before it has even properly begun, since it is quoted as an epigraph to its first part. It is then quoted again within the opening pages as the friendship of two of the principal characters is inaugurated by a joint recitation of its first lines (p. 15). Semprun's novel goes on to refer and allude to Nizan's novel on numerous occasions. It is the 'livre fétiche' (p. 273) and the 'livre de chevet' (p. 311) of the friends. Semprun's novel quotes the description of Lucien Herr from *La Conspiration* (p. 312, quoting *La Conspiration*, p. 48). One of Semprun's characters, Marc Lilienthal, gives Nizan's novel to his lover, Fabienne, so that she can read it on the plane as she flies to an assignation with him.<sup>8</sup> Another character quotes it to his lover, changing the name of Nizan's Catherine to Semprun's Bettina, in order to explain her erotic deficiencies (p. 342, quoting *La Conspiration*, p. 196).

The numerous references to *La Conspiration* are not just an acknowledgement of an admired book; they also indicate a more fundamental reliance on the earlier novel as a source of repetition. One of Semprun's central characters, Elie Silberberg, is a novelist. Marroux suggests to

7 Compare the quotations in Albert Camus, *L'Homme révolté*, in *Œuvres complètes III*, p. 198, with *Netchaïev*, p. 199. Camus's interest in Nechayev is mentioned in *Netchaïev*, p. 108.

8 Moreover, Lilienthal's name recalls that of Rosenthal from *La Conspiration*: one is a valley of lilies (which also alludes to Balzac's *Le Lys dans la vallée*), the other a valley of roses.

him that his work is an incessant rewriting of Nizan's *La Conspiration*. In Nizan's novel one of the group of five, Pluvinage, betrays his friends by revealing the hiding place of a militant sought by the authorities. According to Marroux, Silberberg's novels reproduce this element of Nizan's plot:

C'est toujours, quelles qu'en soient les péripéties, les circonstances, qui peuvent varier, l'histoire d'un groupe et d'un traître. D'un traître supposé, du moins. Toujours le schéma de *La Conspiration*, en somme. Mais votre Pluvinage est moins déterminé, plus ambigu que chez Nizan. On ne sait jamais s'il est vraiment traître. (*Netchaïev*, p. 216)

In this account of actual or presumed treachery, we have a model of repetition with variation; and variation brings with it greater ambiguity. In Nizan's novel there is little doubt that Pluvinage is a traitor. Silberberg replicates Nizan's scheme but holds back from settling the truth or falsehood of the allegation of betrayal. Semprun's novel recalls that Nizan himself had been accused of betrayal after he left the Communist Party in 1939 (p. 273). Nizan's novel predicts its author's own fate, which is then repeated again in Silberberg's novels, which are themselves fictional insofar as they do not exist: Silberberg is, after all, a character in a novel rather than a real person.

If Silberberg's fictional novels repeat Nizan's real novel, then Semprun's real novel, *Netchaïev est de retour*, does so as well. Like Nizan, Semprun bases his novel on five characters, some of whom are students at the Ecole Normale Supérieure and who plot the downfall of bourgeois society. Pluvinage's betrayal is echoed in the more ambiguous story of Laurençon/Netchaïev. The latter is at first *accused* of betrayal by the revolutionary group to which he belongs because the others want to abandon the armed struggle. When he does not accept this, he must be condemned and killed. Later, though, he *actually* plans to betray the revolutionary cause when he decides to give up violence: that is why he is hunted by his terrorist associates.

The importance of Nizan's *La Conspiration* for Semprun's *Netchaïev est de retour* is so great that the latter can be regarded as a rewriting of the former. Both novels are concerned with five friends who declare war on established society, and both entail betrayal. The social, intellectual and economic circumstances of the principal characters are similar. Semprun's novel even replicates the casual sexism of Nizan's. However, what is mainly repeated in the later work is not so much the content as what is called, in the passage cited above, its 'schema', involving

characters and plot elements rather than specific intellectual or political material. Moreover, this repetition operates both in the relation of *Netchaïev est de retour* to *La Conspiration* and, internally, within the novel itself. The group of five terrorists, of whom one is (doubly) accused of betrayal, reflects the history of Laurençon/Netchaïev's stepfather, who during the Second World War was also a member of a group of friends, one of whom was suspected – rightly, as it turned out – of working for the Gestapo. The lines separating stories and identities become blurred. Repetition here has acquired its own dizzying momentum, coming to govern the lives of the characters, their stories and the novel in which they are created.

### Telling the essential

In relation to the *fort-da* game analysed by Freud, Derrida suggests that what repetition repeats is repetition itself: a movement or momentum which endlessly reflects back on itself and in the process propels itself forward, removing itself from interpretability in terms of a hidden but stable kernel of meaning. In a later discussion Derrida relates this absence of a founding, determinable meaning to literature in its broadest sense. A literary work, he says, may be

tout texte confié à l'espace public, relativement lisible ou intelligible, mais dont le contenu, le sens, le référent, le signataire ne sont pas des *réalités* pleinement déterminables, des réalités à la fois *non-fictives* ou *pures de toute fiction* [...]. Le lecteur alors sent venir la littérature par la voie secrète de ce secret, un secret à la fois gardé et exposé, jalousement scellé et ouvert comme une lettre volée. (*Donner la mort*, pp. 173–75; emphasis original)

In this account, the 'secret' of literature is not a content to be revealed; rather, it is a fundamental relation of self-withholding in relation to its source, meaning and destination. As Derrida succinctly puts it in the epigraph to this chapter, 'qui dit quoi à qui, au juste?' (*Donner la mort*, p. 175).

Given that Semprun was both prolific and loquacious, it may seem surprising to describe his fiction as *reticent*. My point is really that the novels leave a sense that something remains unsaid, but that this 'something' cannot be identified simply with a specific experience or set of experiences involving, or including, for example, the author's incarceration in Buchenwald. On this point, the intense self-consciousness

of Semprun's writing may be helpful. His fictional novelist, Elie Silberberg, incessantly rewrites a text by Nizan, another lapsed revolutionary. His practice tells us something about Semprun's, as Semprun also rewrites Nizan's novel. What characterizes fiction, in this process, is that it does not quite say everything it has to say. Marroux, Laurençon/Netchaïev's stepfather, is a detective; his job is to find the truth hidden behind ambiguous clues. But hidden truths are not what he expects from literary fiction. He encourages Silberberg to write fiction because, unlike the essay, the novel does not pass directly to the essential. On the contrary, the novel allows variation and obsession; and, referring to Hannah Arendt, he insists that no theoretical reflection can have 'la richesse de sens d'une histoire bien racontée' (*Netchaïev*, p. 217). The role of the novel is not to say the essential, but precisely *not* to say it, or not to say it too soon. In the novel, then, the duty to state the essential is overwhelmed by the narrative proliferation of meaning. As Marroux discovers at first hand when he tries to speak of his own experience, the essential remains unsaid: 'Ainsi, il n'avait même pas fait allusion à l'essentiel. Il aurait fallu remonter trop loin, se perdre dans trop de digressions, de chemins de traverse, pour qu'elle comprît de quoi il parlait' (*Netchaïev*, p. 320). In this version, the essential is not something that is gradually revealed through the infinite patience of the storyteller and listener; rather, it is something *necessarily* absent, an ungraspable Derridean secret which propels and eludes narration.

I am not arguing that there is no relation between the historical, autobiographical context of Semprun's more overtly testimonial works and his fiction. There obviously is. His characters are, like himself, scarred by the experience of the concentration camps and twentieth-century history more broadly. But to reduce his fiction to its author's experience also misses what is *fictional* about it. His fiction is unnerving and engaging not only because it bears witness to the traumas of the last century, but also because it resists explanation purely in terms of history and biography. It permits interpretation in the light of the author's identity and experience while also questioning the very notions of identity and experience. I would venture to say that this has not yet even begun to be explored in any serious way. Semprun's fiction should not and cannot be exhausted by an antiquated realist agenda, however much that agenda has been reinvigorated by trauma studies. His novels refer to but are not contained by the figure of the Author; they also enact a *dislocation* of meaning which leaves their sense precisely *unlocated*, *unlocatable*.



## CHAPTER TEN

# Elie Wiesel

## Witnessing, Telling and Knowing

Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are talking to *somebody*: to somebody they have been waiting for for a long time.

(Laub, 'Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening', in *Testimony*, pp. 70–71; emphasis original)

Testimonial literature crystallizes the problems involved in gathering together the shards of experience in a communicable tale. Shoshana Felman suggests that we now live in an 'era of testimony' in which 'testimony has become a crucial mode of our relation to events of our times – our relation to the traumas of contemporary history: the Second World War, the Holocaust, the nuclear bomb, and other war atrocities' ('Education and Crisis', p. 5). Testimony, though, is not the promise that the sense of experience can easily be restored or conveyed: 'What a testimony does not offer is, however, a completed statement, a totalizable account of those events. In the testimony, language is in process and in trial, it does not possess itself as a conclusion, as the constatation of a verdict or the self-transparency of knowledge' ('Education and Crisis', p. 5). In short, testimony becomes a central genre precisely when it is perceived as problematic and, at the limit, maybe even impossible.

This chapter deals with the problems of testimony and storytelling in the work of Elie Wiesel. Wiesel has become, along with Primo Levi, perhaps the world's best-known witness to the atrocities of the Holocaust. Born into a Jewish community in Sighet, Romania, in 1928,

he was deported to Auschwitz in 1944 and later to Buchenwald. He saw his mother for the last time at the gates of Auschwitz, and was present at his father's death in Buchenwald. After the war, he lived for a while in France before moving to the United States and gaining citizenship there. He wrote about his experiences, first in Yiddish and then in French, which remained his principal literary language until his death in 2016. His first French work, *La Nuit* (1958), is widely read and accepted as one of the most important Holocaust testimonies. Wiesel went on to achieve high visibility as a writer and human rights campaigner, winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986.

Although Wiesel's status as a pre-eminent witness to the Holocaust is beyond doubt, after *La Nuit*, and until the later, much longer autobiographical work *Tous les fleuves vont à la mer* (1994), he actually wrote relatively little which directly described the Holocaust. He eloquently summarizes a tension at the heart of much Holocaust testimony with his pithy epigram, 'Impossible d'en parler et impossible de ne pas en parler' (*Un juif*, p. 193). A psychological and moral imperative to bear witness runs up against a sense that the Holocaust is beyond language and comprehension. What must be said cannot be said. One way for Wiesel to deal with this tension is through controlled reticence: he speaks and writes of his experiences, but with restraint, frequently reiterating the impossibility of communicating atrocity rather than offering detailed memories. Disclosing the Holocaust entails repeatedly disclosing its inherent unspeakability.

Another way for Wiesel to deal with the tension between the need to speak and the impossibility of speaking about the Holocaust is, perhaps surprisingly, through the practice of fiction. Wiesel grew up in a world of stories stemming from the Hassidic tradition into which he was born. But he echoes and endorses Adorno's dictum according to which poetry after Auschwitz is no longer possible, and he extends it to include literature and cultural values more broadly: 'Adorno avait peut-être raison. Après Auschwitz, la poésie n'est plus possible. Ni la littérature. Ni l'amitié. Ni l'espérance. Ni rien' (*Un juif*, p. 202). In particular, Wiesel insists that there can be no such thing as Holocaust literature: 'Un roman sur Auschwitz n'est pas un roman, ou bien il n'est pas sur Auschwitz. Les deux ne vont pas de pair' (*Elie Wiesel: Qui êtes-vous?*, p. 49). He is nevertheless the author of a substantial body of fiction which is sometimes – despite his own misgivings – categorized as Holocaust literature. In fact, consistent with his view that the Holocaust lies beyond the scope of the novel, his fiction often describes the prelude

to and aftermath of the Holocaust, but only fleetingly evokes the events of the Holocaust themselves. So although his novels are undoubtedly about the Holocaust in some sense, it is usually present as a kind of absent cause. It is anticipated and recalled, but rarely actually depicted. Like the signs of trauma discussed in the Introduction, it is everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

Bearing witness, for Wiesel, involves a complex constellation of telling and not telling, disclosure and reticence, memory, truth, history and fiction. The current chapter explores these issues first by discussing the case of Moshe the Beadle from *La Nuit*, and then in relation to two of his novels, *Le Serment de Kolvillàg* (1973) and *Un désir fou de danser* (2006). The first of these enunciates – even if it does not finally embrace – a particularly provocative suggestion on the problem of witnessing; and the second explores the links between speech, knowledge and psychoanalysis in the experience of the Holocaust survivor.

