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eter Dale Scott

g on the grass

ont of the chancellor's building

Charlie Schwartz's anti-war protests

gs back confused

ories of the wartime sixties

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to awake the morning into sound  
with the antennae of vowel and consonant and diphthong  
to calibrate with delicate care the subtlest  
movement of light and loss in sound

to find yourself suddenly kneeling at the audible  
palpable outline of a word — searching  
for that precise moment in which  
a poetic line expands in air

when the meaning of a word yields, slips  
and then surrenders into tone — from then  
the blood yearns for that infinite pitch of a word  
because: the only truth stands skinned in sound

# Literary Responses to Mass Violence

Sabha's Rope

• Taha Muhammad Ali

Do you remember, Abu Mu

do you remember when Sabh

our neighbor Abu Hashem's c

swallowed the rope?

Do you remember how,

as she was dying,

they slaughtered her,

and, by lamp light,

flayed her and then,

bit by bit, with axes,

hacked her into pieces?

Um Hashem

sent up her wailing,

as the knives sliced

away at Sabha,

and her daughter wept.

Everyone grieved,

and everyone lent a hand,

insisting, "We'll share the bur

No, I'm awake,

of course I remember,

and I remember, too,

that no one ever

tasted a piece of that meat!

It was grilled,

bold embarrassment at being

right angles to most people

but no one ate it!

The people felt

they were slicing into flesh

fresh from a cadaver,

as though it were Abu Hashem's body,

or that of his family,

that was being carved

# Literary Responses to Mass Violence

## DYING IN

• *Peter Dale Scott*

dying on the grass  
in front of the chancellor's building  
for Charlie Schwartz's anti-weapons protest

brings back confused  
memories of the wartime sixties  
hitting the dirt before we realized

these were just wooden bullets  
and then walking back through tear gas  
to teach a class

lying here  
and watching the neutral passers-by  
scale the vertical asphalt

I feel neither  
the old embarrassment at being  
at right angles to most people

No, I'm awake,  
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and I remember, too,  
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It was grilled,  
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## Preface

From September 16-18, 2003, Brandeis University hosted a special symposium called “Literary Responses to Mass Violence.” The event brought together a dozen writers and scholars from Africa, the Middle East, and the United States to reflect on the writing and testimony that has been published in the wake of the Holocaust, South African apartheid, and the genocide in Rwanda, among other recent tragedies. Evening readings featured the writers of poetry and fiction. Daytime discussions involved the creative writers and scholars in conversations organized around three themes: “Literature and Testimony”; “Nations, Populations, Language”; and “Finding Words in an Age of Violence.”

This volume collects many of the presentations made during the symposium, along with additional selections from the work of the poets who attended the event. The symposium enabled scholars and writers from disparate places to engage each other in an intellectually open environment. The authors had an opportunity to revise their papers in light of the event, and some of them have chosen to refer directly to the discussions in the essays published in this volume.

“Literary Responses to Mass Violence” was co-sponsored by the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life, the Tauber Institute for the Study of European Jewry, and the Department of English and American Literature at Brandeis University, and Heksherim: The Research Center for Jewish and Israeli Literature and Culture at Ben Gurion University of the Negev, in Israel, whose director, Yigal Schwartz, helped envision and plan the symposium. Mark Sanders of the Brandeis Department of English and American

Literature served as the program's academic director; the event bore the special stamp of his vision and ideas. Dan Terris of the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life and Sylvia Fuks Fried of the Tauber Institute provided invaluable institutional leadership. Stephanie Gerber Wilson of the Center helped organize the symposium and edit this volume, and Melissa Blanchard, also of the Center, helped compile this publication as well.

Special thanks are due to Helmsley Public Lecture Funds, The Office of the Dean of Arts and Sciences, and the Abba Eban Fund for their generous support. Many thanks also to Facing History and Ourselves for their cooperation.

## Introduction

• *Daniel Terris*

There are some who say that the only proper response to mass violence is silence: The silence of respect for those who have died. The silence of awe in the face of unimaginable horror. The silence of humility to mark our powerlessness to stop the bloodshed.

For writers of poetry, fiction, and other literary forms, the requirement to remain silent has sometimes appeared even stronger. What right do artists have, some ask, to mine catastrophe for their art? What purpose is served, after the fact—or while it's occurring, for that matter, by re-creating violence in another form? What place is there for the creative impulses of writers in a world where shocking truths have long since outstripped the worst that we could have imagined?

These arguments for silence are compelling, and silence will always serve its purpose. But an incontrovertible truth has emerged in the last half-century: the human impulse to respond with words and stories is impossible to suppress—however deep the horror, whatever the scale of tragedy. Literature will endure even in the face of the apparently ineffable. This imperative echoed through the September 2003 symposium on “Literary Responses to Mass Violence” at Brandeis University. The work in this volume amplifies and exemplifies the importance of a vibrant world literature in a time when mass violence remains an ongoing global phenomenon.

A striking theme that emerges in the symposium participants' work is that the moral complexity of the position of the artist in relation to violence both constrains creative writing and nourishes it. The challenge of knowing when to speak out and when to be silent, the risk of discovering beauty in the shadow of horror, the fragility of the reed of literature amidst the winds of politics and madness—these are the pressing issues that grip those who are wrestling with the atrocities of the distant and not-so-distant past.

Three able moderators from Brandeis University—Jane Hale, Leigh Swigart, and Faith Smith—conducted the conversations at our September symposium with grace and insight. Their introductory remarks, rewritten for this volume, define with uncanny precision some of the key questions raised here under three broad rubrics: “Literature and Testimony”; “Nations, Populations, Language”; and “Finding Words in an Age of Violence.”

Ilana Rosen of Ben Gurion University traces the subtle ways that oral testimony and works of literature about the Holocaust have influenced each other. We have known for a long time that creative writers have drawn extensively on oral histories and other first person accounts of the Holocaust in constructing their narratives. Rosen shows that the converse is true as well: the literary motifs that run through Holocaust literature have become so well-known that they unwittingly give shape to more recent testimonies. Drawing on in-depth interviews with more than 30 women survivors, Rosen elevates our appreciation for the elegance of testimony, while at the same time she sharpens our skepticism about its exactitude. Her “afterword” written after the conference, addresses the difficult question of the “usefulness” of narrative in preventing future atrocities.

Peter Dale Scott has written about American complicity in mass violence both in poetry (*Coming to Jakarta*) and in prose (*JFK* and *Deep Politics*). In this volume, Scott wrestles with the subject of denial, connecting the experiences of survivors of mass violence who preserve their sanity by blocking out the past. Scott reveals and discusses his own memory blocks while he was investigating the role of the United States government in violence abroad. He argues that an implicit collusion exists between victims of mass violence and citizens of nations that have abetted bloodshed—both, Scott says, are adept at protecting themselves from bloody truths. He suggests that both groups can help to prod each another toward candor.

Rachel Talshir, an Israeli-born daughter of Holocaust survivors, found herself drawn to write about the experiences of her parents' generation. Her novel, *Love Macht Frei*, is a shattering look at how the lives of three teenaged girls are wrenched apart. But it is also a story of how love and even sensuousness might take root even in the midst of horror. Her evocations of adolescent flirtation amidst the misery of the concentration camp have aroused controversy, but Talshir maintains a steady belief in the power of survival—not just of the body, but of the soul. In an afterword addressed to her father, Talshir paints with bleak, self-deprecating humor the experience of attending a gathering of other “holocaust addicts,” in a climate where people have begun to lose their capacity to be shocked by accounts of horror. Her own art, she hopes, speaks not to voyeurs of violence, but to those who could use “a drop of compassion.”

For more than half a century, Taha Muhammed Ali of Nazareth has been writing poetry in a style that his translator, Peter Cole, calls “figurative plainness,” combining flights of fancy and mythology

with an earthy vernacular that captures the pain of everyday life for Arabs in Palestine and Israel. At our symposium, Ali read selections from his work and recounted stories from his own life, raising important questions about the dangers of beautifying violence through the power of words. In this volume, we re-publish “Sabha’s Rope,” translated by Peter Cole. This poem evokes the pall of fitful bitterness and a “muted sort of grief” cast over a Palestinian community that longs for a sense of home.

The South African poet and journalist, Antjie Krog, speaks powerfully about the challenges of writing in her mother tongue, Afrikaans, in the wake of apartheid. In contemporary South Africa, the very sound of Afrikaans has become inextricably linked to the state security apparatus of the apartheid regime; yet for Krog, Afrikaans is the language of home and family and community. By writing poems in Afrikaans about the stories and lives revealed through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Krog refuses to cede her mother tongue to the forces of violence. Abandoning Afrikaans, a form of silence that some have chosen, strikes Krog as a victory for the forces of oppression.

