

# TESTIMONY

CRISES OF WITNESSING IN  
LITERATURE, PSYCHOANALYSIS, AND HISTORY

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The present volume will endeavor to suggest, therefore, the first stage of a theory of a yet uncharted, nonrepresentational but performative, relationship between art and culture, on the one hand, and the conscious or unconscious witnessing of historical events, on the other. This is then a book about how art inscribes (artistically bears witness to) *what we do not yet know of our lived historical relation to events of our times*.

In considering, in this way, literature and art as a precocious mode of witnessing—of accessing reality—when all other modes of knowledge are precluded, our ultimate concern has been with the preservation, in this book, both of the uniqueness of experience in the face of its theorization, and of the shock of the unintelligible in the face of the attempt at its interpretation; with the preservation, that is, of reality itself in the midst of our own efforts at interpreting it and through the necessary process of its textualization.

# ONE

## *Education and Crisis, Or the Vicissitudes of Teaching*

SHOSHANA FELMAN

### I

#### *Trauma and Pedagogy*

Is there a relation between crisis and the very enterprise of education? To put the question even more audaciously and sharply: Is there a relation between trauma and pedagogy? In a post-traumatic century, a century that has survived unthinkable historical catastrophes, is there anything that we have learned or that we should learn about education, that we did not know before? Can trauma *instruct* pedagogy, and can pedagogy shed light on the mystery of trauma? Can the task of teaching be instructed by the clinical experience, and can the clinical experience be instructed, on the other hand, by the task of teaching?

Psychoanalysis, as well as other disciplines of human mental welfare, proceed by taking testimonies from their patients. Can educators be in turn edified by the practice of the testimony, while attempting to enrich it and rethink it through some striking literary lessons? What does literature tell us about testimony? What does psychoanalysis tell us about testimony? Can the implications of the psychoanalytic lesson and the literary lesson about testimony *interact* in the pedagogical experience? Can the process of the testimony—that of bearing witness to a crisis or a trauma—be made use of in the classroom situation? What, indeed, does testimony mean in general, and what in general does it attempt to do? In a post-traumatic century, what and how can testimony teach us, not merely in the areas of law, of medicine, of history, which routinely use it in their daily practice, but in the larger areas of the *interactions between the clinical and the historical, between the literary and the pedagogical?*

### The Alignment between Witnesses

In his book entitled *Kafka's Other Trial*, writer, critic and Nobel prize laureate for literature Elias Canetti narrates the effect that Kafka's correspondence has had on him:

I found those letters more gripping and absorbing than any literary work I have read for years past. They belong among those singular memoirs, autobiographies, collection of letters from which Kafka himself drew sustenance. He himself . . . [read] over and over again, the letters of Kleist, of Flaubert, and of Hebbel . . .

To call these letters documents would be saying too little, unless one were to apply the same title to the *life-testimonies* of Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Dostoevsky. For my part, I can only say that these letters have *penetrated me like an actual life*.<sup>1</sup>

A "life-testimony" is not simply a testimony to a private life, but a point of conflation between text and life, a textual testimony which can *penetrate us like an actual life*. As such, Kafka's correspondence is testimony not merely to the life of Kafka, but to something larger than the life of Kafka, and which Canetti's title designates, suggestively and enigmatically, as *Kafka's Other Trial*. Both through Kafka's life and through his work, something crucial takes place which is of the order of a *trial*. Canetti's very reading of Kafka's correspondence, in line with Kafka's reading of the letters of Kleist, Hebbel and Flaubert, thus adds its testimony—adds as yet another witness—to Kafka's *Trial*. Canetti writes:

In the face of life's horror—luckily most people notice it only on occasion, but a few whom inner forces *appoint to bear witness* are always conscious of it—there is only one comfort: *its alignment with the horror experienced by previous witnesses*.<sup>2</sup>

How is the act of *writing* tied up with the act of *bearing witness*—and with the experience of the trial? Is the act of *reading* literary texts itself inherently related to the act of *facing horror*? If literature is the *alignment between witnesses*, what would this alignment mean? And by virtue of what sort of agency is one *appointed* to bear witness?

<sup>1</sup>Elias Canetti, *Kafka's Other Trial*, New York-Schocken Books, 1974, p. 4. Emphasis mine.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. emphasis mine.

### The Appointment

It is a strange appointment, from which the witness-appointee cannot relieve himself by any delegation, substitution or representation. "If someone else could have written my stories," says Elie Wiesel, "I would not have written them. I have written them in order to testify. And this is the origin of the loneliness that can be glimpsed in each of my sentences, in each of my silences."<sup>3</sup> Since the testimony cannot be simply relayed, repeated or reported by another without thereby losing its function as a testimony, the burden of the witness—in spite of his or her alignment with other witnesses—is a radically unique, noninterchangeable and solitary burden. "No one bears witness for the witness," writes the poet Paul Celan.<sup>4</sup> To bear witness is to *bear the solitude* of a responsibility, and to *bear the responsibility*, precisely, of that solitude.<sup>4-bis</sup>

And yet, the *appointment* to bear witness is, paradoxically enough, an appointment to transgress the confines of that isolated stance, to speak *for* other and *to* others. The French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas can thus suggest that the witness's speech is one which, by its very definition, transcends the witness who is but its medium, the medium of realization of the testimony. "The witness," writes Levinas, "testifies to what has been said *through* him. Because the witness has said 'here I am' before the other."<sup>5</sup> By virtue of the fact that the testimony is *addressed* to others, the witness, from within the solitude of his own stance, is the vehicle of an occurrence, a reality, a stance or a dimension *beyond himself*.

<sup>3</sup>"The Loneliness of God," published in *Dvar Hashavu'a* (magazine of the newspaper *Davar*), Tel-Aviv, 1984. My translation from the Hebrew. For a further elaboration of the significance of Wiesel's statement, see chapter 7, I.

<sup>4</sup>In "Aschenglorie" ("Ashes-Glory"): "Niemand / zeugt für den / Zeugen."

<sup>4-bis</sup>Celan's verse, "No one bears witness for the witness," is in effect so charged with absolute responsibility and utter solitude, so burdened with the uniqueness of the witnessing, that it becomes itself not a simple statement but a speech act which repeats, performs its own meaning in resisting our grasp, in resisting our replicating or recuperative witnessing. It thus performs its own solitude: it puts into effect what cannot be understood, transmitted, in the mission of transmission of the witness. It is the resonances of this *bearing*, of this burden of the performance of the witness, that will become, in all the senses of the word, the *burden* of this book—its leitmotif. In different forms and in a diversity of contexts, Celan's verse will indeed itself return through the various chapters of the present volume, like a compelling, haunting melody, like a directed beacon, an insistent driving force in the quest toward something which is not entirely within reach.

<sup>5</sup>Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethique et infini: Dialogues avec Philippe Nemo*, Paris: Fayard, 1982, p. 115. My translation from the French; emphasis mine.

Is the appointment to the testimony voluntary or involuntary, given to or against the witness's will? The contemporary writer often dramatizes the predicament (whether chosen or imposed, whether conscious or unconscious) of a voluntary or of an unwitting, inadvertent, and sometimes *involuntary witness*: witness to a trauma, to a crime or to an outrage; witness to a horror or an illness whose effects explode any capacity for explanation or rationalization.

### The Scandal of an Illness

In Albert Camus' *The Plague*, for instance, the narrator, a physician by profession, feels historically appointed—by the magnitude of the catastrophe he has survived and by the very nature of his vocation as a healer—to narrate the story and bear witness to the history of the deadly epidemic which has struck his town:

This chronicle is drawing to an end, and this seems to be the moment for Dr. Bernard Rieux to confess that he is the narrator . . . His profession put him in touch with a great many of our townspeople while plague was raging, and he had opportunities of hearing their various opinions. Thus he was well placed for giving a true account of all he saw and heard . . .

Summoned to give evidence [appelé à témoigner] regarding what was a sort of crime, he has exercised the restraint that behooves a conscientious witness. All the same, following the dictates of his heart, he had deliberately taken the victims' side and tried to share with his fellow citizens the only certitudes they had in common—love, exile and suffering . . . Thus, decidedly, it was up to him to speak for all . . . Dr. Rieux resolved to compile this chronicle, so that he should not be one of those who hold their peace but should bear witness in favor of those plague-stricken people; so that some memorial of the injustice done them might endure.<sup>6</sup>

Camus' choice of the physician as the privileged narrator and the designated witness might suggest that the capacity to witness and the act of bearing witness in themselves embody some remedial quality and belong already, in obscure ways, to the healing process. But the presence of the doctor as key-witness also tells us, on the other hand, that what there is to witness urgently in the human world, what alerts and mobilizes the attention of the witness and what necessitates the testimony is always fundamentally, in one way or another, the scandal

<sup>6</sup>The Plague, trans. Stuart Gilbert, New York: Random House, 1972, pp. 270–287.

of an illness, of a metaphorical or literal disease; and that the imperative of bearing witness, which here proceeds from the contagion of the plague—from the eruption of an evil that is radically incurable—is itself somehow a philosophical and ethical correlative of a situation *with no cure*, and of a radical human condition of exposure and vulnerability.

### In an Era of Testimony

Oftentimes, contemporary works of art use testimony both as the subject of their drama and as the medium of their literal transmission. Films like *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann, *The Sorrow and the Pity* by Marcel Ophüls, or *Hiroshima mon amour* by Marguerite Duras and Alain Resnais, instruct us in the ways 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. As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference.

What the 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 constataion of a verdict or the self-transparency of knowledge. Testimony is, in other words, a discursive *practice*, as opposed to a pure *theory*. To testify—to *vow to tell*, to *promise* and *produce* one's own speech as material evidence for truth—is to accomplish a *speech act*, rather than to simply formulate a statement. As a performative speech act, testimony in effect addresses what in history is *action* that exceeds any substantialized significance, and what in happenings is *impact* that dynamically explodes any conceptual reifications and any constative delimitations.

### Crisis of Truth

It has been suggested that testimony is the literary—or discursive—mode par excellence of our times, and that our era can precisely be defined as the age of testimony. "If the Greeks invented tragedy,



the Romans the epistle and the Renaissance the sonnet," writes Elie Wiesel, "our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony."<sup>7</sup> What is the significance of this growing predominance of testimony as a privileged contemporary mode of transmission and communication? *Why has testimony in effect become at once so central and so omnipresent in our recent cultural accounts of ourselves?*

In its most traditional, routine use in the legal context—in the courtroom situation—testimony is provided, and is called for, when the facts upon which justice must pronounce its verdict are not clear, when historical accuracy is in doubt and when both the truth and its supporting elements of evidence are called into question. The legal model of the trial dramatizes, in this way, a contained, and culturally channeled, institutionalized, *crisis of truth*. The trial both derives from and proceeds by, a crisis of evidence, which the verdict must resolve.

What, however, are the stakes of the larger, more profound, less definable crisis of truth which, in proceeding from contemporary trauma, has brought the discourse of the testimony to the fore of the contemporary cultural narrative, way beyond the implications of its limited, restricted usage in the legal context?

## II

### *The Story of a Class*

As a way of investigating the significance of such a question, as well as of the questions raised in the beginning of this essay concerning the interaction between the clinical and the historical and the instructional relation between trauma, testimony and the enterprise of education, I devised some years ago a course entitled "Literature and Testimony." I subtitled it: "(Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History)". I announced it as a graduate seminar at Yale. The title drew some thirty graduate students, mainly from the literary disciplines, but also from psychology, philosophy, sociology, history, medicine and law.

I did not know then that I would myself, one day, have to articulate my testimony to that class, whose lesson—and whose unforeseeable eventness—turned out to be quite unforgettable, but not in ways that anyone could have predicted. I had never given—and have never given since—any other class like it, and have never been as stupefied

<sup>7</sup>"The Holocaust as a Literary Inspiration," in *Dimensions of the Holocaust*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1977, p. 9.

by the inadvertent lessons and the unforeseeable effects of teaching as I was by the experience of this course. I would like to recount that uncanny pedagogical experience as my own "life-testimony," to share now the peculiar story of that real class whose narrative, in spite of its unique particularity, I will propose as a generic (testimonial) story (in a sense to which I will return, and from which I will later draw the implications): the story of how I became, in fact, myself a witness to the shock communicated by the subject-matter; the narrative of how the subject-matter was unwittingly *enacted*, set in motion in the class, and how testimony turned out to be at once more critically surprising and more critically important than anyone could have foreseen.

I have now repeated this course several times, but never with the same series of texts, never again in the same way and with the same framework of evidence. It was in the fall of 1984.