### Moshe the Beadle's story

*La Nuit* is Wiesel's first book to be published in French, and Moshe (spelt *Moché* in the French version) is the first character to be named in that book. The opening sentence begins: 'On l'appelait Moché-le-Bedeau' (p. 13). It is striking that the book, which has become renowned as a Holocaust testimony, opens with this relatively minor character rather than with, for example, the narrator's father, mother or sister, all of whom would die in the Holocaust. Moshe is an eccentric figure who works in the local synagogue and agrees to teach the Kabbalah to Eliezer against his father's wishes. After the annexation of Sighet by Hungary, Moshe is expelled because he is a foreigner, and yet he returns a few months later to tell an incredible tale. He recounts how, once in Poland, the Jewish deportees were taken from the train and murdered by the Gestapo. Moshe escaped because he was thought to be dead. Eliezer observes a marked change in Moshe: 'Ses yeux ne reflétaient plus la joie. Il ne chantait plus. Il ne me parlait plus de Dieu ou de Kabbale, mais seulement de ce qu'il avait vu' (p. 16). He has become an exemplary, paradigmatic survivor-witness. His transformation, the moral imperative which governs his return and the potential disbelief of his audience, anticipate what will happen to Eliezer as he becomes the narrator of his own experience of atrocity (see Trezise, *Witnessing Witnessing*, p. 200). The insistence that Moshe now speaks only of 'ce qu'il avait vu'

is echoed later in the text when Eliezer describes the burning of babies' corpses in Auschwitz: 'Oui, je l'avais vu, de mes yeux vu ...' (p. 42). The witness's key claim – the one which underpins the moral authority of his testimony – is that he saw what he describes. Moshe and Eliezer offer a straightforward referential contract: we are asked to accept that what they depict really happened.

This implicit assertion of the survivor's testimonial credentials also places Moshe and Eliezer in the Jewish tradition of the survivor-witness who comes back from near-death to tell the tale of misfortune. This is exemplified by the biblical Book of Job when, each time that a catastrophe befalls Job's family and property, there is one survivor who returns with the words, 'And I alone have escaped to tell you'. Although, rather incredibly, this precise formula is repeated four times in the Book of Job, Job unquestioningly believes and accepts the reports of catastrophe which are brought to him. Wiesel has commented that, for him, this proves that Job cannot have been Jewish, because a Jew would question both the verbal coincidence and the series of disasters (see *Job ou Dieu dans la tempête*, p. 59). The problem for Moshe is that his audience consists in the kind of sceptical Jew Wiesel describes, and as a consequence no one will believe his tale or even listen to it: 'Les gens refusaient non seulement de croire à ses histoires mais encore de les écouter' (*La Nuit*, p. 16). The people of Sighet think that he is seeking pity, or that he has gone mad. Even Eliezer comments that he did not believe him, but that he felt sorry for him. In the end Moshe abandons his vain task of trying to inform and forewarn his fellow Jews: 'Même Moché-le-Bedeau s'était tu. Il était las de parler. Il errait dans la synagogue ou dans les rues, les yeux baissés, le dos voûté, évitant de regarder les gens' (p. 18).

Moshe's problem is that he finds no one who will listen to him, and in consequence his testimony fails. This suggests the conclusion that the success of witnessing depends as much upon the listener as it does on the speaker. The place of the listener in the circuit of testimony has in fact been one of the cornerstones of trauma studies. In his influential chapter 'Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening', Dori Laub describes how trauma cannot initially be registered by those who fall victim to it. Paradoxically, they are not yet witnesses to what they have witnessed. It is only through *being heard* that they can become a witness to their own lives. This has the consequence that *listening* is a necessary condition if the act of witnessing is to take place. In Laub's words, 'the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner

of the traumatic event' (p. 59). As I already indicated in Chapter 1, I find the language of 'ownership' to be deeply problematic here, and there are important ethical issues raised by the 'participation' of one person in another's trauma. In the current context, though, the important point is the significance of the listener. A key aspect of trauma studies has been its insistence on the necessary role of the listener in the act of witnessing. For it to succeed, it must be what Trezise, discussing Laub, calls a 'dialogical relation' (*Witnessing Witnessing*, p. 16). It cannot be understood simply as the transmission of a story or of knowledge which pre-exists the verbal performance. It is rather an event in the life of both witness and audience. Witnessing requires being witnessed for the witness to come into being.

The opening sequence of *La Nuit*, which focusses on Moshe's inability to forewarn the Jews of Sighet, is of the utmost significance in the book and for Wiesel's own status as witness. This exemplary testimonial work begins with an act of witnessing which signally fails. The anxiety which haunts the rest of the text as well as perhaps the whole of Wiesel's work and even testimonial writing in general, is that the witness will not be heard or heeded. Every witness fears becoming Moshe: the bearer of an urgent message which cannot be delivered. Wiesel is associated with a conception of the Holocaust as radically unspeakable, as beyond language and comprehension. Nevertheless, even if the Holocaust cannot ultimately be contained in words, a great deal can be said about it. The problem for Moshe is not that his experience is unsayable. It can be recounted, but it meets with disbelief because it exceeds the frame of intelligibility within which his potential audience is enclosed. The issue here, then, is not that the messenger cannot recount his tale, but that there is no one capable of listening to it. Before his experience of atrocity, the addressee of Moshe's mystical celebrations is God, the big Other who gives sense to everything. The dilemma of the witness comes about when there is no big Other, no final guarantor of meaning and justice. Who will listen? The witness requires a listener; and without a listener, there is no witness. Moshe claims that he has returned to Sighet 'pour vous raconter ma mort' (p. 17). This summarizes the impossible position of the failed witness. One's own death is precisely what one cannot recount. The witness has something to say which cannot be said, and which cannot be heard. Again, Eliezer implicitly identifies with Moshe when, at the very end of *La Nuit* he looks in a mirror after the liberation of Buchenwald and sees himself as a corpse: 'Du fond du miroir, un cadavre me contemplait. Son regard dans mes yeux ne me quitte plus'

(p. 121). The witness returns to tell the impossible tale of his own death; and this tale is impossible not because it cannot be *told*, but because it cannot be *heard*.

The story of Moshe yields insights into the constitutive role of the listener in the circuit of witnessing, and into the inherent anxiety of the witness who is painfully aware that testimony might fail to find an audience. Wiesel's endeavour is to avoid becoming Moshe. Yet the ghost of Moshe returns and keeps on returning. Indeed, Moshe reappears in numerous of Wiesel's works. In an essay entitled 'Moshe-le-fou' Wiesel describes how he tried to rid himself of his obsession with Moshe by making him a character in one of his books, only to find that he took over every other character. His fiction, perhaps, is nothing but the story of Moshe: not so much in its overt themes, but in its repeated anxiety concerning testimonial failure. And Wiesel considers that his own life may be no more than a reflection on Moshe's: 'L'idée me vient parfois que je ne suis moi-même qu'une erreur, un malentendu: je crois vivre ma vie, alors qu'en vérité je ne fais que traduire la sienne' (*Le Chant des morts*, p. 102). Moshe, then, haunts Wiesel's writing. Indeed, Wiesel describes him as a kind of ghost or living dead man: 'je le sais mort depuis très longtemps [...]. Mais il se refuse à l'admettre. Il semble abuser de ses privilèges de feu et de mort pour nier les faits' (*Le Chant des morts*, p. 99). He comes back again and again, representing the ever-present possibility that the witness will fail in his task.

However, one of the novels in which Moshe appears – *Le Serment de Kolvillàg* – envisages a radically different view of testimonial obligation: in this case, the survivor assumes the difficult task of remaining silent, in the endeavour to prevent the repetition of atrocity by refusing to recount it.

### The discovery of the listener

The opening sentences of *Le Serment de Kolvillàg* indicate a blunt refusal to speak: 'Je ne parlerai pas, dit le vieillard. Ce que j'ai à le dire, je ne tiens pas à le dire' (p. 9). This is echoed shortly afterwards: 'Je ne raconterai pas, dit le vieillard. Kolvillàg ça ne se raconte pas' (p. 11). With these words we are introduced to a narrator who does not want to narrate; and the rest of the novel can be read as a disavowal of its first sentences. If the old man kept to his word, there would be no story and no book for us to read. Shortly afterwards, when something resembling a narrative appears

to begin, it is with the words '*Il était une fois, il y a longtemps, une petite ville*' (p. 9; emphasis original). The formula '*Il était une fois*' suggests that we are reading an invented tale, perhaps a fairy story, but in any case something other than a historical or testimonial narrative. We are invited to suspend any expectation that what we are reading should be taken as literally, referentially true. It's just a story.

The rest of Wiesel's novel explores this opening tension between a refusal to speak and a willing entry into narrative. *Le Serment de Kolvillàg* is at first a confusing work: different – initially unidentified – voices speak; some passages are in italics; and chronology is uncertain. Eventually, though, the situation becomes clearer. An aging vagrant named Azriel meets and befriends a young man who is on the verge of killing himself. Although the young man's suicidal inclinations are not fully explained, they appear to be linked to his parents' experience of the Holocaust, during which his mother lost her son and first husband. Azriel decides that the way to save him is by speaking to him: '*On ne se suicide pas au milieu d'une phrase. On ne se suicide pas en parlant ou en écoutant*' (p. 19). So he engages his interlocutor by recounting real or invented stories. At the same time, he repeatedly alludes to something he is not telling, namely the story of Kolvillàg: '*comment parler de ce qui nie la parole? comment exprimer ce qui doit demeurer inarticulé?*' (p. 41); '*L'histoire que j'ai à vous raconter, on m'a défendu de la raconter*' (p. 42); '*je ne suis pas ici pour parler mais pour me taire*' (p. 50).

Although Azriel speaks incessantly, he has a secret of which he will not speak. At the end of the first of the three sections of the novel, he nevertheless decides to divulge his secret, despite a binding oath which he has taken. He does this because it seems to be the only way of saving his young interlocutor from suicide; and the secret turns out to be the story of Kolvillàg. The remaining two sections of the novel tell that story. In the years before the Second World War, a Christian boy goes missing in the town of Kolvillàg, which is situated somewhere in Eastern or Central Europe. The Christian inhabitants quickly blame the Jewish community, and it is increasingly apparent that a pogrom is about to occur. Moshe, the local mystic and/or madman, falsely confesses to killing the boy in the hope that his self-sacrifice will avert the impending slaughter. His actions turn out to be in vain. Allowed to preach in the synagogue, Moshe proposes to the Jews of Kolvillàg that, if any of them should survive, instead of recounting the story of the pogrom they should keep silent about it. The community takes an oath not to bear witness. The pogrom occurs, the Jews are murdered and only Azriel escapes. In

the final lines of the book, Azriel passes on the story of Kolvillàg to the young man. His secret has now finally been revealed, and the burden of responsibility has been passed on to the next generation. Moreover, by telling the young man the story of Kolvillàg, Azriel has both saved and blighted his life: *'Parce que maintenant, ayant reçu cette histoire, tu n'as plus le droit de mourir'* (p. 255; emphasis original). The young man has become the witness to the witness. The witness is a moral agent who must transmit the story of atrocity; and the witness to the witness is put into an analogous situation, being forced to preserve a memory of which s/he has been made the depository. The suicidal young man can no longer kill himself once he becomes the bearer of a story which it is his duty to transmit.

The frame narrative of *Le Serment de Kolvillàg* appears closely to endorse the emphasis that trauma studies has placed on the role of the listener. In *La Nuit*, Moshe's testimony remains blocked because he has no one with whom it can be shared. *Le Serment de Kolvillàg*, by contrast, is all about the invention of a listener who will become witness to the witness and in the process make testimony possible. Prior to his encounter with the suicidal young man, Azriel will not or cannot become the author of his own life story. His story is unblocked by the encounter with a secondary witness who becomes its suitable addressee. The story becomes possible precisely and only through the meeting with someone capable of receiving it; and the addressee becomes the vehicle for its continuation. The discovery of the witness to the witness is exactly coterminous with the viability of primary witnessing. The witness needs, in equal measure, an experience of which to speak and a listener capable of hearing it. As trauma studies predicts, the invention of the witness coincides with the invention of the witness to the witness. And testimony is an event in the life of both the primary witness and the secondary witness. The final page of the novel suggests that, once he has told his story, Azriel has the right to die; and having heard it and become its repository, the young listener now has a duty to live.

*Le Serment de Kolvillàg* can be read, then, as depicting the invention of the witness through the encounter with the listener, the secondary witness, who is capable of receiving his story. In this respect, it reproduces the psychoanalytical conditions of witnessing powerfully and influentially described by Dori Laub, and followed in later versions of trauma studies. And yet, this misses what is most compelling and challenging in Wiesel's novel. Here, the decision to narrate is both a life-changing, life-saving unblockage and an act of betrayal.



### The oath of silence

The oath from which *Le Serment de Kolvillåg* takes its title is sworn by the Jews of Kolvillåg as they await a murderous pogrom some time before the Second World War. The principal narrator, Azriel, is a boy at the time. His father, Shmuel, is the community scribe, and as such he keeps and continues the book in which the history and ongoing discussions of the community are recorded. Shmuel believes in the need to bear witness, to keep a record of what is said and done which can be passed on to future generations. The central, second part of the novel turns around the opposition between him and Moshe, the local madman and mystic. Moshe is an enigmatic, charismatic and disturbing figure. His madness and his mysticism are bound up with one another, as he shuns everyday life and claims – and is believed – to have special powers. He nevertheless takes a wife, out of pity and then perhaps out of love, and settles into a more ordinary existence. When the Jewish community is threatened because a Christian boy goes missing, giving rise to long-standing anti-Semitic accusations of ritual sacrifice practised by the Jews, Moshe believes he can avert the impending disaster by falsely confessing to the boy's murder and thereby making himself the necessary scapegoat. However, in what is clearly a prefiguration of the Holocaust, the lust for Jewish blood will not be appeased so easily. It looks as if Moshe's act was in vain.