The realities of 20th century catastrophe have, among other things, exploded our deepest conceptions of the world, argues Yigal Schwartz of Ben Gurion University. History, literature, and myth used to be separate and recognizable approaches to understanding the past. In response to mass violence, realism gives way to mythologized fantasy in literature, respectable historians find themselves meditating on the metaphysical nature of evil, and journalists transform reporting into fiction in the name of a deeper truth. Schwartz suggests that just as events have shattered the boundaries between distinct genres of

writing, readers need to discover new modes of understanding that will enable them to construct a framework for understanding the past and moving toward the future.

Boris Diop is one of those writers who came to believe that reporting could not do justice to atrocity. A Senegalese journalist and novelist, Diop received a commission, along with nine other African writers, to travel to Rwanda in the aftermath of that country’s genocide and to write about what he found there. Diop conducted dozens of interviews with survivors and visited the sites of some of Rwanda’s worst massacres, but he found, in the end, that he was impelled to write a work of fiction. *Murambi* (currently available only in French, with an English translation in progress) tells the story of the Rwandan genocide through the perspective of characters on both sides of the terrible ethnic divide, and some from outside of it altogether. Diop sees his own work—and the work of other writers who come to Rwanda from outside—as an emergency response to the genocide, a stopgap measure until Rwandan writers can tell their nation’s own story.

Mark Sanders, assistant professor of English at Brandeis and the program director for the symposium, offers a provocative look at the relationship between survivors of violence and bystanders who permitted the violence to occur. Sanders draws on reflections of Primo Levi about his classic memoir, *Survival in Auschwitz*, and on the peculiar intensity of the relationship between Levi and the German translator of *Survival*, Heinz Riedt. Unpacking the stages of anger, grief, and silence that Levi undergoes while considering the implications of his work for German readers, Sanders argues that “reparation” (as distinct from “reparations”) might be a mutual

process, through which not only the real violence of the perpetrators but the imagined revenge of the victims must be acknowledged and addressed.

We asked Eugene Goodheart, an honorary dean of letters at Brandeis, to do the near-impossible: to sum up the key ideas articulated by the full range of participants in the symposium, and to weave them together into a coherent closing commentary. Goodheart takes as his starting point the limits of the human imagination when it comes to comprehending the scale and scope of mass violence. Yet he concludes by showing that writers have embraced a full range of techniques to fill that imaginative space, eschewing illusions, “faithful to the truth in all its harshness and complexity.”

The state-sponsored mass violence of the past century has deprived millions of their lives; just as horribly, it has robbed millions more—both victims and perpetrators—of their humanity. But its effects do not stop there. Those of us viewing from a distance become a little less fully human ourselves when such crimes are committed. In an age when distance is no excuse for ignorance, the threads of responsibility for mass violence are woven into the life of every nation that has the capacity to act.

These writers and scholars—and the others who came to Brandeis in September—remind us that literature can help individuals and nations recover their humanity in the aftermath of brutality. Literature can also call the larger human community to account for the humanity we are abjuring every time we fail to prevent such atrocities. Silence has its place, but ultimately we must count on literature—alongside history and law and activism—to rouse us from complacency.

## Literature and Testimony

• *Jane Alison Hale*

An infinite variety of meanings are given to the term “literature,” and some new ones will surely emerge during discussions of written works produced in response to mass violence. The term “testimony,” a counterpoint to literature, has not necessarily received the same attention. Webster’s Dictionary includes several definitions of testimony:

- the act of reporting a fact or an event as one affirms its truth;
- proof;
- what a witness says under oath that s/he knows about a court case;
- certification of the reality or truth of something;
- guarantee of authenticity of a rite; or
- in religion, attestation to the existence of God.

We can connect all of these definitions easily to written responses to mass violence. But we need to pose the following question: Why write literature as a response to mass violence? Why not rely on journalism, sermons, political speeches, history, or anthropology? How does testimony to mass violence in literature differ from such testimony in court, newspapers, history books, or documentary film? Are fictional responses to mass violence more or less convincing testimonials than non-fictional ones? Are writers of literature given more latitude to invent and imagine reality than chroniclers of fact? Does this freedom paradoxically enhance the truth value of the reportage? Can a poet be a reliable witness? In times of mass violence, does literature alter its style and form to accommodate the function of testimony?

Several writers and scholars are well qualified to answer such questions. Peter Dale Scott's combination of professional domains enables him to testify to the expressive, truth-bearing, and political effectiveness of a variety of forms of language and discourse. He has touched on this versatility in public readings of his poetry, saying, rather provocatively, that he sees less and less difference among poetic, diplomatic, academic, and political writing. Scott has told us that poets go into the past to recover what has been repressed in a culture, group, or historical moment. Their jobs are to place *moments* within the context of the *process* of time as well as to design the future. Poets testify to certain transcendent, spiritual, and moral values we can't see or capture with other kinds of exploration.

Ilana Rosen's interest in literature and testimony stems from personal roots: her family's experiences in the Holocaust. She is a scholar of Jewish oral lore from Central and Eastern Europe, particularly from the period between the two world wars and the Holocaust. Rosen offers an essential perspective by adding oral literature to other forms of written expression under consideration. Furthermore, since she is involved in transcribing oral lore into writing, she occupies a privileged place from which to testify to the specificities—and intersections—of each domain. Rosen remarks that the postmodern blurring of boundaries among different disciplines reminds her of a cat chasing its tail. Literature evolves into history, then history into art, into philosophy, into religion, into science, and back to literature. Here, she echoes the cyclic view of history as it relates to language, poetry, and myth proposed by Giambattista Vico in eighteenth century Europe. Rosen notes that written testimony to the Holocaust offered by male writers such as Elie Wiesel and Bruno Bettelheim has heretofore received more respect as authoritative

testimony than have the oral accounts of female survivors. She also reminds us that publishing conditions in various locations and times can tell us as much about political realities as tell about the content of the publications. For instance, women's narratives have not always been available to readers. Furthermore, works not written in the world's most widely spoken languages often don't reach wide audiences.

David Kazanjian, a conference participant, recently published *The Colonizing Trick: National Culture and Imperial Citizenship in Early America* and *The Politics of Mourning*. These evocative titles invite us to consider poetics as an integral part of the study of politics, culture, and society. Kazanjian describes literature as a way of liberating catastrophes from traditional social science approaches that turn them into objects, sealing them up and entombing them in historical discourse. His work reflects on ways to give give new meanings to catastrophe. He asserts that there is no possibility that one single utterance of fact can make us know an event of mass violence. Is a single empirical courtroom-like verdict what we seek in learning about catastrophes? Don't we often bemoan the insufficiency of the courtroom process of exploring the truth of what happened, of reaching a verdict?

These writers raise many more questions than can be answered. Following are some questions that can be thought of as a possible guide to further discussions:

- We have many testimonies to genocide. Do we know how to read them?
- What is the role of the poet in responding to testimony?
- What is the relationship between poetry and mourning?



And how do poetry and mourning intersect with empathy?

- What do we mean by “human”? Do we, or can we, find some common understanding of this term?
- What is the connection among utopia, evil, and literature? Can violence be defined as the imposition of one’s ideals on others?
- How can we free up the limits of capitalism’s imagination?
- Must literature have a task? If so, what is it?
- Is literature about remembering events and facts that history has forgotten?
- Does the poet owe us a deeper, or a different, truth than the historian?

It is refreshing indeed to hear of the role, task, purpose, definition, and meaning of literature. Is the horrific mass violence of the past century a necessary precondition for permission to speak again about such things?

## Literaried Testimonies: Life Histories of Holocaust Survivors of Austro-Hungarian Origin

• *Ilana Rosen*

### Introduction: Holocaust Oral Testimony as Personal Narrative

In recent years, Holocaust awareness has increased in scholarly research world-wide, as well as in the arts and media. As a field of research, the Holocaust is currently ramified in different directions: the Holocaust experience of different groups, the Holocaust in or in relation to different fields of study, etc. From a different perspective, the post-modern era and sensibility dictate a fused or coalescent response mode, wherein the analytical is also personal, the historical is often just as personal, and the personal, in turn, is analytical and historical as well as public and cultural. This mode of thinking and writing is evident, for example, in books such as *Shaping Losses: Cultural Memory and the Holocaust*, edited by Julia Epstein and Lori Hope Lefkowitz, with contributors such as Irene Raab Epstein, Susan Suleiman, and Claire Kahane, who jointly create and present a storied as well as social and cultural view of the Holocaust among contemporary American Jewish women.<sup>1</sup>

Testimony is viewed as *the* genre of the century that just ended.<sup>2</sup> However, critics often denigrate accounts created by Holocaust survivors who are not professional writers, sometimes viewing them as what I would term “natural,”—authentic, simple in their language, devoid of literariness and broad historical understanding. On the other hand, works written by Holocaust writers or scholars, such as Elie Wiesel, Saul Friedländer, Victor E. Frankel, Bruno

Bettelheim, Jean Améry (Hans Meyer), Primo Levi, Aharon Appelfeld, and others are “cultural,” meaning well-wrought, well aware of relevant history and research, and attentive to literary conventions, notwithstanding their own misgivings at times concerning these very issues.<sup>3</sup> Needless to say, the latter group usually takes center stage, whereas the former is tucked away in archives, museums, or presented in fragments in documentaries. This distinction creates further implications in the realm of publicity and public response, as the “cultural” writers are published by renowned presses, whereas the “natural” or anonymous writers publish theirs in almost underground presses and conditions, without proper editing, and with resulting flaws, all of which contribute to their further dismissal and silencing.