I organized my choice of texts around literary, psychoanalytic and historical accounts, which dramatize in different ways, through different genres and around different topics, the accounts of—or testimonies to—a crisis. The textual framework of the course included texts (or testimonies) by Camus, Dostoevsky, Freud, Mallarmé, Paul Celan, as well as autobiographical/historical life accounts borrowed from the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale. By thus conceiving of the course at once as a focused avenue of inquiry and as a varied constellation of texts, a diversity of works and genres in which testimony was inscribed in many ways and with a whole variety of implications, I had two tentative pedagogical objectives in mind: 1) to make the class feel, and progressively discover, how testimony is indeed *pervasive*, how it is implicated—sometimes unexpectedly—in almost every kind of writing; 2) to make the class feel, on the other hand, and—there again—progressively discover, how the testimony cannot be subsumed by its familiar notion, how the texts that testify do not simply *report facts* but, in different ways, encounter—and make us encounter—*strangeness*; how the concept of the testimony, speaking from a stance of superimposition of literature, psychoanalysis and history, is in fact quite unfamiliar and *estranging*, and how, the more we look closely at texts, the more they show us that, unwittingly, we do not even know what testimony is and that, in any case, it is not simply what we thought we knew it was.

How, indeed, has the significance of testimony itself been set in motion by the course, and how has it emerged, each time, at once in a new light and yet always still estranged, still a challenge for the task of understanding?

## III

*Narrative and Testimony: Albert Camus*

It is the most familiar notion of the testimony, the one which we encounter daily through its usage by the media and are thus the most prepared for, because most acquainted with, with which we began the process of the exploration of the class. Taking as a starting point Camus' *The Plague*, we came first to believe—through the novel's underscored and most explicit indications—that the essence of the testimony is historical, and that its function is to record events and to report the facts of a historical occurrence. "To some," says the narrator of the novel, "these events [the outbreak of the plague] will seem quite unnatural; to others, all but incredible":

But, obviously, a narrator cannot take account of these differences of outlook. His business is only to say: "This is what happened," when he knows that it actually did happen, that it closely affected the life of a whole populace, and that there are thousands of eyewitnesses who can appraise in their hearts the truth of what he writes.[6]

Thus, the narrator-doctor-witness feels both obligated and compelled to "chronicle" the "grave events" of the catastrophe he has survived and to "play the part of a historian" (6), to "bear witness," as he puts it, "in favor of those plague-stricken people, so that some memorial of the injustice done them might endure" (287). Since *The Plague* is 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; since, indeed, a fragment of the novel was published literally as an *underground testimony*, as a French Resistance publication in Occupied France (in 1942), the witness borne by the doctor underscores, and at the same time tries to grasp and comprehend, the historical dimension of the testimony.

So did we, in class, focus, at the start, on this historical dimension. Surprisingly, however, the historical event *fails* to exhaustively account for the nature of the testimony, since the bearer of the testimony is not simply a "historian" but, primarily, a *doctor*, and since history appears, and is recorded, in the striking metaphor of a disease, a plague. Since the testimony dwells on historicity as a relationship to death, and since the act of writing—the act of making the artistic statement of the novel—is itself presented as an act of bearing witness to the trauma of survival, the *event* to which the testimony points and



Albert Camus as editor of "Combat," World War II

which it attempts to comprehend and grasp is enigmatically, at once historical and clinical. Is the testimony, therefore, a simple medium of historical transmission, or is it, in obscure ways, the unsuspected medium of a healing? If history has clinical dimensions, how can testimony *intervene*, pragmatically and efficaciously, at once historically (politically) and clinically?

*Confession and Testimony: Fyodor Dostoevsky*

If the testimony is, however, always an agent in a process that, in some ways, bears upon the clinical, how should we understand this clinical dimension when the testimony, in the course of its own utterance, quite explicitly rejects the very goal of healing and precludes any therapeutic project? This, as the class was to discover, is the case of Dostoevsky's hero or narrator, writing his *Notes from Underground*:

I'm a sick man . . . a mean man. I think there's something wrong with my liver . . . But, actually, I don't understand a damn thing about my sickness; I'm not even too sure what it is that's ailing me. I'm not



Fyodor Dostoevsky, 1880

under treatment and never have been, although I have great respect for medicine and doctors. Moreover, I'm morbidly superstitious, enough, at least, to respect medicine. With my education, I shouldn't be superstitious, but I am just the same. No, I'd say I refuse medical help just out of contrariness. I don't expect *you* to understand that, but it's so. Of course, I can't explain who I am trying to fool this way. I'm fully aware that I can't spite the doctors by refusing their help. I know very well that I'm harming myself and no one else. But still, it's out of spite that I refuse to ask for the doctors' help. So my liver hurts? Good, let it hurt even more.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, trans. Andrew MacAndrew, New York: Signet, 1961, pp. 90-91.

In thus presenting us with the "confession" of an illness that spites healing and does not seek cure, Dostoevsky's testimony, unlike Camus', seems to find its predilection in the clinical in a manner which subverts its very *raison d'être* and with such an exclusivity as to entirely preclude any larger perspective, any political or historical preoccupation. And yet, the clinical description, although crucial, is also crucially deceptive, and does not truly exhaust the testimonial stakes of Dostoevsky's text, whose complexity encompasses unwittingly a latent historical dimension: even through its very title, *Notes from the Underground* (1864) is written as a latent echo to a work Dostoevsky published two years earlier, *Notes from the House of the Dead*, in which the writer testifies to his historical and autobiographical experience as a political prisoner in a penitentiary in Siberia. Dostoevsky's early writings had placed him politically as a Russian liberal. Having joined a liberal circle of enthusiastic young men who met to discuss socialism, Dostoevsky was arrested, accused of complicity in a conspiracy (to set up a printing press), and condemned to death. The sentence was commuted to imprisonment, but, in a calculatedly cold-blooded farce devised by the tsarist authorities for



Before the execution.



the edification of subversives, the announcement of the pardon was made only in the middle of the ceremony of the execution, in the very face of the firing-squad. Some prisoners fainted. Two went permanently insane. Dostoevsky's epileptic fits, to which he had been subject since his childhood, were immeasurably aggravated.

In the guise of a confession that seeks above all to demystify and deconstruct itself, *Notes from Underground* can indeed be read as a belated *testimony to a trauma*, a trauma which endows Dostoevsky with the sickness of the one who "knows"—with the underground vision of the one who has been made into a *witness* of his own firing-squad. The testimony to the sickness encompasses, in fact, at once the history that lurks behind the clinical manifestations and the political oppression that signals mutely from behind the clinical "confession."

Unpredictably, the notion of the testimony thus turns out to be tied up, precisely, with the notion of the underground. In much the same way as Camus published *The Plague* as a literal member of the so-called "underground"—of the French Resistance during Nazi occupation—Dostoevsky's testimony from the underground equally, though unpredictably, encompasses not just the subterranean drift of the apparent clinical event, but the political dimension of oppression and the ethical dimension of resistance which proceed from, and inscribe within the testimony, the historical occurrence.

## IV

### *Psychoanalysis and Testimony: Sigmund Freud*

It was at this point that psychoanalysis was introduced into the course, and that the import of its lesson brought about a turning point in the insight of the class. We studied in particular Chapter 2 of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, with Freud's detailed account and interpretation of his "Irma dream." In our tentative awakening into the latent *clinical* dimension of the literary testimonies we had been examining, it was significant to note that Freud's narrated dream at once derives from (in reality), and enacts (in phantasy), the problematization of a setting that, this time explicitly, is clinical: the dream is triggered by the doctor's concern with his only partially successful treatment of his patient Irma: "the patient was relieved of her hysterical anxiety



Sigmund Freud in 1891, age thirty-five.

but did not lose all her somatic symptoms."<sup>9</sup> In the dream, the patient Irma is in fact complaining to the doctor, Freud, about her suffering and her continued pain. When Freud, while thinking of his dream, resorts to writing down for the first time ever all his free associations, he unexpectedly discovers, all at once, the dream's specific latent *meaning*, an unprecedented *method* of dream interpretation and a *theory* of dreams as psychical fulfillments of unconscious wishes:

The dream acquitted me of the responsibility for Irma's condition by showing that it was due to other factors—it produced a whole series of reasons. The dream represented a particular state of affairs as I should have wished it to be. *Thus its content was the fulfillment of a wish and its motive was a wish.* [118–119]

<sup>9</sup>Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Chapter 2, "Analysis of a Specimen Dream," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated from the German under the general editorship of James Strachey, Vol. IV, p. 106. Subsequent quotations from Freud's chapter, designating (in the body of the text) only page numbers in parenthesis, will refer to this edition.



Like Dostoevsky's *Notes* (although with an intention altogether different), Freud's *Dreams* in turn offer us, surprisingly enough, at once an autobiographical and a clinical *confession*. "I have other difficulties to overcome, which lie within myself," writes Freud. "There is some natural hesitation about revealing so many intimate facts about one's own mental life; nor can there be any guarantee against misinterpretation by strangers":

[But] it is safe to assume that my readers . . . will very soon find their initial interest in the indiscretions which I am bound to make replaced by an absorbing immersion in the psychological problems upon which they throw light. [105]

Once again, then, in Freud's writing of his dreams, as in Dostoevsky's writing of his notes, the *testimony* differentiates itself from the content of the *manifest confession* which it uses as its vehicle, the confession is *displaced*, precisely, at the very moment that we think we grasp it, and it is in this surprise, in this displacement, that our sense of testimony will be shifted once again.

Considered as a testimony, Freud's discourse as a whole has an unprecedented status in the history of culture, in three respects: 1) the radical displacement that it operates in our understanding of the clinical dimension; 2) the validity and scientific recognition that it for the first time gives to unconscious testimony; 3) its unprecedented status as both a narrative and a theoretical event, as a narrative, in fact, of the advent of theory.

Freud's innovations as clinician stem, indeed, from his concern with how not to dismiss the patient's testimony—as medical doctors were accustomed to do in hysterics' cases—even when the physician does not understand this testimony. "So far," says Freud in the first of his *Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, "it has been an advantage to us to accompany the doctors; but the moment of parting is at hand. For you must not suppose that a patient's prospects of medical assistance are improved in essentials by the fact that a diagnosis of hysteria has been substituted for one of severe organic disease of the brain":

Thus the recognition of the illness as hysteria makes little difference to the patient; but to the doctor quite the reverse. It is noticeable that his attitude towards hysterical patients is quite other than towards sufferers from organic diseases. He does not have the same sympathy for the former as for the latter. Through his studies the doctor has learned many things that remain a sealed book to the layman . . . But all his knowledge—his training in anatomy, in physiology and in pathology—

leaves him in the lurch when he is confronted by the details of hysterical phenomena. He cannot understand hysteria, and in the face of it he is himself a layman. This is not a pleasant situation for anyone who as a rule sets so much store by his knowledge. So it comes about that hysterical patients forfeit his sympathy. He regards them as people who are transgressing the laws of his science—like heretics in the eyes of the orthodox. He attributes every kind of wickedness to them, accuses them of exaggeration, of deliberate deceit, of malingering. And he punishes them by withdrawing his interest from them."<sup>10</sup>

In contrast, it is by stepping in his turn into the position of the patient, and by acknowledging an interchangeability between doctor and patient (a fact which the Irma dream dramatizes by Freud's own arthritic shoulder pain, echoing the pain of his patient Irma), that Freud creates the revolutionized clinical dimension of the *psychoanalytic dialogue*, an unprecedented kind of dialogue in which the doctor's testimony does not substitute itself for the patient's testimony, but *resonates with it*, because, as Freud discovers, *it takes two to witness the unconscious*.

In presenting his own testimony of the Irma dream as a correlative both to the dreams and to the symptoms of his patients, Freud makes a scientific statement of his discovery that there *is* in effect such a thing as an *unconscious testimony*, and that this unconscious, unintended, unintentional testimony has, as such, an incomparable heuristic and investigative value. Psychoanalysis, in this way, profoundly rethinks and radically renews the very concept of the testimony, by submitting, and by recognizing for the first time in the history of culture, that one does not have to *possess or own* the truth, in order to effectively *bear witness* to it; that speech as such is unwittingly testimonial; and that the speaking subject constantly bears witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him, a truth that is, essentially, *not available* to its own speaker.