Although he is in custody, Moshe gains permission to speak in the town synagogue, and this is where he proposes the novel's titular oath. The passage echoes Paneloux's second sermon in Camus's *La Peste*, and it is also a dense reflection on the Jewish tradition of testimony. The role of human beings, Moshe argues, has always been to survive in order to tell the tale of their survival, the ultimate listener here being God. The story is always the same, even though it can be recounted in numerous ways:

Les hommes n'ont qu'une histoire à raconter, quoiqu'ils la rapportent de mille façons: tortures, persécutions, chasses à l'homme, meurtres rituels, terreur collective, cela fait des siècles que ça dure, des siècles que de deux côtés les participants jouent les mêmes rôles – et au lieu de parler, Dieu écoute, au lieu d'intervenir, de trancher, il attend et ne juge qu'après. [...] C'est qu'il y a toujours un conteur, un survivant, un témoin pour raviver le passé et ressusciter le meurtre sinon les morts. (p. 216)

In Moshe's account, history is the endless repetition of the same: the same hatred, the same accusations, the same murderous outcome. This

echoes passages from elsewhere in the novel, for example when we are told that ‘C’est une bien vieille fable. Et bien bête. [...] Rien n’a changé depuis le premier meurtre rituel. C’était le même cadavre qui servait de prétexte; on assassinait chaque fois le même enfant pour provoquer les mêmes abominations’ (p. 92). There is nothing new about the story of Kolvillàg: it has been repeated innumerable times throughout history. An important intertext here, once again, is the Book of Job, in which a series of disasters occur. Each repeats the previous one with variations but with the same sense of inevitable catastrophe. And as in the Book of Job, in which each time there is one survivor who escapes to tell the tale, someone comes back to speak of what has happened.

And to whom does the survivor-narrator speak? Moshe suggests that the ultimate addressee is God; but the bitterness here is palpable. If the survivor’s role is to report to God on the awfulness of the human situation, God turns out to be an appalling, indifferent addressee because he never responds with decisive action: ‘il attend’. So what is the point of bearing witness if nothing changes? The purpose of transmitting the memory of atrocity may be to avert its reoccurrence. Yet history shows that testimony has always been futile. God does nothing, and human beings pursue their murderous path. The pogrom which takes place in Kolvillàg repeats previous pogroms and in turn anticipates the ultimate pogrom that is the Holocaust; and that in turn anticipates other genocides, for example in Cambodia, Bosnia and Rwanda. Nothing changes; history is an endless repetition of the same; and the different narratives of atrocity do not alter its underlying sameness.

To this already bleak account of the moral purpose of witnessing, Moshe adds a further radical point: what if recalling and recounting atrocity actually contribute to the likelihood of its reoccurrence? Moshe describes the tradition in which there is always a survivor-witness who miraculously escapes to tell the tale and prevent atrocity from being forgotten. But this victory is a hollow one:

Eh! oui, des siècles que ça dure: on nous tue et nous racontons comment; on nous pille et nous écrivons comment; on nous humilie, on nous opprime, on nous expulse de la société et de l’histoire et nous disons comment. [...] L’ennemi peut tout faire de nous, mais jamais il ne nous fera taire: c’était là notre devise. Le verbe était notre arme, notre bouclier, le conte notre radeau de sauvetage. Le verbe, nous le voulions fort, plus fort que l’ennemi, plus puissant que la mort. Puisqu’il restera quelqu’un pour raconter l’épreuve, c’est que nous l’avons gagné d’avance. Puisque, à la fin, il restera quelqu’un pour décrire notre mort, c’est que la mort sera

vaincue; c'était là notre conviction profonde, inébranlable. Pourtant ...  
(p. 217)

Moshe's 'Pourtant ...' marks the point where he will strike a blow against this conviction. Telling the story saves no one; indeed, it might even make matters worse. The key to Moshe's argument is the contention that 'La souffrance et l'histoire de la souffrance [sont] liées de manière intrinsèque' (p. 218). Moshe's disturbing suggestion is that the story prolongs what it describes, both as a memory of past suffering and a kind of blueprint for the future. It encapsulates and makes explicit an aspect of human potential which is then available to be re-enacted by later generations. Moshe's solution, finally accepted by the Jews of Sighet, is a simple, definitive attempt to break the circle of atrocity through a binding oath: 'Prenons l'unique décision qui s'impose: nous ne témoignerons plus' (p. 218).

The implication that bearing witness to one's own story actually causes and prolongs suffering runs up against deep-rooted beliefs about the value of storytelling in particular and speech in general. The much-repeated insistence on the moral duty to bear witness or the psychoanalytical 'talking cure' both stress the benefits, individually and culturally, of trying to formulate the story of pain. Recent theoretical interest in the 'narrative turn' has also drawn attention to the role of storytelling in the necessary and therapeutic process of creating a meaning for one's life.<sup>1</sup> As Karen Blixen is quoted as saying, 'All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them' (Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, p. 2). But reticence bordering on a blunt refusal to speak is also part of the survivor-witness's experience. In one of the opening sequences of Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah*, Lanzmann asks one of the survivors of the Chelmno death camp if it is good to speak of his experiences, only to be told through an interpreter that no, for him it is not good; the survivor does not speak of his experiences, or read books about the Eichmann trial even though he was a witness at it; and a strange smile hovers on his lips because, he says, it is better to smile than to cry (see Lanzmann, *Shoah*, p. 27). The endeavour of Lanzmann's monumental film is to elicit the stories of survivors, perpetrators and bystanders in the face of their reluctance to bear witness. The stakes of Wiesel's *Le Serment de Kolvillåg* are, if anything, even more stark. Should one bear witness at all, if the duty to testify competes with an

1 For discussion, see Meretoja, *The Narrative Turn in Fiction and Theory*.

equally compelling duty to keep silent, and if in any case telling the story of suffering is part of the problem rather than part of the solution?

In Wiesel's novel, Azriel decides to tell the story of Kolvillàg. On balance, his desire to save his listener by making him the repository of the story outweighs his determination to keep to his oath of silence. Where Moshe in *La Nuit* failed to find an audience which would allow testimony to take place, Azriel succeeds in inventing himself as witness by inventing his listener as the witness to the witness. One could say, then, that the novel finally sides with Azriel's father, the scribe committed to the primacy of memory, rather than Moshe, who argues for silence. And yet one should bear in mind that *Le Serment de Kolvillàg* is a novel, not a directly testimonial work; moreover, it is a novel which is deeply aware of the difficulties and dilemmas of narration, and in particular of the problematic distinction between storytelling as part of experience and storytelling as the construction of fictions. Azriel is a storyteller, and storytelling is part of life; but some of Azriel's stories are purely imagined. Moreover, telling invented stories is precisely a way of *not* telling one's own: 'Pour ne pas violer mon serment, je racontais toutes sortes d'histoire sauf la mienne: en les inventant, je donnais libre cours à mon imagination' (p. 51). Thus forewarned, we might wonder if the story of Kolvillàg is actually told, or merely fitted in to a pre-existing pattern of meaning in which each atrocity repeats every other one. At the end of his narrative, despite all that he has disclosed, Azriel nevertheless says that '[l]'histoire de Kolvillàg] demeurera secrète' (p. 254). Telling and not telling turn out to be bound up with one another in ways that perhaps cannot be disentangled.

At the very least, it is significant that Wiesel's novel entertains the possibility of putting an end to witnessing, even if ultimately the work sides with the duty of testimony. The novel, like all of Wiesel's writing, is inhabited by a foreboding of its own futility or impossibility, combined with a moral and psychological need to carry on. The genre of the novel provides a means of negotiating this difficult position. The fictional story of Kolvillàg echoes, but does not quite equate to, the true story of Sighet; and it foreshadows without fully entering into the even more terrible story of the Holocaust. Something is disclosed, and something remains secret.

### Psychoanalysis, trauma and the 'little secret'

The question of secrecy, of telling and not telling what cannot be told, of bearing witness to the truth while insisting that something remains unsaid, lies as the core of Wiesel's aesthetics (for fuller discussion, see Davis, *Elie Wiesel's Secretive Texts*). In the rest of this chapter I want to examine the link between secrecy and knowledge, speaking and remaining silent, in relation to Wiesel's *Un désir fou de danser*. In this late-period novel, a troubled man undertakes a course of psychoanalysis, both rejecting his analyst's search to uncover hidden secrets and yet reluctantly conceding the pertinence of her insights, until the course is terminated by the analyst herself. I discuss this alongside *Le Savoir-déporté: camps, histoire, psychanalyse* (2004), a collection of texts by the Auschwitz survivor and Lacanian psychoanalyst Anne-Lise Stern. What is at stake here is the issue of what it means to know and to speak after Auschwitz. Angered by the failure of psychoanalysts to heed the effects of the camps on post-war generations, Stern attempts to sketch what she calls *le savoir-déporté*, a mode of knowledge formed by the camps rather than a dispassionate interpretation of deportees' experience. I suggest that in Wiesel's writing there is a fascinated but determined resistance to psychoanalysis, whereas Stern's work enacts a resistance *within* psychoanalysis to the appropriation of the survivor's experience. Coming from very different positions, both Wiesel's novel and Stern's essays nevertheless converge as they point towards a mode of post-traumatic knowing.

The question of what one knows and does not know, says and cannot say, is central to recent trauma studies. Yet with some exasperation Shoshana Felman has observed a censorious tendency at work in some writing on trauma and trauma studies. As she puts it, 'Why this policing of the territory of knowledge?' (*The Juridical Unconscious*, p. 181). Perhaps she should not be so surprised. As Felman explains, referring to the work of Cathy Caruth, 'the event of trauma destabilizes the security of knowledge and strikes at the foundation of the institutional prerogatives of what is known' (p. 181). To respond to trauma is to experience as ethically urgent the questions of who knows and what is known, of who can speak with authority and what can be communicated in intelligible form. In particular, the nature and status of psychoanalytic knowledge is at stake here, given the pivotal role that psychoanalysis has played in the development of trauma studies. Psychoanalysis has sometimes been characterized and caricatured as the pursuit of sexual

secrets underlying obsessive behaviour. But trauma, understood as the disruption of knowledge, upsets the masterful position of the analyst, who was famously described by Lacan as the subject supposed (but only *supposed*) to know.

It would be hard to overrate the importance of Cathy Caruth's work on the development of psychoanalytically informed trauma studies in the humanities. Describing her as the 'most authoritative, most original interdisciplinary theorist' of the field, Felman usefully summarizes the main aspects of her thought in a long footnote to her own book *The Juridical Unconscious* (2002):

- (1) Trauma is an essential dimension of historical experience, and its analysis provides a new understanding of historical causality;
- (2) The aftermath of catastrophic experience is riddled by an enigma of survival; the legacy of traumatic experience imposes a reflection on, and provides a new type of insight into, the relation between destruction and survival;
- (3) Because the experience of trauma addresses the Other and demands the listening of another, it implies a human and an ethical dimension in which the Other receives priority over the self. This ethical dimension is tightly related to the question of justice. (pp. 173–74)

Felman concedes, though, that Caruth's theorization of trauma, which is 'largely recognized and widely cited as canonical' (p. 175), has been severely criticized in some quarters. She goes on to discuss Ruth Leys's *Trauma: A Genealogy*, describing it as 'emblematic (symptomatic)' of territorial struggles in academia (*Juridical Unconscious*, p. 175). In her book, Leys takes what she describes as a Foucauldian genealogical approach to the study of trauma, tracing the development of the notion through the work of Freud and Janet into recent debates around post-traumatic stress disorder. The final chapter of Leys's book is devoted to Caruth's work. There are certainly some questionable moves in this chapter. Its opening sentence, for example, describes Caruth's approach as 'postmodernist' and 'poststructuralist', conflating two terms in a way which is at best problematic; and the repeated association of Caruth's views with those of Paul de Man simplifies the complex relation between their positions. Even so, much of the chapter is intelligent and thoughtful, and it leads to the challenging conclusion that Caruth tends to erase the distinction between victims and perpetrators so that even Nazis, for example, are turned into victims in a way that we should find ethically unacceptable. When she summarizes her findings in her Conclusion, Leys's dislike for Caruth's work becomes explicit. Leys

admits to 'impatience with the sloppiness of her theoretical arguments; in the name of close reading she produces interpretations that are so arbitrary, wilful, and tendentious as to forfeit all claim to believability' (*Trauma*, p. 305).