Despite this imbalance, I contend that contrary to the accepted differentiation between literature and testimony, the two modes or sub-genres influence one another. Furthermore, not only is Holocaust testimony a source of inspiration for literature (and other arts), but the contrary is also true. The body of testimonial creation, which has not ceased to be produced and published since the late forties and seems even to be flourishing in recent years, is in turn also influenced by literary conceptions of the Holocaust and Holocaust awareness. Having lived in the post-Holocaust world for decades, these witnesses/narrators and their testimonies/narratives cannot but become part of Holocaust discourse, of which they are both subject and object. Moreover, the very dichotomy between the literary and the testimonial or memoirist works is largely contrived, considering the egalitarian nature and effect of the major event depicted in them, and is basically a function of power and public relations, or the inability to manipulate them.

My contention is based on a decade of work on oral and traditional portrayals of Central and East European individuals from communities that were once part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. These communities then underwent many regime changes, including a brief unfortunate return to Hungary during World War II and the Holocaust. Most of these people, my narrators, left for the West after the Holocaust, while a few of them returned to or remained in their original places of birth in the former Empire. Whether as Israelis, Hungarians, Carpatho-Russians (of present-day western Ukraine), or Rumanians, about a hundred of the narrators related their comprehensive life histories or episodic personal and other narratives to me for my work on three research projects: one devoted to Holocaust survivors of Hungarian origin,<sup>4</sup> one to the oral tradition of Carpatho-Russian Jews in the interwar period,<sup>5</sup> and one, a sequel to the second work, a study of the Holocaust narratives of the Jews of Carpatho-Russia as told by 14 individuals who simultaneously also tell the collective story of their community.<sup>6</sup> The three projects differ from each other in form and focus, and range from entire life histories, to a variety of oral genres, to personal narratives; from Hungarians to Carpathian “Ostjuden”; and from predominantly female to male narrators. Due to their cumulative breadth, however, these projects enable me to draw distinctions concerning the relationship between these corpora and related literature such as Holocaust fictional or memoirist literature, oral traditional lore of the same and neighboring communities, and women’s narratives, as they were the most dominant in my work in general in terms of volume, disclosure, and affect.

For the sake of accessibility I shall rely mainly on those portions of my work that have been translated into English and are

forthcoming in the United States, and leave the Hebrew material in the background. References shall therefore be made to the English version of my doctoral thesis, *Sister in Sorrow: A Journey to the Life Histories of Female Holocaust Survivors from Hungary*, which is forthcoming and includes an appendix presenting verbatim the oral material upon which the work is based;<sup>7</sup> and to a selection made up of other narratives that were also documented for the dissertation as well as a smaller number of excerpts from the Carpatho-Russian work, all hardly known hitherto, titled *Hungarian Jewish Women Survivors Remember the Holocaust: An Anthology of Life Histories*.<sup>8</sup>

These two works are devoted to 30 survivors, most of them women, of traditional or conservative Jewish and Central European upbringing. Viewed through the prism of literariness versus orality, these narratives cover the spectrum with a few extremes on both ends and a majority of mingled discourse along the rather broad center. The survivors whose narratives and discourse are closer to spontaneous testimony speak in everyday language, at times in a mixture of languages but without real fluency in any of them, a trait which diminishes the coherence of their discourse. They retain vestiges of oral performance in that they allude to the very act of remembering or recounting; they reconstruct live dialogues in the form of direct speech; and their narratives are largely devoid of second thoughts, historical or philosophical ponderings, much like the “natural” accounts alluded to above. In all these regards, these narratives are barren or exposed, close at times to the stream-of-consciousness mode, and on the whole far from sophisticated.

The following excerpt, from the narrative of Dora A., an Israeli *moshav* [village] resident, a seamstress by profession, of Hungarian-Slovak origins, may well illustrate this mode of expression, although

listening to the narrator’s voice would reinforce the immediacy and vitality of her discourse:

They took us to work in Augsburg, where [unclear]. I remember traveling in coal trains for three days. We arrived at a station, far away from the factory. We scared them because we were bald-headed and black from the coal. We heard someone asking our German guards if we were insane women from an asylum. We reached a yard, walking. They asked us, “Where are your bags?” We started laughing: “Which bags?” Just as we reached the factory yard there was a bombing. The workers ran outside, they were terrified by the bombing. All of us were standing, what a motley group, five hundred women looking as though we came from an asylum. But they were scared by the bombs so they kept running. . . .<sup>9</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum, we find the following, more refined mode of expression concerning a similar experience, in a narrative told by E. K. (who wished to remain anonymous), a Jerusalemite editor and translator working for the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, originally from Kapuvár, Hungary:

In March 1945, the camp was bombed and the Germans threw us out. We didn’t mind the bombs as we awaited the German defeat. The next night, during a lull, my cousin and I sneaked out and ran into the woods. We feared being taken to a concentration camp again, and we decided to escape this fate. As we looked around, it turned out that there were four other girls from the camp and we stuck together. We walked without stopping for three days and then lay down exhausted on the ground and fell asleep . . .<sup>10</sup>

Between these two extremes, there is a vast variety of possibilities, four of which will be presented and analyzed here. For the sake of coherence, this analysis will be divided into two main “areas” of consciousness: historical-testimonial Holocaust consciousness, and literary-cultural Holocaust consciousness.

### 1. Historical-Testimonial Holocaust Consciousness

Shoshana K. born in Budapest, Hungary, from Ramat-Gan, Israel, recalls:

To go back earlier, to the summer of 1941, I recall stories told by Jews who made it back to the west after having escaped the killing in the east. I recall hearing through the walls of my room stories of atrocities that took place in the east. Of course these stories affected me, prepared me in a way so that when the Germans came in 1944, I knew exactly what to expect. People around me knew less. We know for a fact that the whole Kásztner affair was made possible because people did not know enough. He did not reveal to them what he knew, and therefore they could not escape in time. I guess there was a shared tendency not to tell. I myself did not talk to my family about the things I heard, nobody talked. We were paralyzed by fear. But it did make us act, look for solutions. Most Jews were moved to the ghetto or deported to camps. Very few hid. We hid, probably because we knew things in advance. So we found places. For example, for a time we hid in the summerhouse of one of our neighbors. Later on, police found me out there, so I returned to Budapest, got a Christian I.D. and got along by myself.<sup>11</sup>

Zipora N., from Munkács, Carpatho-Russia, living in Haifa, Israel, tells the following about the conduct of a Jewish high-ranking camp inmate:

I want to tell you about this incident with Malka H., who was so kind to me and sent me to work in that really good and easy job. Once we stood in roll call, I was already kicked out of the job in the living quarters, but I still looked well. Next to me stood a very thin woman, almost a Mussulman. I started pinching her cheeks so she would look healthier, and I even painted her face red with a piece of beet I had with me. Then I pulled her dress up a bit so that she wouldn't look so thin. Then Malka came by with Mengele or whoever it was to do the “selection.” I then pushed this woman aside and stood in front of her, hiding her behind me. I didn't even know her, I only saw her bad state and wanted to save her. Now Malka came with this man, went right up to this woman, pulled her out of our row, and sent her to the gas chambers. Malka did that, and I shall never forget it. I heard she tried to live in Israel for a while, and that survivors almost lynched her.<sup>12</sup>

In these two excerpts we notice that although the Holocaust in Hungary took place mainly during the last year of the war, as far as deportation and mass murder are concerned, the survivors' accounts might go as far back as the early murderous “aktia”s in the newly conquered eastern regions in 1941<sup>13</sup> and as far forward as the so-called Kásztner affair which preoccupied the newly created State of Israel during the fifties,<sup>14</sup> as well as to the figures of “kapo”s and analogous “prominenten”—to use Primo Levi's term<sup>15</sup>—who stood at the center of a recent documentary that was broadcast on Israeli television.<sup>16</sup>

On the basis of this fabula, the narrative of Shoshana K. brings to the fore two central claims that figure prominently in contemporary historical and cultural Holocaust discourse as well: 1) Although Hungarian Jewry was deported to Auschwitz and to its demise only starting from the spring of 1944 and following Hungary's invasion by Nazi Germany, many of the country's Jews—mostly those living in the areas ceded to Hungary in the war's early stage—suffered gravely beginning in 1941; and, related to this claim, 2) Hungary and its Fascist regime and militia are not any less responsible than Nazi Germany for the destruction of Hungarian Jewry. In addition, the question of knowing, or being able to predict the near future on the basis of signs hitherto never experienced, is brought up and left open, as the narrator does pride herself on being able to read reality but refrains from criticizing those who failed to act as she did.