In the underground of language, Freud encounters Dostoevsky. Psychoanalysis and literature have come both to contaminate and to enrich each other. Both, henceforth, will be considered as primarily *events of speech*, and their testimony, in both cases, will be understood as a mode of *truth's realization* beyond what is available as statement, beyond what is available, that is, as a truth transparent to itself and

<sup>10</sup>First lecture, *Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, 1909 in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XI (1910), pp 11–12. Consequent references to Freud's works (other than *The Interpretation of Dreams*) will refer to this edition under the abbreviation *Standard*, followed by volume number (in Roman numbers) and page number (in Arabic numbers).

entirely known, given, in advance, prior to the very process of its utterance. The testimony will thereby be understood, in other words, not as a mode of *statement of*, but rather as a mode of *access to*, that truth. In literature as well as in psychoanalysis, and conceivably in history as well, the witness might be—as the term suggests and as Freud knew only too well (as is evidenced by his insistence on “*der Zeuge*”)—the one who (in fact) *witnesses*, but also, the one who *begets*, the truth, through the speech process of the testimony. This begetting of the truth is also what Freud does, precisely, through his witness and his testimony to the Irma dream, out of which he will *give birth* to the entire theory of dreams, and to its undreamt of implications.

Freud's whole attempt, henceforth, will be to bring the *evidence materialized* by the unconscious testimony into the realm of cognition. Through the material process of the act of *writing down* (which itself in some ways implicates the relevance, and the participation, in the psychoanalytic testimonial process, of the *literary act*): through a detailed recording and deciphering of the dream's associations, the Irma dream *bears witness* to the *unconscious* testimony of the dream in such a way as to transform it into the most reflective and most pointed *conscious* testimony, a conscious testimony which itself can only be grasped in the movement of its own production, and which increasingly embraces not just what is *witnessed*, but what is *begotten* by the unconscious testimony of the dream. The stupendous conscious testimony which the dream gives birth to will consist, therefore, not merely in the actual interpretation and elucidation of the dream, but in the transformation of this one particular event and of this one particular interpretation into a paradigmatic model not just of interpretation but of the very principle of psychoanalytical discovery, a model, that is, of the very birth of knowledge through the testimonial process. The unconscious testimony of one dream—through its conflation with the testimonies of other dreams—is transmuted into the pathbreaking conscious testimony of a universal *theory of dreams* which itself, in turn, founds the entire *theory of psychoanalysis*. Psychoanalytic theory, however, is nothing other than a finally available *statement* (or approximation) of a truth that, at the outset, was unknown but that was gradually *accessed* through the practice and the process of the testimony. In this sense, the whole *Interpretation of Dreams* can be viewed, indeed, as Freud's most revolutionary testimonial work: a universal testimonial work which at the same time dramatizes—to return once again to Cennet's terms with respect to Kafka's correspondence—a particular *life-testimony*, which, in this case, hap-

pens to be Freud's. In the preface to the second edition of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, written ten years after the original publication, Freud thus writes:

The essence of what I have written about dreams and their interpretation, as well as about the psychological theorems to be deduced from them—all this remains unaltered: subjectively at all events, it has stood the test of time. Anyone who is acquainted with my other writings . . . will know that I have never put forward inconclusive opinions as though they were established facts, and that I have always sought to modify my statements so that they may keep in step with my advancing knowledge. In the sphere of my dream-life I have been able to leave my original assertions unchanged. During the long years in which I have been working at the problems of the neuroses I have often been in doubt and sometimes been shaken in my convictions. At such times it has always been *The Interpretation of Dreams* that has given me back my certainty.<sup>11</sup>

Much like Kafka's novel or Kafka's correspondence, much like Dostoevsky's underground or Camus' plague, Freud's dream narrative is equally, indeed, *the story of a trial*: a trial symbolized by the dramatic, anecdotal way in which Freud sees himself, within the dream, both tried and judged by his colleagues; an oneiric trial which, however, is itself the emblem of a larger, more decisive trial, encompassing the ways in which the revolutionary theory of psychoanalysis is being put to trial by the contemporary world. In this way, the very idiosyncrasy of Freud's autobiographical and clinical confession, the very triviality of the oneiric story of the trial, unwittingly emerges into the dimension of the truth of a ground breaking *theoretical event*. As the first dream Freud submitted not just to his own endeavor of detailed interpretation, not just to the further work of his own conscious understanding, but to the conscious witnessing of the whole world, the story of the Irma dream unsettlingly becomes, thus, a *generic* testimonial story.

The curious thing about this stunning theoretical event is the way in which its very generality hinges, paradoxically, on its accidental nature: on the contingency of a particular, idiosyncratic, symptomatic dream. In the symptomatic and yet theoretical illumination of this radically new kind of intelligibility, psychoanalysis can be viewed as a momentarily felicitous, and a momentarily creative, *testimony to an accident*.

<sup>11</sup>Freud, "Preface to the Second Edition," in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Standard, Vol. IV (1900), pp. xxv-xxvi.

## V

*Poetry and Testimony: Stéphane Mallarmé, or An Accident of Verse*

Curiously enough, it is also in such unexpected terms—those precisely of the testimony to an accident—that Mallarmé, the nineteenth-century French Symbolist and perhaps the greatest poet France has given to the world, speaks about contemporary poetry.

Having been invited to give a talk at Cambridge and at Oxford universities on new trends in French poetry—on the poetic revolution taking place around him in France—Mallarmé announces to his English audience:

In effect I am bringing news, and the most surprising. Such a case has never been seen.

They have done violence to verse . . .

It is appropriate to relieve myself of that news right away—to talk about it now already—much like an invited traveler who, without delay, in breathless gasps, discharges himself of the testimony of an accident known, and pursuing him.<sup>12</sup>

The conjunction of the testimony and the accident that seemed at once to redefine the testimony in the psychoanalytical perspective and to pinpoint the newness of psychoanalysis, thus also describes, surprisingly enough, the altogether different realm of poetry in Mallarmé's perspective. Coincidentally, Mallarmé's and Freud's conceptual discoveries occur in the same year: Mallarmé's lecture in England is published in 1895, the very year in which Freud comes across the theory of dreams through the pivotal analysis of his Irma dream. I would suggest, indeed, that this remote conceptual and chronological encounter between Freud's and Mallarmé's juxtapositions of the testimony and the accident is not due purely to coincidence but that, in fact, in spite of the all-too-apparent differences between the two endeavors, something crucial in the depth of their conceptions and in the innovative thrust of their perceptions indeed resonates. What makes Mallarmé, therefore, at once perceive and in his turn convey

<sup>12</sup>"J'apporte en effet des nouvelles. Les plus surprenantes. Même cas ne se vit encore. Ils ont touché au vers. Il convient d'en parler déjà, ainsi qu'un invité voyageur tout de suite se décharge par traits haletants du témoignage d'un accident su et le poursuivant." "La Musique et les lettres," in Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1945, pp. 643–644. Subsequent quotations from Mallarmé will refer to this French edition, indicated by page number. The English version of all cited texts from Mallarmé is here in my translation.

the very newness in French poetry as *testimony to an accident*? What is the nature of the accident referred to here by Mallarmé?

What the poetic revolution basically consists of is the introduction of "free verse" into French poetry, a change of form or a loosening of the poetic rules which entails a destitution or disintegration of the classical Alexandrine, the official French verse whose traditional twelve syllables and symmetric rhymes and rhythms had imposed themselves for centuries as the only possible mould—and as the only formal stamp—of French poetic writing.

If poetry can be essentially defined as an art of rhythm, Mallarmé redefines rhythm and thus radically rethinks the event of poetry as such through the rhythmical unpredictability of free verse which, in unsettling the predictability—the formal structure of anticipation—of the Alexandrine, reaches out for what precisely *cannot be anticipated*: "they have done violence to verse." In opposition to the forms of traditional verse, poetry with Mallarmé becomes an *art of accident* in that it is an art of rhythmical surprises, an art, precisely, of unsettling rhythmical, syntactic and semantic expectations.

What is crucially important is, however, Mallarmé's acute and singular perception of the celebration of free verse as the violent experience of linguistic rupture, as the historical advent of a linguistic fragmentation in which the verse is violently and deliberately "broken," in what Mallarmé describes as a "fundamental crisis" which he calls, precisely, in a text so-titled *Crise de vers*, "Crisis of Verse."<sup>13</sup> As the testimony to an accident which is materially embodied in an *accident of the verse*, poetry henceforth speaks with the very power—with the very unanticipated impact—of its own explosion of its medium.

Apparently, the poetic revolution is purely aesthetic, purely formal. And yet, in Mallarmé's perception the *formal* change is crucially, implicitly endowed with a *political* dimension:

In effect I am bringing news, and the most surprising.

Such a case has never been seen. They have done violence to verse.

Governments change: but always prosody remains intact: either, in the revolutions, it passes unnoticed, or the violent attempt upon it does not impose itself because of the opinion that this ultimate dogma can never vary. [643 – 644]<sup>14</sup>

Mallarmé implicitly compares the effects of the poetic revolution to the ground-shaking processes unleashed by the French Revolution.

<sup>13</sup>Mallarmé, "Crise de vers," in "Variations sur un sujet," op. cit., p. 360.

<sup>14</sup>"Les gouvernements changent: toujours la prosodie reste intacte: soit que, dans les révolutions, elle passe inaperçue ou que l'attentat ne s'impose pas avec l'opinion que ce dogme dernier puisse varier."



Paradoxically enough, the political upheaval and the civil shaking of foundations brought about by the fall of governments and the collapse of institutions may not be in fact as profound and as radical a change as the one accomplished by a linguistic or by a poetic transformation. Insofar as the accident of the verse narrates the drama of the accident—the disruption and the shattering—of “this ultimate dogma,” insofar as the resistance of tradition is now finally and formally dissolved and that traditional hierarchical divisions between poetry and prose—between *classes* in language—are now disposed of and inherently unsettled,<sup>15</sup> the breaking of the verse becomes itself a symptom and an emblem of the historical breaking of political and cultural grounds, and the freeing, or the *liberation* of the verse—through its decanonization—implicates the process of a vaster desacralization, of a vaster liberation taking place in social consciousness and in culture at large. “In effect, I am bringing news, and the most surprising.” What is profoundly surprising, Mallarmé implies, is not simply that the verse is broken, but that the breaking of the verse picks up on something that the political dimensions of the French Revolution have inaugurated in their accidenting both of classes and of dogmas, but failed to consummate, failed to achieve completely. The revolution in poetic form testifies, in other words, to political and cultural changes whose historical manifestation, and its revolutionary aspect, is now noticed accidentally—accidentally breaks into awareness—through an *accident of verse*. The poetic revolution is thus both a replica and a sequence, an effect of, the French Revolution. What free verse by accident picks up on, therefore, is not merely former poetry which it now modifies, but the formerly unseen, ill-understood relationship which the accident reveals between culture and language, *between poetry and politics*.

The seeming triviality of the formal *location* of the accident in free verse—in a literal transgression of the rules of prosody and in a rupture of the Alexandrine—is thus fundamentally misleading. In much the same way as in Freud, the trivial story of the trial—in testifying to an *accident of dream*—amounts to a ground-breaking revolution in perception and in human understanding, Mallarmé’s

<sup>15</sup>Free verse, in effect, has both declassified and mingled poetry and prose, both of which are henceforth equally infused with poetic inspiration. Prose, in Mallarmé’s perspective, is essentially *poeticized* through the accidenting of the verse, and is thus no longer separate, no longer formally distinct from poetry. “Verse is all there is [le vers est tout],” says Mallarmé, “from the moment there is writing. There is style, versification, wherever there is rhythm, and this is why every prose . . . has the weight of a ruptured verse . . . This is indeed, the crowning of what was formerly entitled *prose poem*” (“La Musique et les lettres,” *op. cit.*, p. 644).

accident of verse in effect bears witness to far-reaching transformations in the rhythm of life and to momentous cultural, political, and historical processes of change.

Mallarmé’s subject—his poetic testimony or the news he brings about the accident—is, therefore, by no means trivial, nor is it, in fact, what it appears to be: the scope of the accident is vaster, more profound and more difficult to grasp than the sheer formality of the concerns which convey it and which are its vehicle. Half way through his Oxford lecture, Mallarmé acknowledges this *otherness* of his own subject, which he himself does not entirely possess:

In effect I am bringing news, and the most surprising . . .

They have done violence to verse . . .

It is appropriate to relieve myself of that news right away—to talk about it now already—much like an invited traveler who, without delay, in breathless gasps, discharges himself of the testimony of an accident known and pursuing him . . .

Should I stop here, and where do I get the feeling that *I have come relatively to a subject vaster and to myself unknown*—vaster than this or that innovation of rites or rhymes; in order to *attempt to reach* this subject, if not to treat it . . .