In *The Juridical Unconscious*, Felman mounts a staunch defence against Leys's attack on Caruth. Rather than following the detail of her argument, I want to point out here that the language she uses is every bit as forthright as Leys's. Felman dislikes the 'pure verbal violence' of Leys's book (p. 176), but she herself is not entirely free from denunciatory hyperbole. Felman accuses Leys of reducing 'the momentous stakes of trauma to the triviality of academic conflict' (p. 175); Leys's book is 'entirely derivative of the insights of those she attacks' (p. 176); she 'almost obsessively' attributes Caruth's theories to notions derived from Paul de Man (p. 176); and her falsification of Freud is 'substantive' and 'blatant' (pp. 177-78). In short, *Trauma: A Genealogy* is not a very good book: 'What is wrong with this artificial theory? To begin with, its barrenness of insight, its lack of human depth, and by its own admission, its utter clinical irrelevance' (*The Juridical Unconscious*, p. 177). In fact, precisely in the passage that Felman goes on to quote, Leys does not concede the clinical irrelevance of her work. On the contrary, Leys suggests that her dismantling of trauma theory *does* have clinical consequences, insofar as therapists should learn from it not to follow theory in their treatments, but to adopt instead 'an intelligent, humane and resourceful pragmatism' (*Trauma*, p. 307) towards their patients.

The point here is not to settle the rights and wrongs of this argument; rather it is to observe the excessive terms in which it is conducted. These go beyond what is customary in academic debate and illustrate how the discourse on trauma is infused with a heavy emotional investment on the part of its practitioners. The medical overtones of Felman's references to Leys's book as *symptomatic* and to *almost obsessive* aspects of her writing cast Leys as a patient to be treated, as if she were as much the bearer of trauma as she is its analyst. One feature of this implication which is strikingly odd is the extent to which Felman's stance, like Leys's and indeed Caruth's, preserves the critic's position of authority over the object of her criticism, implicitly likening it to the role of the doctor who diagnoses the ills of her patient with the aim of curing them. Trauma appears consistently in trauma studies as unrepresentable and as intractable to mastery and conventional knowledge. Even Leys concedes on the final page of her book that her argument does not yield 'a meta-position from which to assess the messy and intrinsically painful

conundrums of the field' (307). And yet this failure of knowledge – a failure at the core of our (in)ability to know the unfathomable strangeness of the other – does not, apparently, affect the critic's knowledge of the texts she is reading. The critic knows the text better than it knows itself, speaking on its behalf because her insight has priority over its own self-understanding. This retention of critical authority in the face of a traumatic encounter which might put it in danger is already apparent in Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Therein Caruth suggests, for example, that the resonance of a passage from Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 'exceeds, perhaps, the limits of Freud's conceptual or conscious theory of trauma' (p. 2), and she goes on to demonstrate what Freud's writing 'unwittingly' tells us about trauma (p. 4). The critic knows more about the text than it knows about itself. Trauma may unsettle knowledge, but the critic nevertheless reinstates a position of knowledge in her assumption of authority over the textual traces, effects or discourse of trauma.

This controversy within trauma studies illustrates how the whole field of study is suffused by problems of knowledge and authority both in arguments between critics and, more importantly, in relation to the texts of survivor-victims. Under what conditions, and with what necessary precautions, can anyone speak in the place of, on behalf of, the other? Such questions become particularly acute when the other in question is the survivor or the non-survivor of trauma. In Chapter 1, we saw how Giorgio Agamben places this issue at the centre of the ethical dilemma raised by talking about the Holocaust. Following Primo Levi, he designates the *Muselmann* (the prisoner who has given up on life) as the only true witness, yet he is the witness who, by definition, cannot *bear witness* because he did not survive (*Remnants of Auschwitz*, pp. 33–34, quoting Levi, *The Saved and the Drowned*, pp. 63–64). How can the survivor or the critic speak for the witness who cannot speak for himself? Agamben, like Levi and Caruth, attempts to occupy an impossible position defined by an intense double bind: we cannot and should not speak in the place of others, supplanting their voice with ours; but not to speak for them would be reduce them to silence once again, to be complicit in their second murder. The work of Wiesel and Stern bears directly on these issues. Both speak as survivors who are concerned about the status of the survivor's speech, and about what it means to speak for and about those who did not survive. And they both investigate the kind of knowledge that an analyst, and pre-eminently a psychoanalyst, might have of the traumatized survivor.



## The sane and the mad

Madness is a core theme in Wiesel's work, as the survivor encounters a world drained of sense. The opening pages of *La Nuit* describe an exemplary descent into what some consider to be madness. When Moshe the Beadle returns to Sighet to warn the Jews of Nazi atrocities, he encounters only disbelief and he is held to be mad ('Le pauvre, il est devenu fou', p. 17). Those whom we describe as mad, it is suggested, may be those who have seen things which exceed what we can understand; or, alternatively, Wiesel's subsequent novels will imply, madness may be the only sane response to an unhinged world. The mad are everywhere in Wiesel's fiction, perhaps most insistently in *Le Crépuscule, au loin* (1987), which is set in a lunatic asylum and culminates in an encounter with a madman who thinks he is God – unless it is God who thinks he is a madman. The novel I want to concentrate on now, *Un désir fou de danser*, alludes to madness in its title, and its opening pages reflect on what it means to be mad. Is a madman who knows he is mad really mad? In a mad world, isn't a madman who knows he is mad the only person who is sane? The language of madness can be understood only by those who bear madness within them, but then everyone is said to have a share of madness. So madness is incomprehensible and incommunicable, and yet potentially something which may be close to all of us.

From its opening paragraphs, the novel asks how to speak of madness, and on what terms it can be known and understood. It also suggests that the madman, rather than being someone to whom a pre-existing body of clinical knowledge should be applied with the aim of achieving a cure, may bear witness to his own kind of knowledge. He may be someone who knows something we do not know. The novel recounts scenes from a course of psychoanalysis undertaken by a troubled Jewish man named Doriel and a Freudian psychoanalyst called Thérèse Goldschmidt. From the beginning, there is some mystery over why Doriel has gone to a psychoanalyst at all since he is resolutely hostile to psychoanalytic methods and insights. He refuses to lie on the couch and resists the practice of free association. Moreover, he repeats a well-known set of objections to psychoanalytic reductionism: it brings everything back to sexuality, looking for dirty little secrets which provide a key to unlock the whole psyche; in particular, analysts attempt to find the answer to all problems in the child's relation to its mother. To some extent, Thérèse justifies Doriel's hostility, regarding her patient as a puzzle to be solved and constantly probing him about his parents. Doriel insists that his

parents and his relationship with them cannot be *known* by the analyst: 'il y a des choses que vous ne comprendrez jamais. Vous n'avez pas vécu leur vie, mais moi, je la porte en moi comme une trace de sang. Et leur mort comme une brûlure' (*Un désir fou de danser*, p. 128). The dead inhabit the surviving child not as objects of knowledge but as a wound at the core of his life. And yet, Doriel persists with the course of analysis until it is ended by the analyst. Indeed, he also concedes that Thérèse's suspicious probing may even lead him to discover the truth about his own experience: 'La thérapeute a vu plus clair en moi que moi-même. Au bout de quelques semaines, me guidant par un mot ou un silence, elle réussit à me faire redécouvrir la vérité: rien ne s'est passé entre Ruth et moi' (p. 194). The analyst cannot know the truth, but nevertheless guides the analysand towards it.

In a brilliant reading of Moshe's role in *La Nuit*, Ora Avni has described Wiesel's work as 'beyond psychoanalysis': it invalidates any therapeutic practice, especially psychoanalysis, which restricts its attempted cures to a suffering individual because the wounds Wiesel describes are historical and cultural (see 'Beyond Psychoanalysis'). *Un désir fou de danser* does not entirely repudiate psychoanalysis, however, even though the novel is constructed around a fundamental ambivalence towards psychoanalytic knowledge. Doriel resists psychoanalysis but is also drawn to it, rejecting its shafts of insight while exposing himself to them. Moreover, psychoanalysis appears to be most pertinent to Doriel on precisely the issue over whose single-minded obsession he objects most vehemently: the question of the mother. During the Second World War, Doriel's mother had been a heroine of the Polish Resistance. While Doriel and his father were in hiding, his mother was able to move around more freely because of her Aryan appearance. The image Doriel gives of her is highly idealized: 'Blonde, belle et robuste, l'œil gris perçant, munie de sa carte d'identité aryenne, elle suscitait l'admiration de ses camarades par son audace. Volontaire pour les missions les plus dangereuses, elle avait fini par être en quelque sorte la garante de leur succès' (pp. 143–44). Yet this idealization is also double-edged: in order to be the much-lauded heroine of the Resistance, the mother also had to abandon her child, seeing him only on rare, furtive visits. Moreover, as the analysis progresses, Doriel begins to remember forgotten or repressed episodes from his past that suggest his mother may have had an affair with a fellow member of the Resistance. So she is both idealized heroine and a sordid adulteress who is guilty of abandoning her child and endangering the happy family unit. It seems that for all his hostility towards it, psychoanalysis has

nevertheless led Doriel to the true explanation for the shipwreck of his life: 'Mais la véritable explication, découvre Doriel avec stupéfaction, ce serait ce soupçon inavoué, jamais formulé, qui lentement, implacablement, l'aurait enfermé dans l'ascèse du célibat, le condamnant à la solitude et aux désordres de la pensée' (p. 267).

At this point, though, something surprising happens. It remains unclear whether Doriel has expressed these thoughts out loud. Even so, Thérèse responds as if she has heard them; and rather than seeing in them the confirmation of her psychoanalytic premises, she is non-committal in her appraisal: 'C'est possible, dit la doctoresse alors que le silence s'est installé' (p. 267). When the analyst hears what her analysand thought she wanted to hear, it turns out that she is less pleased than he expected to find that the mother is at the source of his woes. It is not after all definitively true, only *possible*. Roles seem now to have switched. Doriel expresses what elsewhere in the novel are depicted as parodically reductive psychoanalytic views while the analyst distances herself from them. Thérèse, it appears, did not wish merely to confirm what she was deemed already to know, but positively to discover something new. For all the ambivalent hostility shown towards psychoanalysis in *Un désir fou de danser*, the novel also stages a less reductive account of psychoanalytic reductionism. Perhaps Thérèse has something to learn from her insane or traumatized analysand. On this issue, Stern's *Le Savoir-déporté* provides a context for understanding how the victim's knowledge realigns the relationship between analyst and analysand.

### Stern and deported knowledge

In a curious example of the power of the letter, Anne-Lise Stern's very name seemed to predestine her to become a psychoanalyst: she is, after all, psych-Anne-Lise. She was born in 1921 in Berlin.<sup>2</sup> In 1933, on Hitler's rise to power in Germany, her socialist parents escaped with their daughter to France, where they became citizens in 1938. Stern began to study medicine, and, equipped with false papers, in 1944 she moved to Paris where she was denounced as a Jew and arrested on 1 April. She

2 The information on Stern's life and career is taken from Fresco and Leibovici, 'Une vie à l'œuvre'. For discussion of Stern's essays and her relation to contemporary French psychoanalysis, see Dorland, 'Psychoanalysis After Auschwitz? The "Deported Knowledge" of Anne-Lise Stern'.

was deported to Auschwitz, and subsequently to Bergen-Belsen and Theresienstadt, before returning to France in June 1945. In the 1950s, she took a course of psychoanalysis with Jacques Lacan and subsequently became, on her own account, the only Lacanian analyst who was also a deportee (*Le Savoir-déporté*, p. 113). Her relation to psychoanalytic practice in France is a complex one. If Wiesel's novel dramatizes the analysand's resistance to psychoanalysis, Stern diagnoses a resistance *within* psychoanalysis to the trauma of deportation. As she describes it, in the years following the war analysts had simply not understood how Auschwitz imposed a fundamental change in the relation between themselves and their analysands. They continued to treat deportees as objects or documents to be understood dispassionately, sheltering behind the familiar comfort of the 'vilains petits secrets' (p. 190) originating in Oedipal family dramas. Analysts had failed to grasp the fact that the new primal scene for modern humanity is the gas chamber (*Le Savoir-déporté*, p. 152); and the patient now is psychoanalysis itself, because its position of knowing neutrality is no longer viable. The reaction to Bruno Bettelheim is symptomatic of the failure within psychoanalytic circles to understand the complexity of the new situation. As a survivor, he was himself a traumatized subject; in consequence, his views were considered to be untrustworthy; his knowledge was impugned by his own position as victim. It was still inconceivable that the traumatized subject could have something valid to say outside the established structures of psychoanalytic theory.

This resistance within psychoanalysis to the significance of Auschwitz for its own practices does not, however, mean that for Stern it is a lost cause. It is both impossible and necessary: 'Je propose donc à la réflexion cette formule logique: peut-on être psychanalyste en ayant été déporté(é) à Auschwitz? La réponse est non. Peut-on, aujourd'hui, être psychanalyste sans cela? La réponse est encore non' (p. 192). The deportee cannot be an analyst, yet only the deportee can become an analyst. The point here is not that no one other than deportees should now be able to practise psychoanalysis. Rather, it is that the whole psychoanalytic process is affected, including the relationship between analyst and analysand, as well as the kind of knowledge that the former can have of the latter. At this point, Stern's allegiance specifically to Lacanian analysis becomes explicable. In her account, it is Lacanian analysis which most boldly carries the scar of the Holocaust into the core of the analytic relation. The Lacanian analyst does not look for the dirty little secrets which would confirm a pre-established body of doctrine. Countering Primo

Levi's suggestion that psychoanalytic knowledge is irrelevant to the experience of deportees, Stern defends Lacan: 'Je pense: l'enseignement de Lacan tient, devant cette critique. Il tient car par tout cela *il s'est laissé enseigner* ("Ce sont mes analysants qui m'enseignent")' (p. 223; emphasis original).<sup>3</sup> Here, the question for the analyst is not 'What do I know about the deportee?', but rather 'What does the deportee know?'