The narrative of Zipora N. points at a no less painful and multi-faceted figure and affair. Magda or Malka Helinger, whose identity and face were exposed in the above-mentioned documentary, is known to have been the most highly ranked Jewish woman in the concentration and death camps system. Accordingly, she is well remembered by her coevals, who were necessarily her commandants. Yet, surprisingly, memories and stories about her or related to her vary in their degrees of accusation versus acceptance. At times, divergent feelings emerge from one and the same testimony, as happens in Zipora N.'s narrative. Earlier on, Zipora mentions her acquaintance with this Malka in a Zionist summer camp years before and Malka's ensuing initial kindness to her in the camps. But in this later incident, Malka betrays Zipora's trust in what Zipora views as an over-zealous and superfluous act of sacrifice. Although she herself experienced only the positive side of Malka's omnipotence, Zipora

now uses her testimonial act to criticize Malka's cruelty in the name of the victim(s) as it were, thus condemning Malka's overall figure.

In sum, it can be said that far from remaining in their own personal realms, the two narrators and their narratives open up vistas to, and maintain relations with, the histories of their communities and fearlessly touch upon controversial and painful issues, thereby integrating their voices in existing veins of expression, or genres, such as historiography, testimony, memoirist and/or fictional Holocaust literature, and documentaries.

## 2. Literary-Cultural Holocaust Consciousness

Rosi S. of the Erdély or Transylvania region, living in Petach-Tikva, Israel, relates:

Here I am all by myself. This is my "good" life. A tragedy. The things we went through, the hardships we endured, a dog deserves better. What can I do? This is fate. Of all my brothers and sisters I am the only survivor. When my son was small and went to kindergarten, he asked me why he didn't have any grandparents. So I told him that Hitler had murdered them all. He replied, "When I grow up and become a pilot, I'll kill Hitler." I said, "Fine my darling . . ."

The good Lord will guard our children and grandchildren from ever knowing and experiencing what we, to my sorrow, went through. Let us hope it never happens again, although, regretfully, some people today ignore the Holocaust, say it never really happened. So we have to remind everyone of things we would like to forget. When I hear German, I shudder, I can only think of the suffering I went through.

What can we do? That is our fate [crying]. I hope that everyone else will have a better life and not experience what we went through.<sup>17</sup>

Rika S. of the same region, living in Herzliya, Israel, remembers:

Time passed. Every morning, we were pushed out for Zell Appell, roll call. You may have heard about it from other survivors. Once, after we had been disinfected, everyone grabbed for a dress, but I didn't get anything to wear. I remained naked and so did two or three other, older, women. I decided to go to the woman in charge and ask for a dress. It was dangerous, because I didn't know how she would respond. These were Jewish-Slovakian women, who had been in the camps since 1939, 1940. They had become like cruel animals. Occasionally they took one of the girls who had recently arrived to serve them. Now I went up to them, to their small cabin at the center of the barracks. I said to them, "I know you have some extra dresses here. Please give me a few, not for me, but for these older women who could be your mothers." It was just before lunch, when the huge pot called Kübel was brought in. It was so big and heavy that two women had to carry it. Now this girl from Vásárhely, their servant, hit me so hard, that I fell over the pot. I got up and ran out, didn't care about anything, I ran into their superior, the Lagerälteste, and told her what had happened. Then one of the women in her office told the other to give me some clothes. They gave me some underwear as well, and another pair of shoes. I went back and shared the things I got with the other women. After that, some of my friends from Vásárhely started to call me Joan of Arc. But I only learned about it later.<sup>18</sup>

Concerning the first excerpt, in another essay I described the life history of Rosi S. in its entirety as a post-modern lament which partly adheres to the conventions of Jewish lamentation tradition as presented, for example, in the *Eicha* [Threni] Scroll, and partly undermines these conventions to the point of questioning their very relevance to contemporary catastrophe.<sup>19</sup> In that essay, I showed that by implementing *some of* the principles of the traditional lament, Rosi and the other narrator discussed there take advantage of the narrative event to mourn their own lives. Even in Rosi's short text presented here, we may discern the following components of traditional lament repeated by way of variation: 1) referring to the very act of deploring, 2) posing questions concerning the reason and meaning of suffering, and 3) accepting the atrocious past and expressing hope for a better future. A fourth element—alluding to the cruelty and derision of the perpetrator(s)—is missing from this specific excerpt although it is ever-present in Rosi's inclusive account.<sup>20</sup> But the first three elements keep recurring in this minimal excerpt in a wavelike form: although she avoids direct reference to what befell her personally, as the exchange with her small son years ago well expresses, Rosi emphasizes the obligation to recount the unspeakable in a manner echoing the Passover *Haggadah's* decree to pass on from father to son the (hi)story of redemption from slavery in Egypt; she also keeps asking how it could all happen, and immediately retorts by expressing a wish, which is by no means an answer but rather, in its context, sounds like a recitative prayer, that the *Shoah* should never recur. These dualistic gestures and utterances point at the tension between speech and silence, remembrance and forgetfulness, not only in Rosi's consciousness, but for an entire generation living in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

If Rosi's account is rooted in Jewish lore, then the incident described by Rika S. connects to universal values such as solidarity of the repressed and respect for one's elders. However, in the camp's universe, clinging to such values entails inevitable frustration. Rika learns in the flesh, literally and figuratively in both Hebrew and English, that in the world of the camps the old rules are irrelevant. Instead of these, the camp rules, language, and so-called culture seize power quickly and totally, as is evident by Rika's preceding remark to me: "You may have heard about it from other survivors," referring to the roll call routine and ordeal. Thus she positions her narrative in both a chain of similar stories and a tradition of telling them retrospectively among communities of Holocaust-narrative narrators and listeners. Yet, unlike Rosi, who ends each of her revolt gestures by acceptance, Rika refuses to accept the harsh reality she faces, but instead defies it, suffers for her defiance, and eventually wins, even if only in this one battle. Her altruistic act marks her as a martyr as she is identified as a Christian heroine, even if she is unaware of it at the time.

In sum, it is evident that the last two narrators are well aware of the wider implications of their narratives as well as of their role as agents of memory and commemoration. Whether or not Rosi consciously recites her life history in the form of a Biblical lament, she expresses her ties with this tradition. Whether or not Rika knows the Joan of Arc story in depth, her allusion to it evokes universal values such as courage and altruism that do not diminish in the face of threat or hurt, but on the contrary, burst forth in response to them.

### **Conclusion: The Power of Minor Message**

By way of a more general conclusion, reference should be made to the topic of memory and its discourse in the last two decades,

following the works of Pierre Nora, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi and others.<sup>21</sup> Memory here might be viewed as a mediating story substance between formal and informal accounts, collective and individual voices, history and story. The accounts cited above seem to draw on the musical modus of theme and variation(s). They relate to history yet go far beyond or stay far away from it; they might know the formal or institutional accounts but those are found lacking; and they recite stories that are mostly imaginary or hardly imaginable for most of their audiences.

### **Afterword**

The "Literary Responses to Mass Violence" conference was a unique and powerful event, in which the participants had a rare opportunity to hear and share notions with other scholars, journalists, and writers who experienced, witnessed, or documented immense suffering. In some instances this suffering had been perpetrated by members of a group represented by other participants in the conference. In some cases the suffering was ongoing while we convened. Some participants slated to appear could not attend the conference, as they were embroiled in the realities about which they write.

Participating in this conference meant for me carrying out a mission of disseminating the experience and undesired heritage of many ordinary people who lived through the horrors of the Holocaust. My goal was to promote remembrance of the world destroyed in the Holocaust and awareness of those for whom living in the aftermath of the Holocaust is a daily trial. Having studied the personal narratives of these survivors for more than a decade, I have come to view these narratives as a significant component of today's agenda, just like the stories of contemporary sufferers and survivors all over the world that are presented daily in our modern media.

One might assume that these Holocaust survivors have a lesson for their listeners and readers, a “recipe” to prevent future evil and “madness,” as some of my narrators preferred to call it. Regretfully, in most narratives this is not the case. The Holocaust narrators I have met often cannot help but relate the atrocities done to them, without even attempting to assign meaning, offer explanations, express hard feelings, or seek revenge of any sort. In many senses, these are existential narratives that tell only the subjective stories and truths of their narrators. Often, these narratives are laconic, or enigmatic, or pidgin, or stream-of-consciousness in their style, or combine these and similar traits. The narrators seem to be saying—and some of them literally say so—that they have nothing to teach us, no lesson, no moral, no means of defense against future catastrophe, except the certainty of the possibility of catastrophe at any time and place. If anything, this is *the message* embedded in the words of these ordinary non-verbose survivor witnesses.