Consciousness in us is lacking of what, above, explodes or splits.<sup>16</sup>  
[643–647; emphasis mine]

In a way, Mallarmé suggests that he speaks too soon, before he is quite ready, before he quite knows what his subject is about. And yet, since he has been a witness to “an accident known,” since he does *know* that an accident has taken place, and since the accident “pursues him,” he has got to speak “*already*,” almost compulsively, even though he has not had as yet the time to catch his breath. He thus speaks in advance of the control of consciousness; his testimony is delivered “in breathless gasps”: in essence, it is a *precocious testimony*.

Such precocious testimony in effect becomes, with Mallarmé, the very principle of poetic insight and the very core of the event of poetry, which makes precisely language—through its breathless gasps—speak ahead of knowledge and awareness and break through the limits of its own conscious understanding. By its very innovative definition, poetry will henceforth speak *beyond its means*, to testify—precociously—to the ill-understood effects and to the impact of an accident whose origin cannot precisely be located but whose reper-

<sup>16</sup>“Faut-il s’arrêter là et d’où ai-je le sentiment que je suis venu relativement à un sujet plus vaste peut-être à moi-même inconnu, que telle rénovation de rites et de rimes; pour y atteindre, sinon le traiter . . .

Le conscient manque chez nous de ce qui là-haut éclate.”





Stéphane Mallarmé, by Edouard Manet. Paris, Louvre.

cussions, in their very uncontrollable and unanticipated nature, still continue to evolve even in the very process of the testimony.

The accident is therefore "known," paradoxically enough, at once precociously but only through its aftermath, through its effects.<sup>17</sup> The accident is known, in other words, both to the extent that it "pursues" the witness and that *the witness is, in turn, in pursuit of it*. Indeed, the syntax of the French expression "ainsi qu'un invité voyageur se décharge du témoignage d'un accident su et le poursuivant" is radically ambiguous. As Barbara Johnson has pointed out, Mallarmé's unique poetic style—in its play on this syntactic ambiguity—leaves in suspension the question of who is pursuing whom, whether it is the accident that pursues the witness-traveler or whether it is the traveler, the witness, who pursues the accident:

Is is the accident [—writes Johnson—] which pursues the traveler, or rather, the traveler who . . . pursues the accident? Where is the accident

<sup>17</sup>On the belated knowledge of "the accident," and the significance of this belatedness for an understanding of the relation between trauma and history, see Cathy Caruth, "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History" (in Freud), in *Yale French Studies*, "Literature and the Ethical Question," ed. Claire Nouvet, January 1991.

situated? . . . Is the witness the one who *sees*, the one who *undergoes*, or the one who *propagates*, the accident to which he bears witness?<sup>18</sup>

What difference does this ambiguity make in our understanding of the accident and of the testimony?

If it is the accident which *pursues the witness*, it is the compulsive character of the testimony which is brought into relief: the witness is "pursued," that is, at once compelled and bound by what, in the unexpected impact of the accident, is both incomprehensible and unforgettable. The accident does not let go: it is an accident from which the witness can no longer free himself.

But if, in a still less expected manner, it is the witness who *pursues the accident*, it is perhaps because the witness, on the contrary, has understood that from the accident a *liberation* can proceed and that *the accidenting*, unexpectedly, is also in some ways a *freeing*.

Mallarmé thus pursues the accident of *free verse* in the same way Freud pursues, after an accident of dream, the path of *free association*. Both *free verse* and *free association* undergo the process of a fragmentation—a breaking down, a disruption and a dislocation—of the dream, of verse, of language, of the apparent but misleading unities of syntax and of meaning. The passage through this fragmentation is a passage through a radical obscurity. "One does not write," Mallarmé says, "luminously, on an obscure field . . . ; man pursues black on white".<sup>19</sup>

To write—

The inkwell, crystal as a consciousness, with its drop of darkness at the bottom, . . . casts the lamp aside.<sup>20</sup>

"Hitherto," says Freud, ". . . all the paths along which we have traveled have led us toward the light—toward elucidation and fuller understanding":

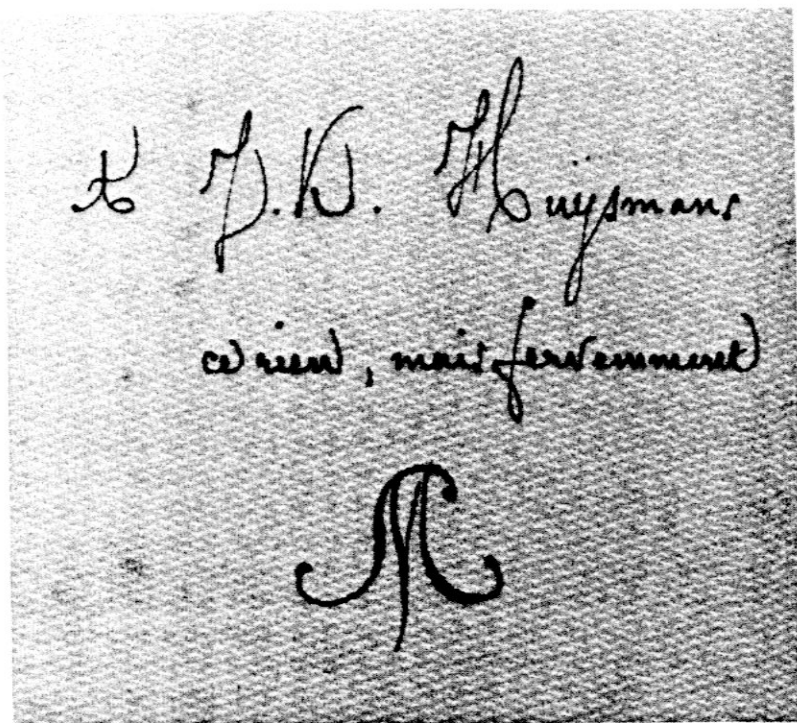
But as soon as we endeavor to penetrate more deeply into the mental process involved in dreaming, *every path will end in darkness*. There is no possibility of explaining dreams since to explain a thing means to trace it back to something already known.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup>*Défigurations du langage poétique*, Paris: Flammarion, 1979, pp. 169–170; my translation.

<sup>19</sup>"Tu remarques, on n'écrit pas, lumineusement, sur champ obscur . . . ; l'homme poursuit noir sur blanc." "L'Action restreinte," in Mallarmé, op. cit., p. 370.

<sup>20</sup>"Ecrire—L'encrier, cristal comme une conscience, avec sa goutte, au fond, des ténèbres . . . écarte la lampe." *Ibid.*, p. 370.

<sup>21</sup>Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in *Standard*, Vol. V, pp. 509–511.



Mallarmé's handwriting and signature (in a dedication of a book of poems)

In Mallarmé's as well as in Freud's case, what constitutes the specificity of the innovative figure of the witness is, indeed, not the mere telling, not the mere fact of *reporting* of the accident, but the witness's readiness to become himself a *medium of the testimony*—and a *medium of the accident*—in his unshakable conviction that the accident, formal or clinical, carries historical significance which goes beyond the individual and is thus, in effect, in spite of its idiosyncrasy, *not trivial*. What makes the newness and the radicality of the poetic—and the psychoanalytical—performance of a testimony which is both “surprising” and momentous is, in other words, not just the inescapability of the vocation of the witness insofar as the accident pursues him, but the witness's readiness, precisely, to *pursue the accident*, to actively pursue its path and its direction through obscurity, through darkness, and through fragmentation, without quite grasping the full scope and meaning of its implications, without entirely foreseeing where the journey leads and what is the precise nature of its final destination.

### *Poetry and Testimony: Paul Celan, or The Accident of Aesthetics*

Half a century after Mallarmé, another poet will proceed to write in Paris (though this time in German) poetry that dramatizes yet another, more acute and more severe crisis of verse which, in its turn, sets out to *pursue* an “accident,” to explore another kind of historic cataclysm and bear witness to another “fundamental crisis”—a fundamental shift in thinking and in being—proceeding this time not from the renewal triggered by a revolution, but from the destruction and the devastation which the Second World War and, in particular, the Holocaust, have set in motion. In exploding, once again—in the footsteps of the lesson taught by Mallarmé—its own poetic medium, in dislocating its own language and in breaking its own verse, the poetry of Paul Celan gives testimony, in effect, no longer simply to what Mallarmé refers to as an undefined, generic “accident,” but to a more specific, more particularly crushing and more recent, cultural and historical breakdown, to the individual and the communal, massive trauma of a catastrophic loss and a disastrous fate in which nothing any more can be construed as *accident* except, perhaps, for *the poet's own survival*. Mallarmé's crisis of verse has come now to express, concretely and specifically, Celan's particular historical reality and his literally shattering experience as a Holocaust survivor. *The breakage of the verse enacts the breakage of the world.*

Like Mallarmé, the witness to the accident, Celan, the witness to catastrophe, is in turn a traveler, a witness-traveler whose poetry precisely is researching, through its testimony, the obscure direction and the unknown destination of his journey. “I have written poems,” says Celan, “so as to speak, to orient myself, to explore where I was and was meant to go, to sketch out reality for myself.”<sup>22</sup> Unlike Mallarmé, however, who brings “surprising news” to England as an “invited traveler,” (“an invited traveller who, without delay, in breathless gasps, discharges himself of the testimony of an accident known and pursuing him”), Celan's witness is not that of an “invited,” but rather that of an evicted, traveler: one whose journey has originated in the constraint of deportation, in the throes of an *ejection* from his native country.

<sup>22</sup>Paul Celan, *Bremen Speech*, address given on acceptance of the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen, in 1958. Here and elsewhere in this chapter, the Bremen speech is quoted in John Felstiner's translation, cited in John Felstiner, “Translating Celan's Last Poem,” in *The American Poetry Review*, July/August 1982, p. 23.

Paul Ancel, who will after the War rename himself—anagrammatically—Celan, was born to German-Jewish parents in 1920 in Czernowitz, Bukovina, a northern province of Romania. In July 1941 an S.S. *Einsatzgruppe*, aided by Romanian troops, began destroying Czernowitz's Jewish community. In 1942, Celan's parents were deported to a concentration camp. Paul Celan managed to escape, but was sent to a forced labor camp, in which he hauled debris and shoveled rocks for eighteen months. The only letter Paul received from his mother informed him that his father, totally spent, had been killed by the S.S. A few months later, Paul learned from an escaped cousin that his mother was in turn murdered, shot through the back of the neck. A story published in a German newspaper in the late seventies suggests that Celan (uncannily not unlike Dostoevsky) faced and in turn escaped execution in the camp, by crossing over a dividing line, by switching places *in extremis* from a formation marked for death to one designated for the fate of slave labor.

In 1944, Celan returns to Czernowitz, which has been liberated by Soviet troops. After the war, he moves to Bucharest, then to Vienna, and finally settles in Paris in 1948. His poetic translations from French, English and Russian into German, accompany the publication of his own poetic works, which win him both prestigious literary prizes and immediate critical acclaim in the German-speaking world.

In April 1970, at the age of forty-nine, Paul Celan commits suicide by drowning himself in the Seine.

In spite of his mastery of many languages and of his fluency in many literatures, in spite of his own choice to live in Paris and to be conversant with French culture, Celan could not give up writing in German. "I do not believe in bilingualness in poetry," he said, in reply to a question about his linguistic choices. "Poetry—that is the fateful uniqueness of language."<sup>23</sup> To his biographer, Israel Chalfen, Celan explained his loyalty to German: "Only in one's mother tongue can one express one's own truth. In a foreign language the poet lies."<sup>24</sup> Yet, this bonding to the mother tongue, this intimate connection to the spoken legacy of his lost mother as the only language to which truth—his own unique truth—can be *native*, is also, quite unbearably,

<sup>23</sup>Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke*, Frankfurt am Main: 1968, Vol. II, p. 20. John Felstiner's translation. Quoted in John Felstiner, in "Mother Tongue, Holy Tongue: On 'Translating and Not Translating Paul Celan,'" in *Comparative Literature* 38, no. 2, Spring 1986, p. 122.

<sup>24</sup>Israel Chalfen, *Eine Biographie seiner Jugend*, 1979. Quoted in Katharine Washburn's introduction to *Paul Celan: Last Poems*, San Francisco: North Point Press, 1986, p. vii.