The deportee's knowledge is what Stern calls *le savoir-déporté*, which is both the knowledge of the deportee and knowledge which is deported, carried away, returning as something other than itself. It describes the survivor's speaking position as an act of witnessing before it is an analysable utterance:

Que sommes-nous? que suis-je? demande-t-il. Chaque sujet-déporté, réellement, témoigne de ça, de cette loque qu'il a été, qu'ont été les autres autour de lui, qu'il était destiné à devenir. Le savoir-déporté, c'est ça, savoir sur le déchet, la loque. Mais quand il en parle, en témoigne, il ne l'est plus. (108)

It is not surprising that Stern says next to nothing about the content of this knowledge, since it is not primarily something to be paraphrased or summarized. She distances herself from thinkers such as Agamben and Felman, and from psychoanalysts who impose a ready-made conceptual framework onto survivors' experience, not because they are necessarily wrong, but because in her view they risk missing the essential point, which is that for the survivor to speak of being a rag ('la loque') or a wreck is to be less of one. The unsurpassed achievement here is Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* (1985), which listens attentively to survivors rather than seeking to explain or to understand them. What the survivor knows is inscribed more in her senses than in any theoretical framework: 'Nous autres, à Birkenau, nous en avons tout de même un peu vu, beaucoup entendu et encore plus senti. Avec le nez. Nous, femmes de Birkenau, nous avons, réellement, le nez dessus, tout le temps, sur cette

3 Stern quotes (selectively) from the French translation of Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved*: 'I do not believe that psychoanalysts (who have pounced upon our tangles with professional avidity) are competent to explain this impulse [to speak]. Their knowledge was built up and tested "outside", in the world that, for the sake of simplicity, we call civilian: it traces its phenomenology and tries to explain it; it studies its deviations and tries to heal them. Their interpretations, even those of someone like Bruno Bettelheim who went through the trials of the Lager, seem to me approximate and simplified, as if someone wished to apply the theorems of plain geometry to the solution of spheric triangles' (pp. 64–65).

odeur de grillé mélangé à notre propre puanteur' (*Le Savoir-déporté*, p. 261).

Stern's work is a bold and heartfelt investigation of the psychoanalyst's inescapable implication in the material she analyses, and the consequences of such an implication for the theory and practice of psychoanalysis. For her, the trauma of the camps is part of the post-war human condition; 'vous êtes – vous aussi – tous, toutes tatoués, psychiquement', she suggests (p. 210). This invalidates psychoanalysis as a position of knowledge seeking to unlock the analysand's 'little secrets'. At the same time, a reinvigorated psychoanalysis, which for Stern would be a psychoanalysis guided by Lacan, is also urgently called for, since it alone can trace and attend to psychic scars unavailable to conscious, conceptual reflection. As analyst and survivor, she describes herself as faced with a double bind, requiring her both to bear witness and to psychoanalyse even when the two activities are in conflict with one another, and when Auschwitz is for ever intractable to the psychoanalyst's gaze. It is not a question of resolving this double bind so much as learning to inhabit it without betraying either the survivor's pain or the analyst's clinical duty. This entails rethinking the relation between analysand and analyst, who is incited to learn from the survivor's non-conceptual *savoir-déporté* rather than to seek to confirm what was already known. The roles of analyst and analysand have to some extent switched over. The section of Stern's book devoted to *le savoir-déporté* closes by suggesting that the survivor may now become a clinician, because what she knows about pain can alleviate the suffering of others. Stern recounts a story about a rabbi with curative powers who decides to abandon his patients. When they ask him what will become of them, he reassures them: 'Ne vous en faites pas, leur dit-il, allez à la synagogue et le premier à qui vous verrez, s'il retrouse sa manche, un petit numéro écrit sur le bras, allez vers lui, racontez-lui vos douleurs, et vous verrez, ça marchera très bien' (p. 262).

### The knowledge of stories

The fact that Stern concludes her discussion of *le savoir-déporté* with a story, and moreover a story which encourages us to tell our own sorrowful stories ('racontez-lui vos douleurs'), brings us back to Wiesel's *Un désir fou de danser*. Throughout Wiesel's writing, if the survivor has any knowledge to transmit, it will take the form of a story, rooted in experience (real or imaginary) and almost always opaque

and ambiguous. Doriel's course of psychoanalysis consists largely in his recounting of stories to his analyst, not so that she can interpret them, but to signal their resistance to her urge to interpret. The non-committal 'C'est possible' with which Thérèse greets Doriel's explanation of his suffering marks a moment of wavering on her part. Having apparently won Doriel over to her Freudian perspective, she is no longer sure that this is what she should be seeking from him. She appears to understand that she has not fully understood. This brings with it a modification of the relation between analysand and analyst which has repercussions for other encounters described in the novel. Even before this point it is clear that Doriel represents a danger for Thérèse. His case unsettles her knowledge and experience, and it begins to disrupt her marriage. In her sessions with him she behaves unprofessionally: she admits that she tries to provoke the transference by which he might fall in love with her. She tells him personal details about her private life, and when she breaks the analysis she gives him the notes she has kept on him. Who is analysing whom here? It is as if Doriel were as much the analyst as the analysand.

This is confirmed by Doriel's relations with others in the novel, as he reproduces something resembling a psychoanalytic situation in his encounters. His version of this situation consists in a willingness to listen to the stories of others: Laurent is traumatized because he inadvertently caused the death of a fellow member of the Resistance during the war; a young woman Doriel meets on a plane tells him of her problems in love; his benefactor Samek Ternover tells him of his experiences as a deportee. Doriel insists that he does not understand: 'Je n'avais rien compris à ce qu'elle venait de dire' (p. 278); 'Je n'étais pas qualifié pour ce rôle. Mais alors? Alors je me contentai de lui prêter l'oreille' (p. 298). What is being depicted here is the survivor as analyst, willing to hear stories without comprehension, qualification or judgement. The survivor-analyst's position is not one of knowledge; rather, it is an attentiveness to the pain and the density of experience of others as partially conveyed in the tales they have to tell. His subjects do not attribute to him a spurious, unfounded authority: 'Laurent me regarda sans ciller, comme si je venais de m'évader d'un asile d'aliénés' (p. 241). The survivor-analyst may be madder than those to whom he attends; yet his madness may also be his receptiveness to their pain, his ability to learn the distraught knowledge of the suffering other.

Wiesel's novel develops the complex meditation on madness which he pursued throughout his writing career. Madness is depicted here as an experience of being locked up, of being cut off from the outside world,

but also as a desire to speak, to encounter and to communicate with other selves. It is a dangerous contagion, but also a susceptibility to otherness, and a form of knowledge in its own right, a theological matter more than a clinical one. It turns out to have a curious link to love: 'il faut être fou pour aimer' (*Un désir fou de danser*, p. 26), we are told, suggesting that in our cynical world love is madness, but also that only the madman can love truly. Love is what madness aspires to, as a desperate opening onto the world; but love is also the impossible outcome of madness because the madman is terribly isolated. It is in this light that the ending of *Un désir fou de danser* can be read. After the curtailment of his analysis, and after a lifetime of unconsummated relations, Doriel does indeed find love, apparently, when he meets and rapidly sets up home with a waitress who is much younger than he is. The final page of the novel sees the couple expecting a child. The madman's vocation for love seems to have been fulfilled. What has been generously forgotten here is that this is also the barred conclusion of madness, the goal to which it aspires but which is unachievable. The happy ending is morally heart-warming but existentially false. By concluding in this way, the novel denies its own bitter insight that, if madness is a desire to communicate and to love, it is also the impossibility of succeeding in either.

Stern writes from the position of an analyst who resists analysis when caring, attentive listening is the better stance. Wiesel's novel depicts an analysand who resists being analysed, though he replicates something of the analytic situation in his encounters with others. Both Stern and Wiesel investigate the questions of who knows what, and who can speak on behalf of the other. Both suggest that what survivors know may amount to more than their analysts can know about them. To speak prematurely, or with unwarranted authority, in the place of the other may be to silence her again, to finish off the work of the victimizers. Together, Stern and Wiesel elucidate a tension inherent within trauma studies. While questioning very radically what it means to represent, to know or to be the subject of one's own experience, trauma studies also cannot rid itself of the impulse to speak for the other, to want to know more about others than they know of themselves. It runs the risk of usurping the other's voice even as it speaks from a position of urgent care. There may of course be no alternative, except silence.

Popular psychology repeatedly tells us that talking about things is good for us. *Le Serment de Kolvillàg* envisages the contrary possibility even if it does not finally embrace it. Wiesel's writing explores the painful, ambivalent position of victims who become witnesses in



search of secondary witnesses which make possible the uncovering, understanding and transmission of their distress. The view of silence as salutary is outweighed by the sense that it may also be an act of self-destructive self-censorship. As we saw in the previous chapter, Semprun's writing sometimes suggests that not telling the story of atrocity is both necessary for survival and a kind of time bomb which will be all the more destructive the longer it ticks away in the dark corners of the mind. Semprun's characters sometimes die after telling their stories. The next chapter looks at the case of someone who really did die, at her own hands, within weeks of the publication of a memoir of her wartime experiences.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# Sarah Kofman and the Time Bomb of Memory

Sarah Kofman's father was arrested in Paris on 16 July 1942, when she was seven. He had emigrated to France from Poland in 1929, and all his six children were French-born. His family never saw him again. After his arrest, he was deported to Auschwitz where, a year later, a Kapo beat him to death because he refused to work on the Sabbath. Kofman survived the war thanks to the protection of a non-Jewish woman, to whom she refers as *mémé*, and who became a kind of surrogate parent and a sometimes bitter rival with her real mother. As an adult Kofman became a noted philosopher; her thesis was supervised by Gilles Deleuze and she became a close associate of Jacques Derrida. She published over 20 books covering a vast range of philosophical issues and authors, with a particular interest in the work of Nietzsche and Freud. Derrida said that no one in the century had read all the folds of the work of Nietzsche and Freud with such pitiless, implacable love (*Chaque fois unique*, p. 214). In 1994, she published *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, a short memoir describing the arrest of her father and her subsequent wartime experiences. On 15 October 1994, she took her own life.

Is there a connection between what happened to Kofman and her family during the war, the publication of her memoir and her suicide? Some readers have suspected that there is a direct link between these events. Kofman's biographer, Karoline Feyertag, reports comments by Kofman's colleague Jean-Luc Nancy, who lists the publication of *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* as one of the factors which led to her death (*Sarah Kofman*, p. 29). It has been suggested that Kofman's memoir made her traumatic experiences all too present to her again. As Françoise Duroux puts it, 'The autobiographical plunge, practiced in vivo, undoubtedly induces an earthquake. Philosophy protects. The plunge causes the

philosophical position to explode: Sarah Kofman's suicidal plunge into her own melancholy' ('How a Woman Philosophizes', p. 138; quoted in Robson, 'Bodily Detours', p. 616). Others have shared the sense of a link between Kofman's wartime traumas and her suicide, as discussed by Penelope Deutscher and Kelly Oliver:

At an homage to Kofman held by her colleagues at the Sorbonne, Elisabeth de Fontenay suggested that it is precisely Kofman's suicide that provokes one to reflect on the relationship between her life and work, or between her life and her two deaths, the one that she narrowly escaped as a child, the other of 1994. Françoise Armengaud suggests that Kofman's death in 1994 could be thought of as the Holocaust having finally caught up with her, killing her with the delayed action of a time bomb. ('Sarah Kofman's Skirts', p. 8)

Taken together, these accounts suggest that Kofman's suicide was a delayed response to the Second World War: the trauma of war, unleashed by the memoir, caught up with her half a century after the event. In this light, Kofman can be seen as belonging to a doomed group of brilliant thinkers and writers whose suicides have been linked to their experiences of war and the Holocaust, including figures such as Jean Améry, Paul Celan, Bruno Bettelheim, Tadeusz Borowski and Primo Levi.

To take just one of these important writers, Kofman's suicide might, then, be compared to the death of Primo Levi. Levi was found dead on the ground floor of the Turin apartment block where he lived on 11 April 1987. The police enquiry confirmed the assumption that he had deliberately jumped to his death. This was rapidly amplified by the belief that his suicide was related to his experiences in Auschwitz. Days after his death, fellow survivor Elie Wiesel said that 'Primo Levi died at Auschwitz forty years later' (quoted Gambetta, 'Primo Levi's Last Moments', p. 2); or, as he put it later, Levi's death is 'proof that one can die at Auschwitz after Auschwitz' ('Bearing Witness'). Levi's biographer, Myriam Anissimov, describes Levi's death as a suicide from her opening pages (see *Primo Levi ou la tragédie d'un optimiste*), and subsequent biographers have followed suit. Likewise, in the chapter of his *L'Écriture ou la vie* entitled 'Le Jour de la mort de Primo Levi', Jorge Semprun does not doubt that Levi deliberately took his own life. Moreover, Semprun points out that the day of Levi's death was the anniversary of the liberation of Buchenwald, the camp in which he (but not Levi) had been interned. Semprun assimilates Levi's situation to his own, surviving only as a kind of ghost after the living death of Auschwitz and Buchenwald.