Related to the issue of message, in the summary session of the conference I raised the question of the effect of the existence of all these narratives and data-pools devoted to worldwide atrocity and serving as bases for conferences such as the one we just adjourned. The anti-climactic atmosphere of the summary session, in relation to such a charged topic, surely did not arouse or provide the kind of seriousness needed to tackle such a question. The question itself may sound like a subversive dismissal of our very effort to discuss and share the “pains of the world.” In the role of devil’s advocate one might say: “Here they are, all these piles of paper and tape. You may as well leave room in your bookcases and archives for future records. Soon, they too will all be piled up, just like the dead and dying in Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, swollen by hunger, full of sound

and fury, signifying<sup>22</sup> utter depression. And all this, simply because they come from the mouths of helpless victims, while certain states or world powers speak other ‘texts.’” In other words, words are not enough, unless they are supported by legislation and power.

This poignant conclusion leads me to a related issue that seemed to lurk behind our talks and even informal meetings during the conference. Concerning the massacres in Rwanda in the 90’s, writer Boubacar Boris Diop of Senegal criticized the refusal of public opinion worldwide to even perceive these atrocities as anything other than “tribal conflicts,”—inner, small scale collisions too petty to warrant the attention and intervention of international authorities such as the United Nations. The world seemed to be saying, Diop suggested, “Let them kill each other, who cares?” Or worse: “Let them kill each other, there will be that many less of them to bother with in the next conflict.”

As regards Jewish suffering, I wish to contend that public and world opinion *can change* in response to a nation’s change of its own self-image and fate. During the Holocaust, six million European Jews were murdered in a variety of ways, and, as popular lyrics would go, “the world didn’t care.” Explanations are heaped in libraries and archives concerning questions such as: why was Auschwitz never bombed,<sup>23</sup> why did German Jewish DP’s not receive special attention and rights as victims, as opposed to Nazi-German prisoners of war and other refugees, in the British Zone after liberation?<sup>24</sup> A visceral response would indeed be that not only did the world not care in those years, but also that Jews did not count, if not worse.



Since the founding and strengthening of the State of Israel, the creation of the newly born or self-made *sabra* [native] Israeli, the constant tension and strife on the borders and within Israel, the opposite image or “myth” has been disseminated, namely, that no Jew or Israeli is ever forsaken, because Israeli diplomacy or well trained secret security forces, or both, will rescue any of us anywhere: Uganda, Yemen, Iraq, Colombia, Lebanon, and the West Bank. Surely, some rules are honored more in the breach, some actions were mere public relations gimmicks, some operations failed, some did not even pass the phase of simulation, and in some cases the very entanglement should have been prevented. Still, the myth holds a grip over international imagination, fears and hopes, to the extent that even if it were not justified in the first place, it became “true” eventually.

In the case of recent Jewish and Israeli history then, no doubt “Jewish (or Israeli) blood” is worth much more now than was the case in Europe of the 30’s and 40’s. Now, surely Rwanda and its people cannot and should not implement Israeli strategies, some of which are controversial in more than one sense. But the very call to take action, even if only by words, even if only by “telling the world,” as Auschwitz inmates hoped they would still be able to (not knowing, not imagining, not daring to realize that the world knew anyway). We should bear in mind that the very act of telling and retelling counts, not for the mere passing along of information, but for creating a cumulative and effective response. For that purpose, all these stories, debates, and arguments are vital and, as the Passover *Haggadah* teaches us, “the more the better.”

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Julia Epstein and Lori Hope Lefkowitz (eds.), *Shaping Losses—Cultural Memory and the Holocaust* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001). The same claim is true for works such as: Ruth R. Linden, *Making Stories, Making Selves—Feminist Reflections on the Holocaust* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1992); Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (eds.), *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Foley, “Fact, Fiction, Fascism: Testimony and Mimesis in Holocaust Narrative,” *Comparative Literature* 34 (1982): 330-360.

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies—The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990): 16, 41.

<sup>4</sup> Ilana Rosen, *The Holocaust at the Center of Life: A Folkloristic Analysis of Life Histories told by Hungarian Speaking Holocaust Survivors* – Thesis Submitted for the Degree: “Doctor of Philosophy” (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Central Library, 1994) [Hebrew]. This work has been adapted to book form, titled: *Sister in Sorrow—A Journey to the Life Histories of Female Holocaust Survivors from Hungary* (trans. Sandy Bloom) Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Publishers, 2003) [Hebrew] and is forthcoming in English by Wayne State University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Ilana Rosen, *There Once Was...—The Oral Tradition of the Jews of Carpatho-Russia* (Tel-Aviv: The Diaspora Research Institute at Tel-Aviv University, 1999) [Hebrew].

<sup>6</sup> Ilana Rosen, *In Auschwitz We Blew the Shofar—Carpatho-Russian Jews Remember the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2004) [Hebrew].

<sup>7</sup> See note no. 4 above.

<sup>8</sup> Ilana Rosen, *Hungarian Jewish Women Survivors Remember the Holocaust—An Anthology of Life Histories* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Ilana Rosen, *Sister in Sorrow*, 227.

<sup>10</sup> Ilana Rosen, *Hungarian Jewish Women Survivors Remember the Holocaust*, 48.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>13</sup> Randolph L. Braham, “The Kamenets Podolsk and Délvidék Massacres: Prelude to the Holocaust in Hungary,” *Yad Vashem Studies—On the European Jewish Catastrophe and Resistance IX* (1973): 133-156.

<sup>14</sup> Yehiam Weitz, *The Man Who was Murdered Twice* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1995) [Hebrew].

<sup>15</sup> Especially in his *The Drowned and the Saved* (London: Michael Joseph, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> The documentary film *Capo* was broadcasted in Channel 1 of the Israeli Broadcasting Authority (IBA) (script and directing by Dan Seton and Tor Ben-Mayor, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> Ilana Rosen, *Hungarian Jewish Women Survivors Remember the Holocaust*, 57.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>19</sup> Ilana Rosen, “The Memory of the Holocaust as Lament – the Life Histories of Two Holocaust Survivors Mourning their Fate,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore* (1994): 97-111 [Hebrew]. The same tension stands at the core of the following works: Sidra De Koven-Ezrahi, *By Words Alone—The Holocaust in Literature* (Chicago and London: the University of Chicago Press, 1980); Alan Mintz, *Hurban—Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse—Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984).

<sup>20</sup> Ilana Rosen, *Hungarian Jewish Women Survivors Remember the Holocaust*, 53-59.

<sup>21</sup> Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982); Pierre Nora, “General Introduction: Between Memory and History, in *idem. et al, Realms of Memory—Rethinking the French Past* (New-York: Columbia University Press, 1996): 1-20. For further reading concerning this turn of consciousness, see the two issues of *Representation*, 26 (1989) and 69 (2000), that were both devoted to memory, history, and their cultural representations.

<sup>22</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, act V, scene V.

<sup>23</sup> Arthur D. Morse, *While Six Million Died: A Chronicle of American Apathy* (New York: Random House, 1968).

<sup>24</sup> Hagit Lavsky, *New Beginnings—Holocaust Survivors in Bergen-Belsen and the British Zone in 1945-1950* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002): 51-55.

## The Sleep of Reason: Denial, Memory-Work, and the Reconstruction of Social Order

• Peter Dale Scott

there is always a war,  
and we are free  
to turn off the news.

The first of the human freedoms.

It's a blessing, isn't it? To be able,  
days at a time,  
to forget what we are.

— Chana Bloch, “The First of the Human Freedoms”

One recurring theme I was struck by at the Brandeis conference was the initial responses of both the public and victims to catastrophic murder all over the world: not just to forget about catastrophe, but to deny it, and to discourage recovery of memories which at first are too painful to bear. The testimonies we heard reinforced my own personal experience with respect to the massacre of up to a million or more Indonesians in 1965, an event which just in the last few years is beginning to be frankly confronted and researched.

My only experience of holocaust is vicarious: the pain of having been one of the only North Americans to write about this massacre, and then watching as the world continued for decades to ignore what had happened. In America this sick silence was further polluted by

efforts to blame what happened on the victims themselves—as in the *Los Angeles Times*' remark (quoted in my poem *Coming to Jakarta*) that the Communist Party “subjected the country to a national bloodbath.”<sup>1</sup>

Writing this poem was in part a process of personal recovery from a near-breakdown that was caused, I came to realize, by my silence and impotence in the face of this disaster. My experience of recovery was captured in the end by a passage I read by chance in the *Gospel of Thomas*: “If you bring forth what is within you it will save you; if you do not bring forth what is within you it will destroy you.”<sup>2</sup> I recognized that the first response to catastrophe may well be a numbness that will wish to forget or even deny it. But ultimately the path towards sanity will require memory-work:<sup>3</sup> the task of recuperating what has been suppressed, so that we can live honestly in an open world.

Thus from the outset I experienced the writing of my long poem as a healing process, in which facts and thoughts which had hitherto obsessed me were slowly separated from me, to face me from outside on the page. It helped that in the same period I was meditating. There too I learned to move towards equanimity by noting an emotional state in my mind, rather than being that state. Only when a memory becomes conscious, I realized, can we free ourselves from its tyranny.