Paul Ancel in Czernowitz, 1936, age sixteen

an indissoluble connection to the language of the murderers of his own parents, a subjugation to the very language from which death, humiliation, torture and destruction issued, in a verdict of his own annihilation. Celan's poetic writing therefore struggles with the German to annihilate his own annihilation in it, to reappropriate the language which has marked his own exclusion: the poems dislocate the language so as to remould it, to radically shift its semantic and grammatical assumptions and remake—creatively and critically—a new poetic language entirely Celan's own. Mallarmé's crisis of language here becomes the vital effort—and the critical endeavor—to



reclaim and repossess the very language in which *testimony* must—and cannot simply and uncritically—be given. This radical, exacting working through of language and of memory at once, takes place through a desperate poetic and linguistic struggle to, precisely, reappropriate the very language of one's own expropriation, to reclaim the German from its Nazi past and to retrieve the mother tongue—the sole possession of the dispossessed—from the Holocaust it has inflicted. "These," says Celan, "are the efforts of someone . . . shelterless in a sense undreamt of till now . . . , who goes with his very being to language, stricken by and seeking reality":

Within reach, close and not lost, there remained, in the midst of the losses, this one thing: language.

This, the language, was not lost but remained, yes, in spite of everything. But it had to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through a frightful falling mute, pass through the thousand darknesses of death-bringing speech. It passed through and yielded no words for what was happening—but it went through those happenings. Went through and could come into the light of day again, "enriched" by all that.

In this language I have sought, then and in the years since then, to write poems—so as to speak, to orient myself, to explore where I was and was meant to go, to sketch out reality for myself.

This, you see, was event, movement, a being underway, an attempt to gain direction. And if I ask about its meaning, I think I must say that this question also involves the clockhand's meaning.

. . . These are the efforts of someone coursed over by the stars of human handiwork, someone also shelterless in a sense undreamt-of till now and thus most uncannily out in the open, who goes with his very being to language, stricken by and seeking reality [wirklichkeitswund und Wirklichkeit suchend].<sup>25</sup>

To seek reality is both to set out to explore the injury inflicted by it—to turn back on, and to try to penetrate, the state of being *stricken*, *wounded* by reality [wirklichkeitswund]—and to attempt, at the same time, to reemerge from the paralysis of this state, to engage reality [Wirklichkeit suchend] as an advent, a movement, and as a vital, critical necessity of *moving on*. It is beyond the shock of being stricken, but nonetheless within the wound and from within the woundedness that the event, incomprehensible though it may be, becomes accessible. The wound gives access to the darkness which the language had to go through and traverse in the very process of its "frightful falling-mute." To seek reality through language "with one's very being," to seek in language what the language had precisely to

<sup>25</sup>Bremen Speech.

pass through, is thus to make of one's own "shelterlessness"—of the openness and the accessibility of one's own wounds—an unexpected and unprecedented means of *accessing reality*, the radical condition for a wrenching exploration of the testimonial function, and the testimonial power, of the language: it is to give reality one's own vulnerability, as a condition of exceptional availability and of exceptionally sensitized, tuned in attention to the *relation between language and events*.

One such poem which attempts to probe precisely this relation between language and events is "Todesfuge" ("Death Fugue"), Celan's first published poem, written toward the end of 1944, immediately upon the poet's own emergence from his devastating war experience. The poem dramatizes and evokes a concentration camp experience, not directly and explicitly, however, not through linear narrative, through personal confession or through testimonial reportage, but elliptically and circularly, through the polyphonic but ironically disjointed art of counterpoint, and through the obsessional, compulsive repetitions and the vertiginous explosion of a mad song whose lament—half blasphemy, half prayer—bursts at once into a speechless, voiceless crying and into the dancing tumult of a drunken celebration. Amazingly enough, the poem which depicts the most unthinkable complexities of horror and the most outrageously degrading depths of suffering is not a poem about killing, but, primarily, a poem about *drinking*, and about the relation (and the nonrelation) between "drinking" and "writing."

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown  
 we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night  
 we drink and we drink it  
 we dig a grave in the breezes there one lies unconfined  
 A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes  
 he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair  
 Margarete  
 he writes it and steps out of doors and the stars are flashing he  
 whistles his pack out  
 he whistles his Jews out in earth has them dig for a grave  
 he commands us strike up for the dance  
 . . . . .  
 he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair  
 Margarete  
 your ashen hair Shulamith we dig a grave in the breezes  
 there one lies unconfined.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup>"Death Fugue," Michael Hamburger's translation, in Paul Celan, *Poems*, selected, translated and introduced by Michael Hamburger, New York: Persea Books, 1980, p. 51.



The performance of the act of drinking, traditionally a poetic metaphor for yearning, for romantic thirst and for desire, is here transformed into the surprisingly abusive figure of an endless torture and a limitless exposure, a figure for the impotent predicament and the unbearable ordeal of having to endure, absorb, continue to *take in* with no end and no limit. This image of the drunkenness of torture ironically perverts, and ironically demystifies, on the one hand, the Hellenic-mythic connotation of libidinal, euphoric Dionysiac drinking of both wine and poetry, and on the other hand, the Christian connotation of ritual religious consecration and of Eucharistic, sacred drinking of Christ's blood—and of Christ's virtue. The prominent underlying Eucharistic image suggests, however, that the enigmatic drinking which the poem repetitiously invokes is, indeed, essentially drinking of blood.

The perversion of the metaphor of drinking is further aggravated by the enigmatic image of the "black milk," which, in its obsessive repetitions, suggests the further underlying—though unspeakable and inarticulated—image of a child striving to drink from the mother's breast. But the denatured "black milk," tainted possibly by blackened, burnt ashes, springs not from the mother's breast but from the darkness of murder and death, from the blackness of the night and of the "dusk" that "falls to Germany" when death uncannily becomes a "master." Ingesting through the liquefied black milk at once dark blood and burnt ashes, the drinking takes place not at the maternal source but at the deadly source, precisely, of the wound, at the bleeding site of reality as stigma.

The Christian figure of the wound, traditionally viewed as the mythic vehicle and as the metaphoric means for a *historical transcendence*—for the erasure of Christ's death in the advent of Resurrection—is reinvested by the poem with the literal concreteness of the death camp blood and ashes, and is made thus to include, within the wound, not resurrection and historical transcendence, but the specificity of history—of the concrete historical reality of massacre and race annihilation—as unerasable and untranscendable. What Celan does, in this way, is to force the language of the Christian metaphors to *witness* in effect the Holocaust, and be in turn witnessed by it.

The entire poem is, indeed, not simply about violence but about the relation between violence and language, about the passage of the language through the violence and the passage of the violence through

Quotations from Celan's poetry in Hamburger's translation will subsequently be cited as Hamburger, followed by page number.

language. The violence enacted by the poem is in the *speech acts* of the German master, the commandant who directs the orchestra of the camp inmates to musically accompany their own grave digging and to celebrate, in an ecstatic death fugue, at once the wounding of the earth and their own destruction and annihilation. But it is already in the very practice of his language that the commandant in effect annihilates the Jews, by actively denying them as *subjects*, by reducing their subjective individuality to a mass of indistinct, debased, inhuman *objects*, playthings of his whims, marionettes of his own pleasure of destruction and musical instruments of his own sadistic passion.

he whistles his Jews out in earth has them dig for a grave  
he commands us strike up for the dance

He calls out jab deeper into the earth you lot you others sing  
now and play

jab deeper you lot with your spades you others play on for the  
dance

He calls out more sweetly play death death is a master from  
Germany

he calls out more darkly now stroke your strings then as  
smoke you will rise into air  
than a grave you will have in the clouds there one lies

unconfined

The violence is all the more obscene by being thus *aestheticized* and by aestheticizing its own dehumanization, by transforming its own murderous perversity into the cultural sophistication and the cultivated trances of a hedonistic art performance. But the poem works specifically and contrapuntally to dislocate this masquerade of cruelty as art, and to exhibit the obscenity of this aestheticization, by opposing the melodious ecstasy of the aesthetic pleasure to the dissonance of the commandant's speech acts and to the violence of his verbal abuse, and by reintroducing into the amnesia of the "fugue"—into the obliviousness of the *artistic drunkenness*—the drinking of black milk as the *impossibility of forgetting* and of getting a reprieve from suffering and memory, and as the sinister, insistent, *unforgettable return of what the aesthetic pleasure has forgotten*.

we drink and we drink you  
A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes  
he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair

Margarete

your ashen hair Shulamith we dig a grave in the breezes there  
one lies unconfined

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night  
we drink you at noon . . .

. . . we drink and we drink you

death is a master from Germany his eyes are blue  
he strikes you with leaden bullets his aim is true  
a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete  
he sets his pack on to us he grants us a grave in the air  
he plays with the serpents and daydreams death is a master  
from Germany

Your golden hair Margarete  
your ashen hair Shulamith

The entire poem is contingent upon various forms of apostrophe and of address. The dehumanizing and annihilating interjections of the murderous address—"you lot, you others"—the address which institutes the other not as *subject* but as *target* ("He strikes you with leaden bullets his aim is true"), meets and clashes with the dreamy yearnings of the desiring address, the address that institutes the other as a *subject of desire* and, as such, a *subject of response*, of a called for *answer*:

Your golden hair Margarete  
your ashen hair Shulamith

Marguerite, Faust's object of desire and Goethe's incarnation of romantic love, evokes at once the general tradition of German literary yearning and the actual longing—possibly of the commandant—for his German beloved. Shulamith, a female emblem of both beauty and desire celebrated and admired in *The Song of Songs*, evokes the Jewish biblical and literary yearning and the longing for the Jewish beloved. The invocation of the cherished name is traversed by the same depth of joy and sadness, charged with the same energy of human longing and desire. The yearnings, as such, resonate with one another. And yet, a bitter difference and a shocking irony resound from within this echoing resemblance. In contrast to the golden hair of Marguerite, the ashen hair of Shulamith connotes not just a mark of racial difference between the fair-haired maiden of the Aryan ideal and the ashen pallor of the Semitic beauty, but the hair reduced to ashes, the burnt hair of one race as opposed to the aesthetic idealization and self-idealization of the other race. Like the light of "daybreak" turned into night and into darkness, the dissonance of golden and of ashen thus produces,

once again, only "black milk" as an answer to one's thirst, one's longing, one's desire. The call to Shulamith—beauty reduced to smoke—is bound to remain unanswered.

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night

. . . . .  
we drink and we drink you

A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes  
he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair

Margarete

your ashen hair Shulamith we dig a grave in the breezes there  
one lies unconfined

The wound within the culture opens up in the discrepancy, the muteness, the abrupt disjunction, not only between "Marguerite" and "Shulamith," but, primarily, between "*we drink*," "*we dig*" and "*he writes*." The open wound is marked within the language by the incapacity of "*we*" to *address*, precisely, in this poem of apostrophe and of address, the "*he*." It is in this radical disruption of address between the "*we*" (who "drink" and "dig") and the "*he*" (who "writes" and who "commands") that Celan locates the very essence of the violence, and the very essence of the Holocaust.

If "death is a master from Germany," it is a "master" not just in the sense that it brings death and that it totally controls its slaves, nor even merely, in addition, in the sense that it plays the *maestro*, the musician or the *meistersinger*, *master of arts* who strives, ironically enough, to produce death as artistic *masterpiece*, but in the sense that Germany, unwittingly, has instituted death as *Meister*, as a *master-teacher*. Death has taught a lesson that can henceforth never be forgotten. If art is to survive the Holocaust—to survive death as a master—it will have to break, in art, this mastery, which insidiously pervades the whole of culture and the whole of the aesthetic project.

The necessity for art to *de-aestheticize* itself and to justify henceforth its own existence, has been forcefully articulated by the German critic Theodor Adorno, in a famous dictum which defines, indeed, Celan's predicament but which has become itself (perhaps too readily) a critical cliché, too hastily consumed and too hastily reduced to a summary dismissal of Celan's troubling poetic efficacy in poems like "Death Fugue": "After Auschwitz, it is no longer possible to write poems."<sup>27</sup> "The aesthetic principle of stylization," writes Adorno, ". . .

<sup>27</sup>"After Auschwitz" (1949), "Meditations on Metaphysics," in *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton, New York: Continuum, 1973, p. 362.

make[s] an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning; it is transfigured, something of its horror is removed. This alone does an injustice to the victims . . . [Some] works . . . are even willingly absorbed as contributions to clearing up the past."<sup>28</sup> In Adorno's radical conception, it is, however, not just these specific works, nor simply lyric poetry as genre, but all of thinking, all of writing that has now to think, to write *against itself*:

If thinking is to be true—if it is to be true today, in any case—it must be thinking against itself. If thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims.<sup>29</sup>

Adorno himself, however, will return to his statement about poetry and Auschwitz in a later essay, to redefine its emphasis, to underscore the aporetic, and not simply negative, intention of his radical pronouncement, and to emphasize the fact (less known and more complex) that, paradoxically enough, it is only art that can henceforth be equal to its own historical impossibility, that art alone can live up to the task of contemporary thinking and of meeting the incredible demands of suffering, of politics and of contemporary consciousness, and yet escape the subtly omnipresent and the almost unavoidable cultural betrayal both of history and of the victims.