He writes twice that ‘la mort avait rattrapé Primo Levi’ (pp. 257, 260), the use of *rattrapé* suggesting that death had not just *claimed* him, but *reclaimed* him: since Auschwitz, Levi had belonged more to the dead than to the living. So why, Semprun wonders, was it suddenly impossible for Levi to bear his terrible memories? He quickly answers his own question: ‘Une ultime fois, sans recours ni remède, l’angoisse s’était imposée, tout simplement. Sans esquive ni espoir possibles’ (*L’Ecriture ou la vie*, p. 260). Semprun, like Wiesel and others, takes for granted, first, that Levi’s death was suicide, and second, that it was related to his experience of Auschwitz.

The suicide of Levi, like those of Kofman, Améry and Celan, may appear to be the final victory of Nazism over those who appeared to have survived it. Such a view is underpinned by two important features of Holocaust testimony and trauma studies. One is the widespread sense among Holocaust survivors *that they have not in fact survived*, that in reality they died in the camps alongside their companions despite the illusion of their return. As Mado, one of the speakers in Charlotte Delbo’s *Mesure de nos jours*, puts it, ‘Je ne suis pas vivante. Je suis morte à Auschwitz et personne ne le voit’ (p. 66). The other important feature is the operation of latency, which Freud described in his analysis of the victim of a train crash who walks away apparently unscathed, only to develop debilitating symptoms at a later date. According to the concept of latency, the consequences of a traumatic event may be felt long after the event itself; and in the intervening period the victim may appear to be unaffected by his or her experiences. So a friend could say of Levi that ‘Until the day of his death I was convinced he was the most serene person in the world’ (quoted Gambetta, ‘Primo Levi’s Last Moments’, p. 1), while Semprun could describe him as suddenly, overwhelmingly driven to suicide by unbearable memories.

Semprun’s rather rapid appropriation of Levi’s death might nevertheless give pause for thought. We might wonder on what basis he feels entitled to come to such a decisive interpretation of why Levi killed himself. In this and other accounts, although Levi’s death is terrible, at least it remains intelligible and narratable. It bears a meaning, even if that meaning is a depressing one. It is almost as if the Holocaust, which once was perceived as a radical challenge to our interpretive frameworks, how now been fitted out with concepts and paradigms which allow us to make sense of it a little too quickly. Some commentators, though, have doubted that Levi’s death was a suicide at all. Diego Gambetta, for example, has reviewed much of the evidence: Levi left behind no suicide

note, no one saw him jump (or fall) and he had made plans for the days after his death, which might suggest at the very least that it was not premeditated. Of course, the fact that he did not plan to kill himself does not mean that he did not commit suicide. Gambetta argues, though, that ‘the facts known to us arguably suggest an accident more strongly than they indicate suicide’ (p. 11).

Even if we assume that there is a watertight conceptual distinction between suicide and accident, that a suicide cannot be accidental and an accident cannot be suicidal (an assumption I do not make), the truth about Levi’s death will in all likelihood never be definitively settled. The case tells us more about the interpreter’s desire than it does about what really happened on 11 April 1987. For Semprun, Levi’s suicide confirms his view of the pent-up, self-destructive violence which lingers in the living dead who survived Auschwitz. For Gambetta, Levi’s (probably) accidental death confirms that ‘[his] last moments cannot be construed as an act of delayed resignation before the inhumanity of Nazism. He never yielded. At most he snapped. On that tragic Sunday only his body was smashed’ (p. 13).

A disturbing aspect of this disagreement is the readiness of some commentators – whatever their view of Levi’s death – to speak on behalf of the dead, to explain their experiences and to endow their final moments with a suitable meaning and narrative closure. As explained in Chapter 1, I find this appropriation of the other’s voice and experience to be, on the very best account, ethically questionable. In Kofman’s case, the chronological proximity of the publication of *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* to her suicide (which, so far as I am aware, has never been doubted as such) is certainly striking. It is less obvious that this entitles us to make a direct causal connection between them. The temptation to connect the life and the work is almost irresistible; and we might be encouraged in the attempt to find such a connection by the fact that Kofman herself was often exercised by the relation between life and work in the authors she studied. But is there anything in Kofman’s memoir which actually justifies making a link between her life during the 1940s, her autobiographical text and her suicide?

### Kofman and autobiography

Kofman claimed or confessed that she wanted to tell the story of her life: ‘J’ai toujours eu envie de raconter ma vie’; but she also conceded

that her life was 'inénarrable' (quoted Robson, 'Bodily Detours', p. 608). She describes a tension between the desire to narrate and a bedrock of experience which is not susceptible to ordering through narrative. In the context of twentieth-century literature, and particularly the problems of narration raised by Holocaust literature and other experiences of trauma, there is nothing surprising about this kind of comment. The tension between the urgency and the impossibility of recounting is, one might hazard to say, a defining condition of much modern narrative. In other words, Kofman is certainly not alone in wanting to tell the story of her life while sensing that her life is not a story that can be told. Her scholarly writing on autobiography, however, adds another dimension to this. In her book *Autobiogriffures* (first edition 1976; second edition 1984), she analyses the German author E.T.A. Hoffmann's fictional autobiography of a cat, published in English as *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr* (1819–1821). In this study, Kofman does not restrict herself to suggesting that the complexity of a life cannot be contained within narrative paradigms. She goes further, to say that *all* autobiography is *necessarily* mendacious: 'Toute autobiographie est mensongère, écrite qu'elle est dans l'illusion rétroactive et à des fins d'idéalisation' (p. 99).<sup>1</sup> The error of readers, she argues, is to seek 'derrière le texte un autre texte qui en serait la vérité' (p. 22), attempting to explain the text in the light of the author's pre-existing experience, intention and meaning. What if, she says, 'l'auteur voulait justement ne rien dire? [...] Si chercher derrière le texte et la mise en scène le vouloir-dire de l'auteur était une manière d'effacer le texte et l'écriture [...]?' (p. 22).

Methodologically, Kofman here proposes that we should read the text for what it is, not as the failed or impeded representation of something else: a 'true' experience which only partially appears. This is quite different from Kofman's suggestion, quoted above, that her life is 'inénarrable'. If life cannot be narrated, we may nevertheless be encouraged to try to understand how unnarrated, unnarratable experiences permeate the narrative text. Such a position still presumes that there is a truth behind the text, even if it is by its very nature unavailable to language and narration. But in *Autobiogriffures* Kofman suggests that this is itself a mistake: reading the text as it is means abandoning the assumption that

1 Kofman may be alluding here to Freud's comments on biographers in 'Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood'. Freud describes how biographers 'devote their energies to a task of idealization', and thereby 'sacrifice truth to an illusion' (p. 223). I am grateful to Patrick Hayes for drawing my attention to this passage.

it is a flawed mirror of an absent, perhaps impossible primary narrative which would convey the truth of experience.

So how should we read Kofman's *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, and how does it offer itself to be read? The book's title appears to be referentially secure: it names two streets in Paris which will indeed turn out to be the key locations around which the story rotates, the first being where the narrator lives with her Jewish family, the second being where she takes refuge with her Catholic protector and surrogate mother after the deportation of her father. Readers unfamiliar with the streets of Paris might nevertheless be forgiven for speculating about these place names. As Verena Andermatt Conley has suggested, we might see in 'Ordener' either *ordonné* or *ordinaire*, and Labat may contain its homophone *là-bas*, an otherworldly elsewhere separate from the rules and conventions of the ordinary, familiar world ('For Sarah Kofman', p. 156). Huysmans's great nineteenth-century novel *Là-bas* may be invoked as an intertext. And in fact these echoes fit what happens in the narrative just as well as the literal reality of the street names. The title of the book promises referentiality, but this soon becomes overlaid with further layers of meaning. *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* turns out to be harder to pin down than it might first appear. This is indicated by the variety of frameworks in which critics have attempted to place it: it has been discussed in the contexts of psychoanalysis, feminism, trauma studies and the deconstruction of the subject, and even related to the form of the fairy tale.<sup>2</sup> The apparent literalness and geographical specificity of the title soon gives way to a complex, elusive, teasing text.

Before the book proper has even begun, then, the title of Kofman's memoir seems to offer us a stable, referentially secure text while also potentially deliteralizing the very terms which name it. This work is, I suggest, both grounded and self-ungrounding. Even so, at the core of the text is the simple, heartbreaking story of the deportation and murder of the narrator's father and its effects on her and her family. The first sentence of the second chapter states factually that 'Le 16 juillet 1942, mon père savait qu'il allait être "ramassé"' (p. 11; emphasis original); and the first sentence of the following chapter states with even more poignant simplicity, 'Nous ne revîmes, en effet, jamais mon père' (p. 15).

2 See Rizzuto, 'Reading Sarah Kofman's Testimony'; Robson, 'Bodily Detours'; Horowitz, 'Sarah Kofman et l'ambiguïté des mères'; Conley, 'For Sarah Kofman'. Conley likens aspects of the book to 'the utopian form of the fairy tale' in 'For Sarah Kofman', p. 158.

However, nothing in this text remains simple for very long. Before we have even got to this point, a short first chapter of barely 100 words invites the reader to consider not only the literal events of the following narrative but also their emotional meaning. Kofman begins: ‘De lui, il me reste seulement le stylo. Je l’ai pris un jour dans le sac de ma mère où elle le gardait avec d’autres souvenirs de mon père’ (p. 9). She goes on to say that she used it during her school years, and that she still possesses it, held together with sticking tape: ‘il est devant mes yeux et il me contraint à écrire, écrire. Mes nombreux livres ont peut-être été des voies de traverse obligées pour parvenir à raconter “ça”’ (p. 9).

This opening passage has attracted the attention of everyone who has reflected seriously on Kofman’s memoir, and rightly so. It has been observed that the masculine personal pronouns here link the father to the pen; and the passage connects the desire to write with the paternal imperative. The pen can obviously be seen as phallic, and the psychoanalytic resonance is underscored by the final ‘ça’, this being the common French rendering of the Freudian id. It has also been pointed out that there is a tragic symmetry to the text, which begins with the loss of the father/pen and ends with the death of the surrogate mother, *mémé*, who, the priest recalls at her graveside, ‘avait sauvé une petite fille juive pendant la guerre’ (p. 99).

One part of the opening chapter which, to my knowledge, has not been thoroughly explored (and, indeed, which is sometimes elided when the passage is quoted) is its second sentence: ‘Je l’ai pris un jour dans le sac de ma mère où elle le gardait avec d’autres souvenirs de mon père’. This curiously overlooked sentence raises interesting issues about the narrator, about her ethics and the ethics of the text, from the very beginning. Although the French does not necessarily mean this, I presume that ‘je l’ai pris dans le sac de ma mère’ means that she *stole* the pen; she took it *without permission* from a collection of her father’s belongings retained by his widow.<sup>3</sup> No other information is given: there is no indication, for example, of *when* the pen was taken other than the narrator’s statement that she used it ‘pendant toute [sa] scolarité’. The lack of further detail makes it impossible to know what the full circumstances are; but we might at least wonder whether taking the father’s pen from the mother’s bag wasn’t cruel, callous and vindictive. This may be overreading; but at the very least, the sentence opens the text with a

3 Conley also refers to taking the pen as a theft: ‘The child pilfers a pen that later becomes a fetish’ (‘Sarah Kofman’, p. 192).



reference to a possible theft. The father's pen, and with it the right to authorship, may be *stolen* rather than legitimately owned.

This first chapter invites, entitles, almost forces the reader to interpret what is to follow not just as the literal recording of terrible events, but also as *meaningful* within parameters which, crucially, the authorial voice attempts to predetermine. If we cleverly observe that the paternal pen may be phallic, and that the word *ça* has psychoanalytical resonance, we are perhaps not being as clever as we might have hoped: we are being fed these interpretive leads from the very beginning. The text guides us towards seeing how it should be properly understood. So by the time we get to the first sentence of chapter two ('Le 16 juillet 1942 mon père savait qu'il allait être "ramassé"'), facts and interpretations are already intertwined. The italicization of the date, 16 July 1942, is a nod and a wink to those of us who will immediately recognize it as a reference to the Rafle du Vel' d'Hiv.<sup>4</sup> The inverted commas around *ramassé* signal that the word is a euphemism and hint at its more terrible implications. Nothing here is as literal as it appears; everything is preinterpreted and laden with broader resonance. The text consistently anticipates and directs our attempts to make sense of it.