This process of liberation for the self is equally important for a culture or society. It is no surprise that oppressors will wish to suppress the facts of their handiwork, so as to preserve the illusion that they are agents of justice and benevolent order. As Howard Zinn

has written in his *People's History of the United States*, “One reason these atrocities are still with us is that we have learned to bury them in a mass of other facts, as radioactive wastes are buried in containers in the earth.” But as became clear in the proceedings of the Brandeis conference, silence and denial about truths too terrible to bear are the initial defense mechanisms also of the victims.

Only with time can one acquire the perspective and strength to deal with the intolerable, in this world where (as I wrote in *Jakarta*) “we live by forgetting.”<sup>4</sup> As I wrote in prose,

Just as in an earlier era people derived psychological comfort from the idea that the forces of our environment were controlled by benign or appeasable deities, so today most people would prefer to think that the violence of the world we live in is subject to sovereign powers and laws.<sup>5</sup>

This soothing belief is reinforced by high-level assurances that violence is “mindless,” ignoring its often conspicuous function in state-sponsored campaigns of terror.<sup>6</sup> For example, the Rwanda massacre of 1994 is still often dismissed as “mindless violence,” ignoring the French official role in preparing for and protecting the massacre, as revealed in 1998 by *Le Figaro*.<sup>7</sup> But to liberate ourselves from this wide-spread violence in the world, just as to liberate ourselves from the disturbances in our own psyche, we must penetrate to a deeper level, in part through memory-work.

In writing *Jakarta*, I came to recognize that even in my own privileged and protected life, I had frequently preserved my sanity by psychologically suppressing facts at odds with my necessary illusion for survival: namely, that I lived in a secure and benevolent world.

The second half of the poem included a series of recovered memories that undercut this illusion, and indeed constituted evidence that there were darker forces at work in our society than I would normally allow myself to admit.

Perhaps the most powerful of these suppressed memories, and certainly the very last to be recovered, is near the end of Section V.ii, reprinted here. It was of a witness to opium flights in Asia who, after agreeing with Alfred McCoy and myself to be interviewed, changed his mind overnight. And for good reason: in those hours someone had warned him by burning a hole in the steel door of his M.G. with a sophisticated implosion device. One might think that such a vivid and incongruous message could hardly be forgotten. The fact was that I had totally suppressed my memory of it, even through the first two years of my determined poetic search to *recover* such memories!<sup>8</sup>

And so, as I rightly suspected, had Al. In the preface to the latest edition of his monumental classic, *The Politics of Heroin*, he writes in prose about his own suppression of the same facts. At the risk of seeming self-absorbed in the context of larger tragedies, I would like to quote his prose account of an unforgettable event almost instantly forgotten.

I landed in San Francisco for a stay with poet and Berkeley professor Peter Dale Scott. He put me in touch with an ex-Green Beret, just back from covert operations in Laos, who told me, over the phone, of seeing CIA aircraft loading opium. He agreed to be interviewed on the record. The next morning, we knocked at his door in an East Palo Alto apartment complex. We never got inside. He was visibly upset, saying he “had gotten the message.” What happened?

“Follow me,” he said, leading us across the parking lot to his M. G. sportscar. He pointed at something on the passenger door and named a chemical explosive that that could melt a hole in sheet metal. It was, he said, a signal to shut up. I looked but cannot recall seeing. The next day, I flew to Los Angeles, visited my mother, and then flew on to Saigon, forgetting the incident. I refused to recognize the reality of this threat until, 20 years later, I came across a passage in Professor Scott’s poem, *Coming to Jakarta*:

but that clean morning in Palo Alto  
the former Green Beret

who just the night before  
had said he would talk to us  
about opium in Laos

showing us the sharp black hole  
in his M.G.’s red steel door  
the floorboards hardly scorched

and saying *that hot*  
*an imploded thermal charge*  
*must have come from my old unit*

and if from such terror  
we each acknowledge  
*we are not normal*

in this world where  
we live by forgetting.<sup>9</sup>

I believe this anecdote is paradigmatic on two levels. With respect to the world around us, it suggests a depth to US society which neither McCoy's prose nor my own have hitherto fathomed, in which some form of sophisticated surveillance could be followed by an order to intimidate through low-grade terrorism. In short it is a symptom of what I have elsewhere called deep politics, those practices "which are usually repressed rather than acknowledged."<sup>10</sup>

One of the great merits of the Brandeis conference was to remind us that unspeakable atrocity is not a single event at a moment in space and time, but something to be encountered on every continent of the world today. Deep politics is the same, not a temporary affliction of one country lapsing into fatal imperial temptation, but a widespread, perhaps universal phenomenon.

But more pertinently the anecdote of the bomb-blasted M.G. illustrates how effectively two hopefully normal people, indeed two *investigators*, suppressed a fact highly relevant to their research—but at odds with the complacent world view in which they were comfortable. I take it as a symptom that this psychological need for suppression and denial is very widespread, indeed almost universal—except among paranoids, who by their very lack of such denial alienate themselves from the mainstream.<sup>11</sup>

Elsewhere I have written of civilization as "a great conspiracy/ of organized denial."<sup>12</sup> I mean by this the creation of a partly illusory mental space, in which unpleasant facts, such as that all western empires have been established through major atrocities, are conveniently suppressed.<sup>13</sup> I say this as one who believes passionately in civilization, and fears that by excessive denial our own civilization may indeed be becoming threatened.

Why is it important not to rest in comfortable denial, and to get to the truth of atrocities when they exist? Here I think of Goya's memorable phrase, "The sleep of reason begets monsters," and his clarification that "Imagination abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters."<sup>14</sup> Goya's pregnant remarks could have been externally inspired, by the monstrosities of war in an unenlightened world. But I have had personal experience of the monsters which grow within us, when the conscious and unconscious are not in touch with each other. The repressed must be eased back rationally through memory-work, or it will threaten to burst upon us.

A South African psychologist interviewed by author Antjie Krog in connection with the work of the South African Truth Commission also stressed that a victim of atrocity needs to find words to get a handle on the experience. The alternative is to be haunted by nameless terror, "merciless spaces filled with the horrible howls of anguish."<sup>15</sup>

There is something about human nature that cannot for long be at rest in a mental condition of denial and lies. The writers who recover the suppressed memories of catastrophe may in the short run appear to be a menace to the existing, superficial social order. But they act in the name of a truer and more stable order, into which the forces of violence have been accommodated, not merely denied.

There is a social as well as a personal stake in not succumbing to the torpor of an unexamined life. If we abandon the search to understand what has really happened, we forsake also our hopes for consolidating a better and more mindful world.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Peter Dale Scott, *Coming to Jakarta* (New York: New Directions, 1989): 110; quoting *Los Angeles Times*, 11/15/75.

<sup>2</sup> Scott, *Jakarta*, 146.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. e.g. International Summer Programs on the Holocaust, “Memory Work and Post-Holocaust Identity: Confronting the Past as a Third Generation. Reflections on the 2002 International Summer Program on the Holocaust. Edited and arranged by Bjorn Krondorfer.” I also recommend Jane Kramer, *The Politics of Memory: Looking for Germany in the New Germany* (New York: Random House, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Scott, *Jakarta*, 148.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Dale Scott, *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996): xiv.

<sup>6</sup> Thus the El Salvadorean Army’s punitive rape and murder of four American nuns they considered subversive was dismissed by *Time* as “mindless violence” [12/15/80; cf. Peter Dale Scott, *Listening to the Candle* (New York: New Directions, 1992): 106]. Compare the effort of Clifford Geertz to belittle the Indonesian Army’s role in the 1965 massacre in Bali, which we now know to have been an organized psywar campaign of systematic murder. See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973): 282, cf. 322; Scott, *Jakarta*, 120-22; Peter Dale Scott, “Atrocity and its Discontents: U.S. Double-Mindedness About Massacre,” in Adam Jones, ed. *Genocide, War Crimes and the West: Ending the Culture of Impunity*. (London: Zed Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> William Pfaff, *International Herald Tribune*, 1/22/98; “France’s official implication in the Rwanda genocide of 1994, revealed this month by the newspaper *Le Figaro*, demonstrates the power of history, even bad history, to influence a politician’s decisions. It also provides disconcerting evidence of certain recurrent traits in the behavior of the French political class. The newspaper told how French soldiers trained many of Rwandan soldiers and militiamen who later carried out the genocide, did not interfere when the genocide began, and subsequently were ordered to help the killers’ leaders to escape.” For the misinterpretation of the genocide as “mindless violence,” see UN Security Council Resolution 912(1994), 21 April 1994; *Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*, <http://www.reliefweb.int/library/nordic/book2/pb021h.html>.

<sup>8</sup> I narrated this recovered memory a second time a decade later in *Minding the Darkness* (New York: New Directions, 2000): 138. The reason for this duplication is symptomatic: I had again forgotten and recovered it. However the second recovery was nothing like as intensely liberating and therapeutic as the first; I suppose the memory was by then too close to the level of consciousness to be of psychological importance.