I have no wish to soften the saying that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric . . . But Enzensberger's retort also remains true, that *literature must resist this verdict* . . . It is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it.

Today, every phenomenon of culture, even if a model of integrity, is liable to be suffocated in the cultivation of kitsch. Yet paradoxically in the same epoch it is to works of art that has fallen the burden of wordlessly asserting what is barred to politics.<sup>30</sup>

The whole endeavor of Celan's poetic work can be defined, precisely, in Adorno's terms, as poetry's creative and self-critical *resistance to the verdict* that it is barbaric, henceforth, to write lyrically, poetically; a verdict which the poetry receives, however, not from the outside but from inside itself; a verdict which "Death Fugue" encompasses

<sup>28</sup>Adorno, "Commitment" (1962), in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, introduction by Paul Ricoeur, New York: Continuum, 1982, p. 313.

<sup>29</sup>"After Auschwitz", op. cit., p. 365.

<sup>30</sup>"Commitment," op. cit., pp. 312, 318.

already, and in fact enacts and sets in motion through the master's usurpation of the singing of the inmates.

\*

Something of that usurpation has, however, inadvertently reproduced itself even in the very destiny of "Todesfuge," whose immense success and frequent anthologization in the German-speaking world had soon turned Celan into something like another celebrated "master." Celan himself, in later years, thus turned against his early poem, refused to allow its reprinting in further anthologies, and changed his writing style into a less explicit, less melodious, more disrupted and disruptively elliptical verse.

**NO MORE SAND ART**, no sand book, no masters.

Nothing won by dicing. How many  
dumb ones?  
Seventeen.

Your question—your answer.  
Your song, what does it know?

Deepinsnow,  
Eepinnow,  
Ee-i-o.

To prevent the possibility of an aesthetic, drunken infatuation with its own verse, the later poetry rejects, within the language, not its music and its singing—which continue to define the essence of poetic language for Celan—but a certain predetermined kind of recognizably *melodious* musicality. In Celan's own words, the verse henceforth "distrusts the beautiful, . . . insists on having its 'musicality' placed in a region where it no longer has anything in common with that 'melodious sound' which more or less undisturbed sounded side by side with the greatest horror. The concern of this language is, in all the unalterable multivalence of the expression, *precision*. It doesn't transfigure, doesn't 'poeticize, it names and places.'"<sup>31</sup>

Deep in Time's crevasse  
by the alveolate  
waits, a crystal of breath,  
your irreversible  
witness.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup>"Reply to an Inquiry Held by the Librairie Flinker, Paris," (The Paper Castle), p. 23; emphasis mine.

<sup>32</sup>"Etched Away," in *Hamburger*, p. 189.





Paul Celan, 1947/48, age twenty-seven

The quest for musical precision—which shuns melody and which refrains, above all, from “poeticizing”—is, however, coupled with a tendency toward silence. “Tendency toward silence,” notes Celan, “—this, too, can’t be said just so. We mustn’t create new fetishes. Even the anti-fetish can become a fetish.”<sup>33</sup>

**NO MORE SAND ART**, no sand book, no masters.

<sup>33</sup>Paul Celan, “Conversational Statements on Poetry,” in *Prose Writings and Selected Poems*, trans. Walter Dillate, The Paper Castle, p. 45.

“One of the truths hardest to demonstrate”—writes Pierre Boulez in an analysis of contemporary music that could apply as well to Celan’s revised poetic musicality—“one of the truths hardest to demonstrate is that music is not just the ‘Art of sound’—that it must be defined rather as a counterpoint of sound and silence. [Contemporary music’s] rhythmic innovation is this conception whereby sound and silence are linked in a precise organization directed toward the exhaustive exploitation of our powers of hearing.”<sup>34</sup>

By introducing silence as a rhythmic *breakdown* and as a displacing *counterpoint* to sound not just *in between* his stanzas and his verses, but even *in the very midst* of the phonetic flow and the poetic diction of his *words* (“You my words being crippled / together with me . . . / with the hu, with the man, with the human being.”),<sup>35</sup> Celan strives to defetishize his language and to dislocate his own aesthetic mastery, by breaking down any self-possessed control of sense and by disrupting any unity, integrity or continuity of conscious meaning. Through their very breakdown, the sounds testify, henceforth, precisely to a knowledge they do not possess, by unleashing, and by drifting into, their own buried depths of silence.

Your question—your answer.  
Your song, what does it know?

Deepinsnow,  
Eepinnow,  
Ee-i-o.

But this breakdown of the word, this drift of music and of sound of the song which resists recuperation and which does not know, and cannot own, its meaning, nonetheless reaches a *you*, attains the hearing—and perhaps the question, or the answer, of an Other: “Your question—your answer / Your song.” The poem strives toward the *Du*, the *you*, the listener, over the historical abyss from which the singing has originated and across the violence and the unending, shattered resonances of the breakage of the word. “A poem,” writes Celan, “as a manifest form of language and thus inherently dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the (not always greatly hopeful) belief that it may somewhere and sometime wash up on land, on heartland perhaps”:

<sup>34</sup>Pierre Boulez, *The Threshold*, quoted by Katharine Washburn in her introduction to Paul Celan, *Last Poems*, San Francisco: North Point Press, 1986, p. xxv.

<sup>35</sup>“ . . . Plashes the Fountain,” in *Hamburger*, p. 151.



Poems in this sense are always under way, they are making toward something.

Toward what? Toward something standing open, occupiable, perhaps toward a "thou" that can be *addressed*, an *addressable* reality.<sup>36</sup>

As an event directed toward the recreation of a "thou," poetry becomes, precisely, the event of *creating an address* for the specificity of a historical experience which annihilated any possibility of address. If the lesson of death ("Todesfuge's" *executioner, commandant and maestro*)—the lesson of the master—was precisely that a master is the one who *cannot be addressed*, the one to whom one cannot say "you," Celan's poetry now strives not simply, as is often said, to seek out the responsive *you*, to recreate the listener, the hearer, but to subvert, to dislocate and to displace the very essence of aesthetics as a *project of artistic mastery* by transforming poetry—as breakage of the word and as drifting testimony—into an inherent and unprecedented, testimonial *project of address*.

As one speaks to stone, like  
you,  
from the chasm, from  
a home become a sister to me, hurled  
towards me, you,  
you that long ago  
you in the nothingness of a night,  
you in the multi-night en-  
countered, you  
multi-you—<sup>37</sup>  
  
and at times when  
only the void stood between us we got  
all the way to each other.<sup>38</sup>

### *Crossing the Void, or Poetry as Setting Free*

Along with the above-sketched journey of the various writers, theorists and poets, the class traveled its own path. Opened up to the diversity and touched by the concrete peculiarities of literary, clinical, historical and poetic testimonies; captivated and surprised by the unexpected ways in which the very different texts nonetheless unwittingly

<sup>36</sup>Bremen Speech. Emphasis mine.

<sup>37</sup>"Radix, Matrix," in Hamburger, p. 153.

<sup>38</sup>"So many constellations," in Hamburger, p. 135.

tingly evolved into each other, came to engage each other's depth and put each other in an increasingly complex perspective, the students reemerged from each textual encounter somewhat changed. The formal and historical vicissitudes of Celan's poetry found them ready: ready to receive the silent counterpoints of the breakage of the words and of the poem's broken sounds; ready to be solicited by the namelessness of Celan's experience; ready, in other words, to assume the position of the "thou," to become the "you" that "in the nothingness of the night" the poetry was seeking. Through its responsive yet subdued, contained vibrations (vibrations evident both in the students' writing and in the keenness of attention in the class discussions), the class became, in fact, this responsive "you," this deeply attentive addressee, prepared to accompany the poet into the very place—the very night, the very silence—from which his poems had originated.

As Celan's drifting musicality became, indeed, the rhythm of the class, the class seemed to experience also, curiously enough, something like a liberation, the process of a freeing up. "Whoever has art before his eyes and on his mind," Celan said in his famous speech entitled "The Meridian," "... has forgotten himself. Art produces a distance from the I":

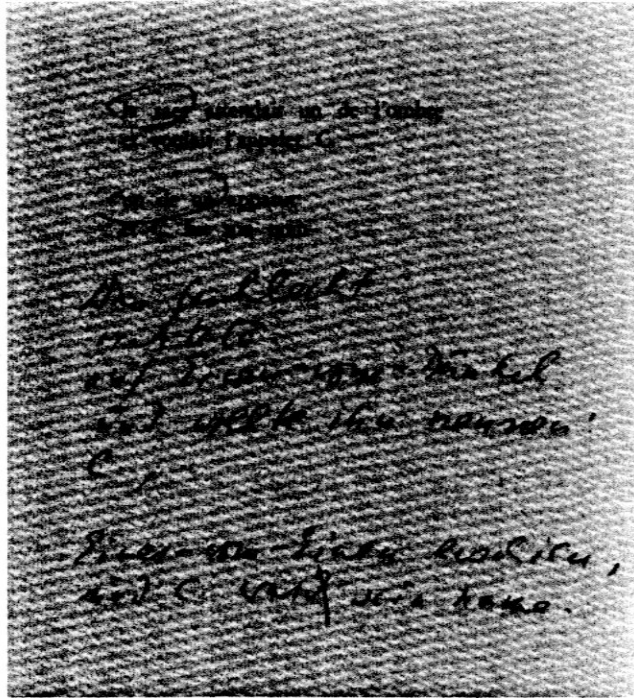
Perhaps—I'm just asking—perhaps literature, in the company of the I which has forgotten itself, travels the same path as art, toward that which is mysterious and alien. And once again—but where? but in what place? but how? but as what?—it *sets itself free* . . .

Can we now, perhaps, find the place where strangeness was present, the place where a person succeeded in setting himself free, as an—estranged—I? Can we find such a place, such a step? . . .

*Is perhaps at this point, along with the I—with the estranged I, set free . . .—is perhaps at this point an Other set free?*<sup>39</sup>

Through Celan's poetry the class, in fact, felt strangely and obscurely freed up—freed from form, from rhythm, from melodiousness, from words, freed in sum from the "aesthetic project" and thus ready to become the addressee to the "message in the bottle" thrust into the sea "in the (not always greatly hopeful) belief that it may somewhere and sometime wash up on land, on heartland perhaps." The class became the inadvertent, unexpected heartland, on which Celan's po-

<sup>39</sup>"The Meridian," speech given by Celan in 1960, on the occasion of receiving the prestigious Georg Büchner Prize (by the German Academy for Language and Literature). English translation by Jerry Glenn, published in *The Chicago Review*, Winter 1978, Vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 29–40; citation from pp. 33–35. Emphasis mine.



Handwriting of Celan, in a translation into German of a French poem by Jean Daive.

etic bottle did indeed—by chance—wash up. Opened to the risks incorporated by the chance—and the necessity—of the encounter with the drifting testimony, ready to receive, and resonate to, the obscurity, the suffering, the uncertainty—and yet the absoluteness—of the message in the bottle, the class was now prepared for the next step.

## VI

### *Life Testimonies*

The next and final stage of the course itinerary was the screening of two testimonial videotapes borrowed from the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, an archival collection of filmed testi-

monies—of autobiographical life accounts given by Holocaust survivors to volunteer, professionally trained interviewers, most of whom are psychoanalysts or psychotherapists. Within the context of these dialogic interviews, many of these Holocaust survivors in fact narrate their story *in its entirety* for the first time in their lives, awoken to their memories and to their past both by the public purpose of the enterprise (the collection and the preservation of first-hand, live testimonial evidence about the Holocaust), and, more concretely, by the presence and involvement of the interviewers, who enable them for the first time to believe that it is possible, indeed, against all odds and against their past experience, to tell the story and *be heard*, to in fact *address* the significance of their biography—to *address*, that is, the suffering, the truth, and the necessity of this impossible narration—to a hearing “you,” and to a listening community. In the spirit of Celan’s poetical endeavor, though on an altogether different level, the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale is thus, in turn, the endeavor of *creating* (recreating) *an address*, specifically, for a historical experience which annihilated the very possibility of address.