In this context, it is particularly important that, from its second chapter, the text makes an issue of the scandal of *lying*.<sup>5</sup> The narrator's father knows that he is going to be arrested. When a policeman arrives (it is important to note that this is a French policeman: the roundup was conducted by the French, not the occupying Germans), her mother claims that the father is not there ('Il n'est pas là, dit ma mère. Il est à la synagogue', p. 12). Her father nevertheless appears and contradicts the mother, allowing himself to be taken away ('Si, je suis là. Prenez-moi!', p. 12). The mother then makes two more attempts to save him. First she says that her youngest child is under two years old. Fathers of children under two were not arrested at this stage of the Occupation, but the narrator insists that her brother had in fact had his second birthday two days earlier on 14 July (a date which itself invites further interpretation). Then the mother claims that she is currently pregnant once more, presumably hoping once again to win the policeman's favour.

4 On 16 and 17 July 1942, a mass roundup of Jews was undertaken in Paris. Over 13,000 Jews were arrested, and many were held in the Winter Velodrome. They were subsequently deported, mainly to Auschwitz, where the huge majority of them were murdered.

5 For discussion, see Rizzuto, 'Reading Sarah Kofman's Testimony', pp. 8–9.

The mother's attempts to save her husband evoke a psychoanalytical scenario with which Kofman was fully familiar: the logic of the kettle, or in French *le raisonnement du chaudron*. In Freud's account, a man borrows a kettle from a neighbour and returns it in a damaged state. When confronted about this, he replies that he never borrowed a kettle, that the kettle was already damaged when he borrowed it and that the kettle was undamaged when he returned it.<sup>6</sup> Even though these different versions of events contradict one another, they have one crucial point in common: all versions confirm the desire of the speaker, in this case, the desire not to be held responsible. In the narrator's mother's version of this reasoning, the underlying desire is for the father to avoid arrest: you can't arrest him because he is not here; you can't arrest him because we have a child under two years of age; you can't arrest him because I am pregnant. The narrator is shocked by her mother's attempt to save her father by lying:

Ma mère ment! Mon frère venait d'avoir deux ans le 14 juillet. Et elle n'était pas enceinte, que je sache! Je ne pouvais, sur ce point, être aussi affirmative que sur le premier, mais je me sentais très mal à l'aise. Je ne savais pas encore ce qu'était un 'mensonge pieux' (l'on ne prenait pas à cette date les pères dont les enfants avait moins de deux ans, et si le flic avait été crédule, mon père aurait été sauvé) et je ne comprenais pas très bien ce qui se passait: que ma mère puisse mentir m'emplissait de honte et je me disais, inquiète et tourmentée, qu'après tout, j'allais peut-être avoir encore un petit frère! (p. 13)

I suspect that all but the most rigorous, intransigent Kantians would forgive the mother for her lies here.<sup>7</sup> In Kofman's text, however, the mother's lie has the status of an inaugural catastrophe, one which is perhaps as traumatic as the father's deportation. It entails a clash between paternal and maternal orders, and between absolute and compromised values. The mother lies ('Il n'est pas là') in order to save her husband; the father insists on the truth ('Si, je suis là') even though it will lead to his death, leaving his wife a widow and his children fatherless.

*Rue Ordener, rue Labat* begins with two transgressions, narrated in reverse chronological order: in Chapter 1, the narrator steals a pen ('Je l'ai pris un jour dans le sac de ma mère') some time after the deportation

6 For discussion in relation to Camus's *La Peste*, see Chapter 5 of this book.

7 According to the Kantian categorical imperative, lying is always, unconditionally wrong, however much it might seem to be justified in individual circumstances.

of the father; in Chapter 2, the mother lies ('Ma mère ment!') on the day of the father's arrest. These transgressions are small beer in comparison to the genocidal acts which define the context in which they occurred. Even so, they crucially inflect the meaning of Kofman's memoir. Purely in terms of how it is presented in the text, the mother's lying competes with and perhaps even outweighs the significance of the father's deportation. The deportation is sad but expected ('mon père savait qu'il allait être "ramassé"'), whereas the mother's lying occasions a crisis of values and belief, preparing the ground for the (albeit ambiguous) replacement of the bad, biological, Jewish mother by the good, surrogate, Catholic mother: *mémé*, the woman who takes in the narrator, cares for her, saves her from deportation and severs her links with Judaism.

The inaugural scene of the mother's lies has a further twist which has consequences for the memoir as a whole. The passage explicitly raises the issue – unknown to the narrator at the time – of when a lie may be a *mensonge pieux*: a white or benevolent lie. The Jewish tradition places great value on truthfulness, even though it acknowledges that sometimes circumstances might justify lying. But Kofman's narrative of the mother's *raisonnement du chaudron* raises the further problem of how to distinguish between lying and truth-telling. How do you know when a lie is a lie? In some cases, there is little difficulty. The mother's claim that the father is not at home is shown to be a lie when he comes into the room and contradicts her. The narrator knows that the claim about her brother Isaac's age is also untrue. But the mother's declaration that she is pregnant is not so evidently and demonstrably true or false. The narrator appears to be particularly disturbed by this declaration: 'Elle n'était pas enceinte, que je sache! Je ne pouvais, sur ce point, être aussi affirmative que sur le premier, mais je me sentais très mal à l'aise' (p. 13). The mother's lies cause shock and shame: 'que ma mère puisse mentir m'emplissait de honte'; but the claim about her pregnancy seems even more disturbing, leaving the narrator 'inquiète et tourmentée' (p. 13). A lie is bad enough; a claim that cannot be shown to be either true or false appears to be even worse.

The arrest of the father in the second chapter of *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* is the text's primal scene; and the mother's actions here and the narrator's response to them appear to be of at least equal importance to the actual loss of the father. From here on, the shifting sands of knowledge, belief and values are key drivers of the narrative. My suggestion here is that the narrator's 'torment' over her mother's possible pregnancy reveals not so much a concern about acquiring

another sibling (she already has five, after all) as an anxiety about the status of a declaration which is not ascertainably either true or false; and this in turn can be linked to a reflection on ambiguity and ambivalence which permeates the text. Even when *mémé* replaces the mother in the child's affections, ambivalence still reigns in relation both to the 'bad', punitive, biological mother and the 'good', caring, surrogate mother. After the war, a tribunal decides to let the child stay with *mémé* rather than her real mother. Although this is what the narrator wanted, she finds that it also not entirely what she wanted: 'Je ressens un étrange malaise. Sans comprendre pourquoi, je ne me sens ni triomphante, ni parfaitement heureuse ni tout à fait rassurée' (p. 71). When the biological mother forces her to return to live with her family, she resists, but is also relieved: 'Je me débattais, criais, sanglotais. Au fond, je me sentais soulagée' (p. 71). Later, she maintains contact with *mémé* but then breaks with her for a long period: 'Pendant plusieurs années, je coupe tout contact avec mémé: je ne supporte plus de l'entendre me parler du passé, ni qu'elle puisse continuer de m'appeler son "petit lapin" ou sa "petite cocotte"' (p. 98); and in the final paragraph of the book she records curtly that she did not attend *mémé's* funeral, without giving any account of what prevented her from being there: 'Je n'ai pu me rendre à ses obsèques' (p. 99).

The signs of ambivalence towards *mémé* complicate any simple opposition between the good mother and the bad mother in Kofman's narrative. This opposition is one of a number of interpretive avenues which the text offers us but then does not entirely endorse. The implications of the opening chapter, describing the father's broken pen which compels the narrator to write, are not picked up later in the text, leaving us to decide for ourselves whether it should be regarded as a key to the work or a red herring. Further clues for interpretation are offered towards the end of the text, as the narrator explicitly invites us to make a link between her memoir and Kofman's later work. Chapter 18 describes the picture by Leonardo da Vinci which appears on the cover of Kofman's first book, *L'Enfance de l'art*, followed by a long quotation from Freud which discusses Leonardo's 'two mothers' (pp. 73–74). In Chapter 21, the narrator tells us that her mother sometimes locked her in a dark room, and then adds a footnote pointing out that she has written a book entitled *Camera obscura* (p. 85); and a further footnote refers us to her book *Comment s'en sortir?*, which discusses a witch-like figure from Jewish folklore invoked by her mother to terrify her in her childhood (p. 86). As the book draws to its close, then, it appears to be

positively encouraging us to interpret Kofman's work in the light of her life and career.

Chapter 19 is particularly interesting in the context of this apparent invitation to interpretation. The chapter discusses Alfred Hitchcock's film *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), which the narrator tells us is 'l'un de [ses] films préférés' (p. 75), and which (in her account) hinges on the distinction between good and bad maternal figures.<sup>8</sup> The narrator describes how what she finds most powerful in the film is the sequence in which 'la bonne petite vieille, miss Froy' disappears and is 'remplacée par une autre femme qui se fait passer pour la première' (p. 75); the 'bon visage "maternel" de la vieille' is supplanted by a 'visage effroyablement dur, faux, fuyant, menaçant' (p. 76). The protagonist, Iris, is almost persuaded that she was hallucinating after a blow on the head, and that Miss Froy had never been on the train. However, Iris later discovers the truth, thwarts a wicked plot and saves Miss Froy, who is in fact a secret agent in the British Intelligence Service. This account of the film draws out its relevance to the narrator's predicament of being torn between two mothers; and moreover, the concluding short paragraph places the analysis firmly within a psychoanalytical context: 'Le mauvais sein à la place du bon sein, l'un parfaitement clivé de l'autre, l'un se transformant en l'autre' (p. 77). This offers the reader instruction in how to interpret both the current chapter and the book as a whole. Critics have duly – obediently? – spotted the Kleinian vocabulary and used it to inform their readings of Kofman's memoir.<sup>9</sup>

The narrator's self-interpretation might leave us dissatisfied, however. The Kleinian scheme may provide an explanation for some elements of the chapter and the work as a whole while failing to account for others. It is striking, for example, that the narrator makes nothing of the film's political context. Although it is not explicit that the wicked foreign power plotting against Miss Froy represents the German Nazis, the hint is pretty unmistakable.<sup>10</sup> The disappearance of Miss Froy could therefore easily have been linked to the deportation and murder of the

8 For discussion of Kofman's chapter on *The Lady Vanishes* and the longer version of it in *L'Imposture de la beauté*, see Conley, 'Sarah Kofman'.

9 See for example Rizzuto, 'Reading Sarah Kofman's Testimony', p. 7; Horowitz, 'Sarah Kofman et l'ambiguïté des mères', pp. 110–11. On problems in reading this passage, see Cairns, *Post-War Jewish Women's Writing in French*, pp. 219–20.

10 This is made explicit in the 1979 remake of the film, directed by Anthony Page, which is set in pre-war Nazi Germany.

narrator's father. Moreover, the reading of the film, and by implication Kofman's book, in terms of good mothers and bad mothers, the good breast and the bad breast, simplifies the film and the book. As suggested above, the relation to both the biological mother and *mémé* is marked by ambivalence rather than being simply polarized into good and bad. And in the film, Miss Froy may *appear* to be a maternal 'bonne petite vieille' with a kindly face, contrasted with the 'visage effroyablement dur, faux, fuyant, menaçant' of the woman who replaces her; but in fact Miss Froy is also *false*; she masquerades as someone she is not. Rather than a benign, harmless old lady, she is actually a resourceful secret agent employing subterfuge and pretence. Everyone is double; appearances and reality can never be counted on to match each other, and no one can be trusted to be what they seem until the final resolution. Even so, in *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* the narrator's concluding comments on the good breast and the bad breast effectively forestall the possible interpretations of the film and of Kofman's book which such observations might open up.

This is all the more significant because a longer version of this chapter and its reading of *The Lady Vanishes* appears in Kofman's posthumously published collection, *L'Imposture de la beauté*. It turns out that the chapter in *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* contains only the first two paragraphs of the longer version of the text. In her memoir Kofman ends the discussion of the film precisely at the point when, in the longer version, she is about to nuance – and perhaps even undermine – her Kleinian interpretation by acknowledging the ambivalence of Miss Froy: 'Et pourtant Miss Froy n'est pas aussi "bonne" et parfait qu'il peut le sembler: l'on apprend qu'elle est une espionne (même si c'est pour la bonne cause, l'anglaise contre celle des Nazis) et qu'elle a donc menti sur son identité' (*L'Imposture de la beauté*, p. 142). Kofman here concedes that the 'belle image' of the good mother is now 'contaminée' (p. 142); and in any case, she goes on to argue that the film's knowledge of its own illusion-making means that 'il déjoue, comme par avance, toute lecture réductrice, "psychanalytique" entre autres, qui se prendrait par trop au sérieux' (p. 145). On Kofman's account, her own reading should be taken with a pinch of salt. This continuation of her discussion of the film confuses the terms of her earlier comments, as the good mother turns out not to be so good after all; and it explicitly denies the authority of an over-serious psychoanalytical interpretation. The fact that Kofman doesn't include these paragraphs in her memoir gives them the status of repressed self-knowledge. *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* allows the Kleinian

interpretation to stand unchallenged, as a provocation or perhaps a misleading guide to gullible readers. The text gives us guidance about how it should be read, while mocking us if we take it at its word too readily.

At moments, the *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* looks like a sparse testimonial work describing the experience of the Occupation and the threat of deportation; but this is largely forgotten as the text focuses instead on the psychological narrative of a girl caught between two mothers. Part of the problem here is that there is no reality behind the text which can be separated from its interpretation(s), no simple story which can be told independently of the possible meanings that it can be made to bear. What is presented here, rather, is a preinterpreted reality in which the reality cannot be disentangled from its preinterpretations. In other words, the whole text mirrors the mother's declaration that she is pregnant: unverifiable, it hovers between event and meaning, between a desire for autobiographical literalness and a sense that no such literalness is available because facts are always already interpreted, always already experienced as meaningful.