<sup>9</sup> Alfred W. McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Traffic* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books/ Chicago Review Press, 2003): xii; quoting Scott, *Jakarta*, 147-48. I believe that when I first checked with McCoy about this in 1990, his memory ended with our descending the stairs from the veteran’s home “to see something.”

<sup>10</sup> Scott, *Deep Politics*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> Hence the notable paradox, variously formulated: that people who are not the least bit paranoid are so deeply into denial they are nuts.

<sup>12</sup> Scott, *Minding the Darkness*, 137.

<sup>13</sup> I suspect in fact that most readers will be tempted to reject and forget my anecdote of the bombed car-door, as something which simply “doesn’t compute.”

<sup>14</sup> Francisco Jose Goya, *Los Caprichos*, Plate 43. “El sueño de la razon produce monstruos” can mean either “The dream” or “the sleep” of reason produces monsters.” Goya explicates the caption with the words, “La fantasia abandonada de la razon, produce monstruos imposibles: unida con ella, es madre de las artes y origen de sus maravillas.” (“Imagination abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters: united with her, she is the mother of arts and the origin of their marvels”). In the present situation, one can say that reason and the unconscious (fantasy) must be brought closer together.

<sup>15</sup> Personal communication from Antjie Krog, author of *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* (Johannesburg: Random House, 1998).

## DYING IN

• *Peter Dale Scott*

dying on the grass  
in front of the chancellor's building  
for Charlie Schwartz's anti-weapons protest

brings back confused  
memories of the wartime sixties  
hitting the dirt before we realized

these were just wooden bullets  
and then walking back through tear gas  
to teach a class

lying here  
and watching the neutral passers-by  
scale the vertical asphalt

I feel neither  
the old embarrassment at being  
at right angles to most people

with brief-cases  
nor, and this is the spooky part  
that steam of comprehending anger

only the warm  
smell of the grass beside my nose  
saying, *come back here every now and then*

## Nations, Populations, Language

• *Leigh Swigart*

When we consider incidents of mass violence in the 20th century, it becomes clear that they have taken place between groups of people whose primordial identities have become pitted against each other for a variety of reasons. An understanding of mass violence, and the responses that writers have made to it, thus requires a look at the place of nations, populations and languages—all of which may give rise to such primordial identities—in the creation of conflicts that result in widespread aggression.

### **The Relationships of Nations, Populations, and Languages**

Nations, populations, and languages represent groupings that are not coterminous. Peoples and languages clearly cross state borders, and nations may have within them a diversity of languages and peoples. This is obvious, but it must be stated outright for the benefit of an American audience, whose national ideology seems to equate these notions: *one country = one people = one language*. This ideology, in fact upheld by no official national policy, explains the discomfort felt by many Americans with a growing Hispanic population that will not give up one of its languages for the exclusive use of the other, the one usually associated with the American ethos—English.

This connection between language and nation is not confined to the United States, of course. Language has often been used to create or promote a feeling of nationhood and to unite disparate peoples within borders. An example is China, two of whose principal “dialects” are in fact mutually unintelligible languages—Cantonese and Mandarin—but which are united by a single written language



system. This is possible because the Chinese alphabet is based not on sound units represented by letters—like the Roman and Arabic alphabets—but on ideas represented by ideographs.

The imposition of certain languages or varieties of languages as official ones also seeks to unify those within borders, although this process almost inevitably alienates some sector of the population—whether it is a language group whose language was not chosen as the official one or a group that has not had access to education in the official language. This is particularly relevant in post-colonial situations where foreign languages have become the official tongues of education and state.

The *one country = one language* equation also breaks down when one looks outside of a single nation. There are obviously citizens of different nations who speak the same language, or at least mutually intelligible dialects of the same language—like the US, Britain, India, and South Africa. In some cases, because peoples are divided by national borders, these languages in fact come to be thought of as distinct, thus bolstering the separate national identities with which they are associated. One example is that of the Norwegian and Swedish languages, or Urdu in Pakistan and Hindi in India. The separateness of the nations can subsequently promote a divergence in the languages, as they develop along separate tracks over time.

All of these examples illustrate the lack of exact overlap among nations, populations, and languages that we find in the world today. This very lack of overlap can be both the source and result of conflict, the kind of conflict that can lead at times to mass violence. Thus we find that the conflict in the Middle East is a tangled web of these three entities, where disjunctures between borders,

ethnolinguistic groups, religious groups, and ideologies feed on each other and also feed the violence.

### Language

How do writers choose which language they will write in, if they in fact have a choice, and what are the implications of their choices? For such choices are not neutral. An obvious example is that of Dante, who chose to write *The Divine Comedy* in his native language, the Italian of 14th century Florence instead of the expected Latin. This action resulted in a new status for the Italian language and furthermore privileged his Tuscan dialect so that it became the basis of modern standard Italian.

The Arabic language provides another interesting example, being a classic case of what sociolinguists call “diglossia”—the coexistence of a high and low variety of a language, the first being used for official, educational and state functions and therefore assigned a high status, the second confined for use in all kinds of everyday verbal interactions and consequently assigned a lower status. Taha Muhammad Ali writes his poetry in a carefully selected mixture of *Fusha*, classical Arabic or “high Arabic,” and the vernacular Arabic spoken in his home region, an unusual and provocative choice. This choice is “quietly subversive,” as Gabriel Levin remarks in his introduction to Ali’s English language edition. What does Ali’s choice of language tell us, the reader? And what might its influence be on the very status of his native vernacular?

What does the choice of an African writer to publish in French or English, instead of an indigenous African language, tell us? Boris Diop has recently decided to move away from writing in French toward his native Wolof, as described in “Quand la Plume Trahit ta Bouche”

(Courrier International No. 646, March 20-26, 2003.) He has chosen to abandon a paternalistic language to re-embrace a maternal one, *lakk bi mu nàmp* as they say in Wolof, “the language he was nursed on.”

The choice of language in Antjie Krog’s *Country of My Skull* raises different questions. Despite the multiplicity of languages used for testimony in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), her excerpts of testimony are all in English, and the pragmatic mechanisms for how everyone involved in this process understood each other are almost invisible in the text. The exception is her inclusion in the book of the original verbatim Afrikaans testimony by members of special forces units that committed atrocities, with the English translation shown in parentheses. What does this choice to highlight Afrikaans and hide Zulu, Tswana, or other South African languages communicate to the reader of her book? Does the Afrikaans language become inextricably linked, especially in the mind of the non-South African reader, with violence and despicable acts? What did the author intend through this linguistic selectivity? What does it tell us, the reader, about what the author is grappling with in terms of her own language and identity?

Krog’s poetry, much of it in Afrikaans, raises additional questions of language choice in response to violence and atrocity. Krog discusses the use of her native Afrikaans in her poetry. She explores what it means to write in the language of the oppressor, to use that language as a tool of opposition, and to imbue the language with new meanings.

This leads to yet another issue about language, this time “language with a big L.” By this is meant not one of the thousands of languages with a lowercase l, each its own expression of the unique human capacity for languages, each a system of by and large arbitrary

symbols that by convention convey meaning to its speakers. It is instead Language, a channel of communication that we all use, the innate human capacity itself. Krog eloquently writes of the challenge of putting into Language—any language—the experiences that victims or perpetrators of apartheid have lived through. How do victims of mass violence manage to put their experiences into spoken words? How do writers manage to put the experiences of these victims into words on the page? And what does this process of rendering into Language these experiences *do*, if anything, for societies in the aftermath of mass violence? As Krog writes in *Country of My Skull*, “We tell stories not to die of life.”

### Translation

Talk of language leads to questions of translation. In order that literature responding to mass violence be widely read, it must often undergo translation. Yet this very necessary and mundane act in a highly multilingual world is not simple and straightforward, and may even be controversial. Some would call it impossible that the thoughts, ideas, and cadences of the original piece of literature—written in a particular language—ever be adequately rendered into another language.

The process of translation furthermore goes beyond the level of language itself to the level of experience. Can the eye, mind and heart of one person ever be truly communicated to another person? Can someone giving testimony at the TRC ever communicate to even a native speaker of the same language the real sense of what was suffered, the sense of loss, or the sense of guilt and remorse? Can there really ever be a translation of experience between individuals so that the knowledge of certain events is shared and understood in all its complexity?

## Audience

A final question to be raised in regard to the kind of literature being examined in this conference is that of its audience. This literature is written as a response to mass violence, but *who* exactly is it being written for? Does it reach the people who have suffered the most in situations of violence? What about the illiterate, many of whom are women, the elderly, and the marginalized, groups that may also be targeted in civil conflicts? Even if these sectors of the population are literate, do they have a habit of reading “literature” at all, or is their reading instead confined to sacred texts?

Does this literature then become a product simply for elite consumption? Does literature responding to mass violence become a de-nationalized, de-ethnicized, and de-politicized product in order to sell?