### *The Encounter with the Real: A Convergence of Historical, Poetical and Clinical Dimensions*

In the context of the course we have previously explored in sequence, one after the other, the historical (Camus/Dostoevsky), the clinical (Camus/Dostoevsky/Freud), and the poetical (Mallarmé/Celan) dimensions of the testimony. Neither dimension taken in itself, however, truly captures the complexity of what the testimony is, since this complexity, as we have seen, always implies, in one way or another, the coexistence of all three dimensions and their mutual interaction. The Holocaust testimonies in themselves are definitely, at least on their manifest level, as foreign to “poetry” as anything can be, both in their substance and in their intent. Yet many of them attain, surprisingly, in the very structure of their occurrence, the dimension of discovery and of advent and the power of significance and impact of a true *event* of language—an event which can unwittingly resemble a poetic, or a literary, act. The very real, overwhelming and as such, traumatic aspect of these narratives engages, on the other hand, both the clinical and the historical dimensions of the testimony. The clinical and the historical dimensions are implied, as well, by Celan’s poetry. What makes Celan’s poetry crucially poetic (even in its post-aesthetic, antipoetic stage) is, as we have seen, its

formal insistence on the unpredictability of its own rhythm. In thus insisting on the unpredictability of its own music and its "turns of breath,"<sup>40</sup> Celan's poetry insisted, in effect (as did Mallarmé's), on the risky unpredictability of the endeavor of the witness, who does not master—and does not possess—his testimony or his "message in the bottle," which may or may not reach a "you." I would suggest, indeed, that both the mystery and the complexity of the endeavor of the testimony and of its compelling power derive, precisely, from this element of unpredictability, from what is unpredictable, specifically, in the effects of the exchange and the degree of interaction between the historical, the clinical and the poetical dimensions of the testimony.

For the first time in the history of my teaching, I decided, therefore, to have recourse to the archive—to move on, as it were, from poetry into reality and to study in a literary class something which is *a priori* not defined as literary, but is rather of the order raw documents—historical and autobiographical. It seemed to me that this added dimension of *the real* was, at this point, both relevant and necessary to the insight we were gaining into testimony. Intuitively, I also knew that the transference, the shift in medium from text to video—from the literary to the real and from the textual to the visual—would have an impact that would somehow be illuminating, and that the interpenetration of historical and literary testaments would turn out to be quite crucial to the understanding—and the process—of this class.

### *The Determination to Survive*

I watched a number of testimonies at the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, and I selected, for the purpose of the class, two videotapes whose singular historical narration seemed to contain the added power of a figure, and the unfolding of a self-discovery: the testimonies of one woman and one man.

The woman's story is the story of a catastrophic, overwhelming *loss* which leads, however, to an insight into the joint mystery of *life* and of the need for *testimony*. The testimony is, precisely, to the experience of the narrator's repetitious crossing of the line dividing

<sup>40</sup>Cf. Celan in "The Meridian": "Literature: that can signify a turn-of-breath. Who knows, perhaps literature travels its path—which is also the path of art—for the sake of such a breath-turning?" (*op. cit.*, p. 35).

life from death. Starting at age fifteen, the testifier had to live through the successive deaths of nearly all the members of her family—her father, her mother, her youngest brother, her sister-in-law, and a baby (the last three dying in her presence, in her arms). The sole survivor of her family is her newly wedded husband, himself lost during the war but miraculously refound after liberation. Each one of them is, in turn, the only one to survive his or her own family. Although estranged at the time of their reunion, they stay together after the war because, she says, "he knew who I was":

The man I married and the man he was after the war were not the same person. And I'm sure I was not the same person either . . . but somehow we had a need for each other because, he knew who I was, *he was the only person who knew* . . . He knew who I was, and I knew who he was . . . And we're here, we're here to tell you the story.<sup>41</sup>

What is unique about the story of this woman is her conscious determination to survive precisely at the most abysmal and most devastating moment of her confrontation with death. Her determination to survive, her decision to live, paradoxically springs out of her most intimate and close attendance of the actual dying of her youngest brother, a boy of thirteen who, asphyxiated in the transport wagon, literally expires in her arms:



Helen K. (second to left) with her three brothers. Warsaw, 1935 (age ten)

<sup>41</sup>Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, T 58, Helen K.



### *Education and Crisis*

He was going to be thirteen . . . And you know, when my brother died in my arms, I said to myself, 'I'm going to live.' I made up my mind to defy Hitler. I'm not going to give in. Because he wants me to die, I'm going to live. This was our way of fighting back.<sup>42</sup> After I was liberated, . . . a Russian doctor examined me and said, "Under normal circumstances you would not have survived . . . It's just a medical miracle that you survived." But I told you, I really wanted to live, I said to myself, 'I want to live one day after Hitler, one day after the end of the war' . . . And we are here to tell you the story.<sup>43</sup>

The woman's testimony is, therefore, a testament to how she survived in order to give her testimony. The story of survival is, in fact, the incredible narration of the survival of the story, at the crossroads between life and death.

### *Liberation from Silence*

The second videotaped testimony screened to the class narrates the story of a man who was a child survivor, one of the two children to remain alive of the four thousand children incarcerated in the Plashow concentration camp. In 1942, his parents decided to smuggle him out of the camp because they learned that all the children would shortly be rounded up for extermination. At the age of four he was thus instructed by his parents to leave them, to run away and head toward a refuge place, which at the time he took to be a hospital, but which turned out to have been—as he later learned—a high-class brothel, hospitable to marginal people like himself. As his stay there became in turn risky, he had to leave and make it on his own as a member of a gang of children of the streets, who stayed alive by begging and by stealing. In moments of distress, he would turn to—and pray to—a student picture of his mother, given to him by her at the time of his escape, with the promise that she and his father will come to look for him after the war and will find him wherever he will be. The promise of the picture and his trust in their future reunion gave him both the strength and the resourcefulness to endure and to survive the war.

In effect, after the war he did miraculously find his parents, but the people who returned from the camp—dressed in prison garb, emaciated and disfigured—bore no resemblance either to the moth-

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*



Menachem S. at the end of 1944 (age five). Brnowice Wielkie, Poland.

er's picture or to the parents he had been waiting for and dreaming of. He could not accept these strangers, could not address them as "Mom" and "Dad," but instead insisted upon calling them "Mr." and "Mrs." It was during the years that followed the war, when he was finally safe, that he disintegrated, could not sleep, developed fears, and started having nightmares. Haunted, he nonetheless could not talk about the war experience. For thirty five years he kept his silence:

This was not a subject brought up in my father's household. It was always . . . something you have to forget . . .

I was unable to read any books . . . I didn't read a word about the Holocaust . . . It just wasn't there.<sup>44</sup>

For the past thirty five years I've been trying to convince myself that it never happened, that . . . maybe it happened, but I wasn't affected. I walked under the rain without getting wet.<sup>45</sup>

But I never realized that I never talked about it, neither with my wife nor with my children.<sup>46</sup>

It is not without dread nor without conflict that he decides to give his testimony, after having first refused to do so. Once he resolves to testify, however, his own dreams—which he recounts—bear witness to the fact that he experiences his own decision to speak up as profoundly *freeing*: his own sudden realization of the magnitude of his burden of silence and its dead weight on himself and on his loved ones comes to him, surprisingly, at once as an exhilarating, unexpected liberation from his nightmares—a liberation which allows him for the first time to experience feelings both of mourning and of hope—and as a transfiguring illumination, a transforming insight into the extent to which this burden—and this silence—has in fact affected, and reshaped, his whole life:

The thing that troubles me right now is the following: if we don't deal with our feelings, if we don't understand our experience, what are we doing to our children? . . .

We are what we are, . . . we can change some, but we will never be able to eradicate . . . what happened . . . The big question is: Are we transferring our anxieties, our fears, our problems, to the generations to come? And this is why I feel that we are talking here not only of the *lost generation*—like the term they coined after World War I—this time

<sup>44</sup>Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, T. 152, Menachem S.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*

we are dealing with *lost generations*. It's not only us. It's the generations to come. And I think this is the biggest tragedy of those who survived.<sup>47</sup>

## VII

### *The Class in Crisis*

These reflections of the child survivor on the liberating, although frightening, effects of his own rebirth to speech in the testimonial process, on the value of his own emergence from a life of silence not just for himself, but for his children, for the conscious and unconscious legacy that history and memory—unwittingly or lucidly—leave for the forthcoming generations, were meant, in this way, to conclude the course with the very eloquence of life, with a striking, vivid and extreme *real example* of the liberating, *vital function of the testimony*.

But the eloquence of life—coupled with the eloquence of literature (with the testimonial eloquence of Albert Camus, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Sigmund Freud, Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Celan)—carried the class beyond a limit that I could foresee and had envisioned. The unpredictability of the events that took place at this point in the class indeed confirmed, once more, in an unanticipated manner, the unpredictability of testimony. Something happened, toward the conclusion of the class, which took me completely by surprise. The class itself broke out into a crisis. And it was this crisis which made this class unique in my experience, this crisis which determined me to write about it, and which contained, in fact, the germ—and the germination—of this book.

That turn of events took place after the screening of the first Holocaust videotape, recounting the story of the woman. The tapes were screened in the informal privacy of an apartment, with the students sitting on the carpet, all over the floor. During the screening some were crying, but that in itself is not an unusual phenomenon. When the film was over, I purposely left the floor to them. But even though this class, throughout the course, had been particularly literate and eloquent, they remained, after the screening, inarticulate and speechless. They looked subdued and kept their silence even as they left. That in itself is not unusual either. What was unusual was that the experience did not *end* in silence, but instead, fermented into endless and relentless talking in the days and weeks to come; a talking which

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*

could not take place, however, within the confines of the classroom but which somehow had to *break the very framework of the class* (and thus emerge outside it), in much the same way as the writers we examined somehow all *broke through the framework* of what they had initially set out to write.

I realized that something strange was going on when I started getting phone calls from the students at my home at all odd hours, in a manifest wish to talk about the session, although they did not quite know what to say. As I later learned from my colleagues, the students of my class who met in other classes could only talk about the session and could focus on no other subject. Friends and roommates of my students later wrote me letters, to tell me of the interest they had developed in my class, by virtue of their having become, as one letter puts it, the "coerced listeners" to these outside proceedings of the class and to the frantic talking of my students, who apparently could talk of nothing else no matter where they were, in other classes, study rooms or dorms. They were set apart and set themselves apart from others who had not gone through the same experience. They were 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.

I was myself in turn taken by surprise, and worried by the critical dimensions of this crisis which the class was obviously going through, and which was gathering momentum. I realized, at the same time, that the unpredicted outcome of the screening was itself a psychoanalytical enhancement of the way in which the class felt actively *addressed* not only by the videotape but by the intensity and intimacy of the testimonial encounter throughout the course. Since the class viewing of the archive films had been in effect planned in the presence of the psychoanalyst who was, specifically, the interviewer of the two Holocaust survivors and the conceiver of the very idea of the archive—the coauthor of this book, Dr. Dori Laub—I turned to him for counsel.

After we discussed the turn of events, we concluded that what was called for was for me to reassume authority as the teacher of the class, and bring the students back into significance. I therefore called the students who had failed to contact me, to discuss with each one his or her reactions to the "crisis-session." Next I prepared a half-hour lecture as an introduction to the second screening in the form of an

address to the class which opened, in effect, the next and final session. This address was divided into two parts: the first part summarized, and returned to the students, in their own words, the importance and significance of their reactions; the second part attempted to articulate for them *an integrated view* of the literary texts and of the videotapes—of the significance of all the texts together, in relation to their own reactions.

The following are excerpts from this introduction.<sup>48</sup>

### *The Address to the Class*

"We have in this second screening session quite a task before us: the task of surviving the first session. I would like to begin by reviewing with you your responses to the first Holocaust testimony. Your reactions helped me, started in me a process of thinking in dialogue with your responses.

"What your responses most of all conveyed to me was something like an *anxiety of fragmentation*. People talked of having the feeling of being "cut off" at the end of the session. Some felt very lonely. It struck me that Celan's words were very accurate to describe the feelings of the class:

A strange lostness  
Was palpably present.<sup>49</sup>

There was a sort of *panic* that consisted in both emotional and intellectual disorientation, *loss of direction*. One person told me that he literally "lost the whole class," that the emotion of the first videotape was so overwhelming, that everything he thought he had acquired in the previous classes got somehow "*disconnected*."

On the other hand, a number of people said that they suddenly realized how much this class counted for them, and the way in which it counted seemed crucially important, though unsettling. The videotape viewing was described as "a shattering experience"; it was felt that the last session "was not just painful, but very powerful," so powerful that it was "hard to think about it analytically without trivializing it." Most people said that they were much more affected twenty-four hours after the session, and as time went on, than on the spot. Some felt a need to write down their reflections and emotions. They kept diaries of every word thought or said. Some kept diaries of their dreams.