### Conclusion

In its second chapter Kofman's memoir raises the question of its own truth and reference through the narrator's anxious response to the mother's lies. The father tells the truth, and dies for it. The mother lies, and survives. And her lies culminate in a declaration ('J'attends un autre enfant', p. 12) which for the moment can neither be verified nor falsified. The text then stages two responses to this situation. The daughter is left 'mal à l'aise', 'inquiète et tourmentée' (p. 13), and the policeman who has come to arrest the father simply does not know what to make of what he has heard: 'Le flic, lui, paraît embarrassé. Il ne veut prendre sur lui aucune responsabilité' (p. 13). Later in the text, the narrator will implicitly identify with her mother when she herself becomes a liar during an attempt to return to Paris and to *mémé*. 'J'ai perdu ma mère', she tells some men in a lorry, and they appear to believe her (though they subsequently hand her over to the police): 'Je me crois "sauvée". Je ne pensais pas que cela allait être si facile! Si facile de mentir, si facile de faire croire à d'autres mes mensonges!' (p. 84).

Kant condemned all lies on the grounds that, once you accept that it is sometimes permissible to lie, it becomes impossible to know whether a

person is lying or not. Kofman's memoir accepts that risk. The *mensonge pieux* may appear justified if it helps achieve a desired, desirable aim: in the mother's case, to save the father from deportation; in the daughter's case, to return to *mémé*. In the process, though, the regime of truth is damaged. The reader may be left, like the narrator, anxious and tormented, or like the policeman, simply bemused and unwilling to accept responsibility. And we may be less likely to believe the liar in the future. At the post-war tribunal which decided who should have custody of the young child, the mother claims that *mémé* had abused the narrator. The narrator does not know what she means by this, but disbelieves her anyway: 'j'étais persuadée qu'elle mentait' (p. 70); and the tribunal agrees with her.

The narrator's shock at the mother's lies comes from the child's realization that a statement does not always or only mean what it says. It is bound up with fears and desires which underlie, perhaps even undermine, its literal truthfulness. *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* becomes a problematic example of the testimonial memoir insofar as it instantiates this insight. The simple, harrowing story of the Occupation, the deportation of the father and the subsequent effects of his loss on his surviving family, is knowingly filtered, before it has even begun, through a psychoanalytical grid which places everything in the context of a family drama involving absent fathers and punitive mothers. Events are preinterpreted, and presented as a function of the meanings we are invited to find in them. This does not mean that the facts of the narrative are not *true*; but it does suggest that the facts, such as we are given, are inseparable from the interpretive schemes which the text offers us.

So does *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* tell us anything which would help us to understand Kofman's psychology and suicide? Does it offer any support to the view that publishing the account of her wartime experiences unleashed a trauma that led her to take her own life? On the basis of the memoir, might we say of Kofman what Semprun says of Levi: 'Une ultime fois, sans recours ni remède, l'angoisse s'était imposée, tout simplement. Sans esquivé ni espoir possibles'? In a nutshell, Kofman's memoir refuses any such interpretation. This is a work which does not *want* us to make the leap from text to world or from text to author except within the preinterpreted parameters which it lays out for us. Wiesel thought that Levi died in Auschwitz 40 years after Auschwitz. I don't know if he was right. But nothing in Kofman's memoir justifies us in trying to make similar sense of her subsequent suicide. Kofman's book actually attempts to prevent us from understanding her suicide in



the light of her traumatic memories. It both encourages and frustrates interpretation, and in the process it impedes any rapid linking of life and work. In fact, as we read the text, we might suspect that it is also reading us, offering us titbits for our own interpretive desires – the father’s broken pen, the two mothers, the traces of the life in the philosophical work – but never letting us feast off them to our fill. More than it tells us about the experience of the Occupation or about Kofman’s life and death, it plays upon and reveals to us our desire for interpretive schemas which will show us, however tragically, that there is some kind of sense to be made out of the shards of trauma. Perhaps we prefer tragic meaning to benign senselessness. To put it bluntly, though, nothing gives us the right to interpret Kofman’s suicide in the light of her memoir.

# Conclusion

## Whose War, Which War?

Rien ne marchait plus dans ma tête. Plus j'essayais de comprendre, plus tout se brouillait. C'est ainsi qu'on devient fou. Ou amnésique. Je suis devenu fou.

(Delbo, *Mesure de nos jours*, p. 160)

This book has not attempted to tell a coherent story about the Second World War and the ways in which it has affected the lives and works of those who experienced it at first hand. No such story is available, possible or perhaps even desirable. It would involve too many elisions, obfuscations and simplifications. What is clear is that we are still in some sense *post-war*, in that the war remains a problematic, traumatic reference point which will not yet be silenced. The controversy around works such as Jonathan Littell's Goncourt prize-winning *Les Bienveillantes* (2006), which gave voice to a fictional Nazi perpetrator, and the film *La Rafle* (2010), which belatedly reminded French audiences of the complicity of their countrymen in genocide, demonstrates that we are dealing here with a still-unresolved past. The war continues to call for speech, representation, symbolization and interpretation. Moreover, these issues matter more than ever. As the living memory of the Second World War fades, we are left only with its half-forgotten, partly hidden traces, in texts and films which are still, I would suggest, under-interpreted. And in a Europe which is once again unsettled, we have to fear that un confronted trauma always risks being repeated, in ever more destructive forms.<sup>1</sup>

1 I write this sentence on 30 June 2016, one week after the UK voted to leave the European Union.

I am reminded at this point of one of the great French novels about the Second World War, Michel Tournier's *Le Roi des aulnes* (1970), and in particular the encounter of its protagonist, the Nazi-serving prisoner of war Abel Tiffauges, with the commander of Kaltenborn. This latter character is an aristocratic career soldier who becomes the head of a school for Nazi cannon fodder, even though he is not himself particularly favourable to the Nazi regime. In a key passage of the novel, he offers Tiffauges an apocalyptic vision of the war as the explosion of symbols:

Et tout cela est symbole, tout cela est chiffre, indiscutablement. Mais ne cherchez pas à comprendre, c'est-à-dire à trouver pour chaque signe la chose à laquelle il renvoie. Car ces symboles sont diabolos: ils ne symbolisent plus rien. Et de leur saturation naît la fin du monde. (p. 321)

Tournier's disturbing novel describes and exemplifies this catastrophic explosion of symbols: nothing means what it seems, everything is to be interpreted, but interpretation never reaches a final destination. In the formulation promulgated by Ricœur, 'le symbole donne à penser' (see for example *De l'interprétation*, p. 46). The inherent ambiguity of the symbol is a provocation to interpretive reflection. But the apparent generosity in Ricœur's use of the word *donne* is double-edged. While opening up possibilities of meaning, it also excludes the possibility of assured conclusion. The consequences of this are epistemological and ethical. Free interpretation may turn out to lead dangerously close to Tournier's moral apocalypse.

The most influential formulations of trauma studies have often stressed the unspeakability or unrepresentability of the experience of historical violence. As Caruth puts it in a much-quoted passage, the traumatized 'carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess' ('Introduction', p. 5). Astute critics such as Thomas Trezise and Sharon Marquart have suggested, however, that stressing unspeakability can have silencing effects on those who want or need to speak (see Trezise, *Witnessing Witnessing*, pp. 2–3; Marquart, *On the Defensive*, pp. 7–8). To impose a generalizing theory on the diverse experiences of survivors is to find another way of not listening to them. From a hermeneutic perspective, listening is always already interpreting; and if listening is essential to the testimonial process, then interpretation exactly coincides with the possibility of witnessing. It is part of it from the very beginning.

What I have called 'traumatic hermeneutics' here is not, then, something which comes *after* the experience of war, or after any other

traumatic disturbance. It belongs to the experience as it belongs to the very possibility of its narration and reception. It is certainly not a guarantee or even a distant promise of definitive understanding. Hermeneutics is not and never was anything of the sort, despite how it has sometimes been portrayed, especially in French and French-inspired theory. Hermeneutics is, rather, an attempt to manage the proliferation of meaning, that is, the attempt not to be overwhelmed by it, to make it liveable against all the odds. This entails, inevitably, constantly skirting the likelihood of error and misunderstanding, perhaps to a catastrophic degree. Inhabiting the conflict of interpretations risks perpetuating a history of violence even while it endeavours to appease it. To illustrate this, I turn again, for the last time, to Charlotte Delbo.

In Chapter 2, I discussed Loulou, one of the figures in Delbo's *Mesure de nos jours*, who is a different man when he returns from deportation. We are told that he was one of seven survivors from the convoy which took him to the concentration camps, another being a man named Jacques. Later in *Mesure de nos jours*, Jacques narrates the story of his return. He comes back later than the other survivors, does not wish to recount his experiences to curious fellow passengers on the train to his home in Charente, arrives to find no one to greet him and soon discovers that his parents are dead and his home destroyed. The passage is haunted by a sense of return to something which no longer exists, a return which is not a return. Jacques, like other figures in Delbo's texts and in trauma texts more generally, comes back and does not come back, returns to encounter the impossibility of return. When he tries to find former Communist Party resisters and fellow survivors, he is met with hostility and suspicion which he finds incomprehensible. He visits his comrade Vincent:

'Vincent! C'est moi, Jacques. J'ai changé, mais c'est moi, Jacques'. Il restait planté devant sa porte, muet, et je suis resté devant lui sans comprendre. Je ne saurais dire aujourd'hui s'il était ennuyé, gêné ou mauvais, j'étais trop secoué pour remarquer quoi que ce fût. Des suppositions me passaient par la tête, trop rapides pour que je puisse les formuler maintenant. Vincent avait été arrêté et il n'avait pas tenu. Ou bien Vincent n'était pas des nôtres et il avait passé de l'autre côté. Ou bien Vincent était devenu fou. Ou bien moi. Aucune de ces suppositions n'était vraisemblable et je restais là à regarder Vincent qui ne me regardait pas. (p. 158)

This passage gives a powerful account of what is at stake in traumatic hermeneutics. It is both impossible and imperative to make sense of signs which signify anything or nothing. Vincent's response to Jacques's

return is incomprehensible: did he betray us, or is he mad or is it I who am mad? Any interpretation is possible, but none adds up. And what dominates this is the sense that everything has changed and nothing has changed: 'J'ai changé, mais c'est moi'. Jacques emerges from this encounter profoundly bewildered: 'Tout m'échappait. Quelque chose qui aurait dû me fournir une clé m'échappait. Quoi? Tout était embrouillé, inextricable, bouché' (p. 158).

We subsequently discover that the way Jacques is treated on his return is explained by the suspicion among his former comrades that he had turned traitor. Here again, interpretation runs rampant. His very survival proves his guilt, when all his fellow resisters were shot or died in the camps: 'D'être le seul survivant ne plaidait pas en ma faveur. C'était même la principale preuve contre moi' (p. 164). In the urgent and insane rush to make sense of what happened in the war, conclusions are drawn which are false, unjust, violent and almost irresistible. It is only years later that the suspicions towards Jacques are allayed, when an alternative account of events explains the discovery of the resistance network in terms of bad luck rather than betrayal. The truth is restored, but it is now too late: 'On m'a réhabilité. J'ai beau savoir qu'à leur place j'en aurais fait autant – parce que moi aussi, j'étais intransigeant –, je ne peux pas regarder les camarades comme avant' (p. 166). Things have been put back in place; at the same time, though, they can never be the same again. Jacques returns and does not return; he is the same, but totally changed; the truth is known, but the trace of error cannot be fully erased.

The story of Jacques illustrates the urgency and violence of interpretation and all the concomitant risks of mis- and over-interpretation. We simply must understand these matters, while everything we need to say about them may be facile, premature or disastrously wrong. But there is another twist to Delbo's astonishingly intelligent text. Jacques is supported through the difficult years following his non-return by another survivor, Denise, who returns from Ravensbrück, keeps faith with Jacques and becomes his wife. In Jacques's testimony, Denise is a strong but enigmatic figure, devoting herself to helping her husband and clearing his name. The passage following the story of Jacques is much shorter, and entitled 'Denise'. Jacques's sequential narrative contrasts with Denise's more fragmentary text. She begins by describing how dedicating her energies to supporting Jacques left her no time for herself:

J'ai eu tant de peine à ramener Jacques sur la rive  
je me suis donné tant de peine pour ramener Jacques et pour qu'il vive  
que je n'ai pas eu le temps de penser à moi. (p. 167)

The final lines of the fragment echo this opening:

J'ai eu tant de peine à lui rendre la volonté de vivre  
que penser à moi  
toutes ces années-là ... (p. 169)

One story hides another. Jacques recounts a tale of heartbreaking misunderstanding, of heroism and suffering interpreted as betrayal. To help him tell this story, Denise suppresses or neglects her own. What is said covers over what remains unsaid. Behind the war that is recounted, understood and misunderstood, remains another war, other wars, which are still untold.

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