There was a great *need to talk* about the class experience, and everybody mentioned that. People frantically looked for interlocutors, but expressed their frustration at the fact that everything that they

<sup>48</sup>Given and tape recorded on December 4, 1984, and consequently transcribed.

<sup>49</sup>"Dumb Autumn Smells," in Hamburger, p. 139.



could say to an outsider to convey a sense of the event was just fragments: they could not convey the whole experience. "I was compelled," said one student, "to speak about the Holocaust testimonies, the class, etc., to friends who were not disinterested but who were perhaps a bit surprised. This speaking was at best fragmentary, dissolving into silence: at moments, lapsing into long, obsessive monologues. It was absolutely necessary to speak of it, however incoherently. It was the most fragmented of testimonies. At times, I felt that I would simply have to abduct someone and lock them up in my room and tell them about the 'whole' thing."

One person suggested an analytic view of the whole situation. "Until now and throughout the texts we have been studying," he said, "we have been talking (to borrow Mallarmé's terms) about 'the testimony of an accident.' We have been talking about the accident—and here all of a sudden the accident happened in the class, happened to the class. The accident passed through the class."

In trying to address the fragmentation in the class and bring it back into significance, I first reread to them an excerpt from Celan's "Bremen Speech" about what happened to the act of speaking, and to language, after the Holocaust. In setting out, however, to re-cite this text again, I now referred it to the resonances of what happened in the class:

"I will suggest that the significance of the event of your viewing of the first Holocaust videotape was, not unlike Celan's own Holocaust experience, something akin to a *loss of language*; and even though you came out of it with a deep need to talk about it and to talk it out, you also felt that language was somehow incommensurate with it. What you felt as a "disconnection" with the class was, precisely, an experience of *suspension*: a suspension, that is, of the knowledge that had been acquired in the class: you feel that you have lost it. But you are going to find it again. I will suggest it is this loss Celan precisely talks about, this loss that we have all been somehow made to live. You can now, perhaps, relate to this loss more immediately, more viscerally, when you hear the poet say that *language was "all that remained."* Here again is Celan's language, that remains: lost and regained again through the videotape experience.

Within reach, close and not lost, there remained, in the midst of the losses, this one thing: language.

This, the language, was not lost but remained, yes, in spite of everything. But it had to *pass through its own answerlessness*, pass through a frightful falling-mute, pass through the thousand darkneses of death-bringing speech. It passed through and yielded no words for what was happening—but it went through

*those happenings.* Went through and could come into the light of day again, 'enriched' by all that. (Bremen Speech)  
This, I would suggest, is also what has happened now to the language of the class: it *passed through its own answerlessness.*

"Another possible response to the answerlessness through which the class is passing now, can be given in the context of our thought about the *significance of testimony*. You remember the very impressive moment in the first videotape, where the woman-survivor speaks about her husband whom she lost during the war, but with whom she reunited after liberation. As if to explain the necessity—and the significance—of this miraculous and improbable reunion, she says: "*He knew who I was.*" But *who she was was precisely her testimony*. "Who she was," in other words, is here implicitly expressed by the survivor as a radical and irretrievable loss, one of the most devastating losses—dispossessions—inflicted by the Holocaust, one of those "answerlessnesses," of those answerless questions, through which the Holocaust inexorably made one pass. The narrator herself does not know any longer who she was, except *through her testimony*. This knowledge or self-knowledge is neither a given before the testimony nor a residual substantial knowledge consequential to it. In itself, this knowledge *does not exist*, it can only *happen* through the testimony: it cannot be separated from it. It can only unfold itself in the process of testifying, but it can never become a substance that can be possessed by either speaker or listener, outside of this dialogic process. In its performative aspect, the testimony, in this way, can be thought of as a sort of signature.

"As the next step in the course, I want to ask you to write a paper for next week. I would like you to think about this paper in relation with, and as a function of, the *timing* of this act of writing. The writing is designed to be, in other words, an essential element of your working through of this experience. And as such, it needs precisely to encroach on your reactions to the first screening session. Many of you, indeed, quite literally said that they felt they *did not count* after the first session, that, had they been there in the camps, they are certain that they would have died. And I am inviting you now to testify to that experience, so as to accept the obligation—and the right—to repossess yourselves, to take, in other words, the *chance to sign*, the *chance to count*.

I invite you thus to write a paper on *your* experience of the testimony, and on your experience of the class. To do that, you need to think of the Holocaust videotapes in the context of the significance of the entire course, and in relation to the other texts we studied. I want you to work on precisely what you said was so difficult for you to achieve: you felt a disconnection, and I want you to look, on the contrary, *for the connections*. What has this experience taught you in the end? What did

it change in your perception of those other texts? *What difference* did it make in your global perception of the class?

What I am suggesting is that you view this paper as *your testimony to this course*. I admit that it would be a *precocious testimony*: I know you feel you are not ready. But perhaps the testimony *has* to be precocious, perhaps there is no other way. I wish to remind you of the fact that the writers we have read also, and quite often, give expression to the feeling that their testimony is precocious. Mallarmé, you will remember, says: "Il convient d'en parler déjà," "It is appropriate to talk about it *now already*"—

It is appropriate to talk about it *now already*, much like an invited traveller who, without delay, in breathless gasps, discharges himself of the testimony of an accident known and pursuing him . . . Celan in turn puts an emphasis on the precocity of testimony: I have gotten ahead of myself (not far enough, I know).<sup>50</sup>

But after all, literature, too, often shoots ahead of us. *La poésie, elle aussi, brûle nos étapes*.<sup>51</sup> I am inviting you, in turn, to "shoot ahead of yourselves" precisely in this way and to give, in turn, *your precocious testimony*."

Upon reading the final paper submitted by the students a few weeks later, I realized that the crisis, in effect, had been worked through and overcome and that a resolution had been reached, both on an intellectual and on a vital level. The written work the class had finally submitted turned out to be an amazingly articulate, reflective and profound statement of the trauma they had gone through and of the significance of their assuming the position of the witness.

## IX

### *Pedagogical Transvaluation*

I have since had the occasion—and the time—to reflect upon the nature of what took me then so completely by surprise. Because what happened then happened as an accident—an unpredictable vicissitude of teaching—I am recounting it (to borrow Mallarmé's words once again), as my own *testimony to an accident*. And yet, I would submit that the very singularity, the very idiosyncrasy both of the accident and of my testimony to it (like the idiosyncratic and yet archetypal status of the Irma dream) comprises a generic story, and

<sup>50</sup>"The Meridian," p. 33.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 34.

the validity of a generic pedagogical event and thus of a generic lesson.

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 the vulnerability or the explosiveness of a (explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps *not truly taught*: it has perhaps passed on some facts, passed on some information and some documents, with which the students or the audience—the recipients—can for instance do what people during the occurrence of the Holocaust precisely did with information that kept coming forth but that no one could *recognize*, and that no one could therefore truly *learn, read or put to use*.

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.

### *The Event of Teaching*

In the era of the Holocaust, of Hiroshima, of Vietnam—in the age of testimony—teaching, I would venture to suggest, must in turn *testify*, make something *happen*, and not just transmit a passive knowledge, pass on information that is preconceived, substantified, believed to be known in advance, misguidedly believed, that is, to be (exclusively) a *given*.

There is a parallel between this kind of teaching (in its reliance on the testimonial process) and psychoanalysis (in its reliance on the psychoanalytic process), insofar as both this teaching and psychoanalysis have, in fact, to *live through a crisis*. Both are called upon to be *performative*, and not just *cognitive*, insofar as they both strive to produce, and to enable, *change*. Both this kind of teaching and psychoanalysis are interested not merely in new information, but, primarily, in the capacity of their recipients to *transform themselves* in function of the newness of that information.

In the age of testimony, and in view of contemporary history, I want my students to be able to receive information that is *dissonant*, and not just *congruent*, with everything that they have learned beforehand. Testimonial teaching fosters the capacity to witness something that may be surprising, cognitively dissonant. The surprise implies the

crisis. Testimony cannot be authentic without that crisis, which has to break and to transvalue previous categories and previous frames of reference. "The poem," writes Celan, "takes its position at the edge of itself."<sup>52</sup> In a post-traumatic age, I would suggest that teaching, equally, should take position at the edge of itself, at the edge of its conventional conception.

As far as the great literary subjects are concerned, teaching must itself be viewed not merely as *transmitting*, but as *accessing*: as accessing the crisis or the critical dimension which, I will propose, is inherent in the literary subjects. Each great subject has a turning point contained within it, and that turning point has to be met. The question for the teacher is, then, on the one hand, how to access, how *not* to foreclose the crisis, and, on the other hand, how to *contain* it, how much crisis can the class sustain.

It is the teacher's task to recontextualize the crisis and to put it back into perspective, to relate the present to the past and to the future and to thus reintegrate the crisis in a *transformed* frame of meaning.

### Teaching as Testimony

In much the same way as psychoanalysts, in their practice of dream interpretation, will register as literally as they can the manifest dream content and the incoherent flow of dream associations, so did I take down, word by word, the emotional upheaval of my students' statements and the spectrum both of their responses and of their literal expressions. This documentation and this written record served as the material basis upon which interpretation—in the guise of a returned testimony—could indeed begin to be articulated.

In much the same way as the psychoanalyst serves as witness to the story of the patient, which he then interprets and puts together, so did I return to the students—in their own words—the narrative I had compiled and formed of their own reactions. When the story of the class—the story I am telling now—was for the first time, thus, narrated to the class itself in its final session, its very telling was a "crisis intervention." 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

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 36.

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*.

In working through the crisis which broke the framework of the course, the dynamics of the class and the practice of my teaching exceeded, thus, the mere concept of the testimony as I had initially devised it and set out to teach it. What was first conceived as a *theory* of testimony got unwittingly *enacted*, had become itself not theory, but an *event* of life: of life itself as the perpetual necessity—and the perpetual predicament—of a learning that in fact can never end.

### Epilogue

In conclusion, I would like to quote two excerpts from two papers that were written as the last assignment of the class.

The first excerpt, written by a Chinese woman, reflects on the testimony of the child survivor.

The testifier seemed to be a man of great compassion. He wondered aloud what sorts of testimony one leaves to one's children, when one does not confront the past. I thought at first, what sorts of burdens will I pass on to *my* children, in the unlikely event that I have any. And then, I thought of my father, who lived through the Chinese Civil War, and four years of incarceration as a political prisoner on the Island of Taiwan. What sorts of burdens has he passed on to me? . . .

In an odd sort of way, I feel a strange sort of collectivity has been formed in the class. This, of course, is a most frightening thing. As I mentioned above, my mode of interaction with those whom I do not know, has always been one of radical differentiation, rather than of collectivization. My autonomy has been rendered precarious, even fragile. Somehow, though, I have managed to survive, whole and a bit fragmented at the same time; the same, but decidedly altered. Perhaps this final paper can only be testimony to that simple fact, that simple event.

The second paper was, in contrast, written by a man (a man who—I might mention in parenthesis—was not Jewish).

Viewing the Holocaust testimony was not for me initially catastrophic—so much of the historical coverage of it functions to empty it from its horror. Yet, in the week that followed the first screening, and throughout the remainder of the class, I felt increasingly implicated in the pain of



the testimony, which found a particular reverberation in my own life

... Literature has become for me the site of my own stammering. Literature, as that which can sensitively bear witness to the Holocaust, gives me a voice, a right, and a necessity to survive. Yet, I cannot discount the literature which in the dark awakens the screams, which opens the wounds, and which makes me want to fall silent. Caught by two contradictory wishes at once, to speak or not to speak, I can only stammer. Literature, for me, in these moments, has had a performative value: my life has suffered a burden, undergone a transference of pain. If I am to continue reading, I must, like David Copperfield, read *as if for life*.

# T W O

## *Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening*

DORI LAUB, M.D.

### I

#### *A Record That Has Yet to Be Made*

The listener to the narrative of extreme human pain, of massive psychic trauma, faces a unique situation. In spite of the presence of ample documents, of searing artifacts and of fragmentary memoirs of anguish, he comes to look for something that is in fact nonexistent; a record that has yet to be made. Massive trauma precludes its registration; the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out, malfunction. The victim's narrative—the very process of bearing witness to massive trauma—does indeed begin with someone who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence, in spite of the overwhelming and compelling nature of the reality of its occurrence. While historical evidence to the event which constitutes the trauma may be abundant and documents in vast supply, the trauma—as a known event and not simply as an overwhelming shock—has not been truly witnessed yet, not been taken cognizance of. The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to—and heard—is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the “knowing” of the event is given birth to. The listener, therefore, is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time.

By extension, 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. The relation of the victim to the event of the trauma, therefore, impacts on the relation