Or if such literature is written in a language that is *not* a “world language”—Ali’s spoken Palestinian Arabic or Diop’s Wolof—what are the implications of these choices for audience? Are they inevitably small? Is dissemination of the literature unavoidably narrow?

In conclusion, these are just a few of the questions that may arise as we contemplate the presentations of Antjie Krog, and Taha Muhammad Ali. They will focus on very different parts of the world and manifestations of mass violence—South Africa and Palestine—but the place of nations, populations, and languages in all of these situations has been a principal determinant in the tragic events described by these writers.

## Sabha’s Rope

• *Taha Muhammad Ali*

Do you remember, Abu Muhammad,  
do you remember when Sabha,  
our neighbor Abu Hashem’s cow,  
swallowed the rope?

Do you remember how,  
as she was dying,  
they slaughtered her,  
and, by lamp light,  
flayed her and then,  
bit by bit, with axes,  
hacked her into pieces?

Um Hashem  
sent up her wailing,  
as the knives sliced  
away at Sabha,  
and her daughter wept.  
Everyone grieved,  
and everyone lent a hand,  
insisting, “We’ll share the burden.  
We’ll manage.”

The villagers  
rushed together,  
shoulder to shoulder,  
without exception  
to buy Sabha’s meat!  
Do you remember—  
or have you fallen asleep?

No, I'm awake,  
of course I remember,  
and I remember, too,  
that no one ever  
tasted a piece of that meat!

It was grilled,  
fried, cooked,  
and minced for chop meat,  
but no one ate it!  
The people felt  
they were slicing into flesh  
fresh from a cadaver,  
as though it were Abu Hashem's body,  
or that of his family,  
that was being carved.  
Men and women turned in disgust  
and threw it away.

For a while,  
the village was choked  
in a muted sort of grief,  
like Abu Hashem's hoarse voice,  
and green as Sabha's eyes.  
Don't you see, Abu Muhammad,  
our village was pleasant.  
It's true, there were hard times,  
but the bitterness was good,  
like chicory,  
or better!  
You see what I mean . . .  
wasn't it pleasant?

—Pleasant?!  
Ha! . . .  
Pleasant, he says, . . . pleasant.  
Let me tell you,  
by the book of Almighty Allah,  
I swear to you,  
I was prepared,  
in fact I would have preferred,  
and with all my heart I would have agreed,  
to swallow a rope longer than Sabha's,  
if only  
we could have stayed in our village.

•*Translated from the Arabic by Peter Cole, Yahya Hejazi, and Gabriel Levin.*

## Nations, Populations, Language

• *Antjie Krog*

My mother tongue is Afrikaans. Afrikaans gave the world the word “Apartheid”—but also the word ‘kopje’. Afrikaans carries the name of the continent, yet a country was set alight in protest against it. Afrikaans is a hybrid language, yet it claimed the utmost of purity. Arabic texts form the first evidence of written Afrikaans, yet those very speakers were later classified not white enough to qualify as citizens. Afrikaans is spoken by a majority of speakers of colour, yet has been claimed as the single most important identity-forming characteristic of white Afrikaners.

Permit me a short overview of the history of Afrikaans and its relation to Afrikaners before responding to the specific points proposed for discussion by Mark Sanders. Afrikaans is a language which has produced writers of international calibre such as André P. Brink and Breyten Breytenbach. It was also the language of the father in the family of J. M. Coetzee and a language he often refers to in his work, particularly in *Youth*. Afrikaans is a young language. Its origin is Dutch brought to the south of Africa in 1652. Mixed with the language of Cape Malay slaves and indigenous inhabitants like the Khoi-San, Xhosa, and Zulu, the language became a hybrid in the isolated outstretched plains of southern Africa, a bastard language. The educated Dutch of 1750 tried to keep it pure and referred to this new hybrid as Kitchen Dutch.

There were four crucial moments in the history of Afrikaans: First, in August 1875 a group of men decided to call themselves

Die genootskap van Regte Afrikaners—the Foundation of Real Afrikaners. They saw themselves coining this wild dialect into a respectable grammatical structure and set the tone that will hold sway in debates about the Afrikaans language for many years to come—that is, the difference between the ‘real’ speakers in contrast to the ‘not-real,’ speakers. Afrikaans became the exclusive domain of its ‘real speakers’—that is, the white Afrikaans speakers. For many years the question was debated by political prisoners on Robben Island: what to do with the Boere’s or Afrikaner’s language? Should the language be used to punish them, or should the language be used as a bargaining chip in negotiations?

The second crucial moment was in 1905, after the Anglo-Boer war, when a poet wrote a short poem about a farmer returning to his burnt-down farmstead. He has lost his family in the British concentration camps, it was night and cold and dark.

Oh cold is the slight wind and lean  
And gleaming in the dim light and bare  
as vast as the mercy of God  
lies the veld in starlight and shade.  
And high on the ridges  
spreading among burnt patches  
the seed grass is moving  
like beckoning hands. (first stanza)

This poem by Eugene Marais (“Winternag,” or “Winter Night”) proved that Afrikaans was a language capable of expressing the deepest thoughts in the heart of humanity. In 1923 Afrikaans was recognised as a language in its own right and instituted in schools

instead of Dutch. As the only official language next to English, all South Africans were forced to speak it. When the Afrikaners took power in 1948, Afrikaans was the language of the rulers who coined apartheid and separate development—the language of violent separation and difference; the language classifying you into a second-rate citizen; the language of the police and the army.

The third crucial moment was June 16, 1976, when thousands of children gathered in Soweto (the black township outside of Johannesburg) in peaceful protest against the law making Afrikaans the language of instruction and its intended effects. They were singing songs, chanting slogans and holding up placards some of which read: Down with Afrikaans; Blacks are not Dustbins—Afrikaans stinks; Afrikaans is Tribal Language; Bantu Education—To Hell With It. Instinctively the black youth knew—if you want to strike at the heart of apartheid, you have to target Afrikaans.

A white policeman drew his revolver. Pandemonium. Three hundred and sixty children were left dead. Thousands left South Africa to join the ranks of liberation movements in exile.

The fourth crucial moment was in 1994 when Afrikaans lost its exclusivity as the only official language other than English in South Africa. Our new constitution recognises all eleven South African languages as official languages, which meant that Afrikaans suddenly had to share its space with nine other African languages. This created a stream of complaints among Afrikaners—for the past 10 years literally not a day has gone by without a letter somewhere complaining about the threatened position of Afrikaans.

There are of course many sides to this story and many nuances, but these are more or less the broad lines.

Now let me respond to some of the points raised by Mark Sanders.

*How does the writer respond when a specific language is closely tied to a collective identity (national, ethnic, for instance)? Can you choose a language?*

I would like to draw a distinction between a writer and a poet. One is a poet because of sound; the sound at the root of your tongue, at the bed of your heart, in the slipstream of your soul. You cannot choose it because sound is the origin of poetry.

to awake one morning into sound  
with the antennae of vowel and consonant and diphthong  
to calibrate with delicate care the subtlest  
movement of light and loss in sound

to find yourself suddenly kneeling at the audible  
palpable outline of a word — searching  
for that precise moment in which  
a poetic line expands in air

when the meaning of a word yields, slips  
and then surrenders into tone — from then  
the blood yearns for that infinite pitch of a word  
because: the only truth stands skinned in sound

the poet writes poetry with her tongue  
yes, she breathes deeply with her ear.  
(Antjie Krog “Poet Becoming”)

This inner ear often develops from the first songs, nursery rhymes and stories as learnt from the mother’s tongue. In other words, you are inclined towards writing poetry and write your first clumsy poems long before you have made any rational decision about your identity or the agony of your mother’s tongue or the baggage of your father’s tongue. Can a writer ‘choose’ a language? My answer would be: maybe a writer can, but a poet not.

But what you can choose, however, is the language or languages you publish in. More about that later.

It remains a tightrope when one writes in the language of violent and oppressive rulers. On the one hand you don’t want to be read or praised or claimed by them, you want nothing to do with them, you wish you could write in another language. On the other hand you have the kind of access to their ears which those suffering their violence can never have. You can hurt them in a way the oppressed never can. This manifested prominently in Afrikaans. Some started writing in such difficult, layered, harsh, and vulgar ways that the majority of readers couldn’t read them and there was talk about an estrangement between readers and writers. At the same time some writers expressed in every available forum their criticism. I remember I had two drawers in my desk: one overflowing with anti-apartheid lectures, papers, letters, articles, petitions—and another one with a few spare, difficult, concentrated poems.

There was a lot of criticism against those vocal in their resistance. Politics is bad for poetry, we were told. We were accused of selling out the essence of art to political ideologies, of turning art for art’s sake into art for politics’ sake, of neglecting the universality of art for

the sake of politics, for jumping on the anti-apartheid bandwagon, for trying to curry favour with the enemy, with blacks, with overseas anti-apartheid sentiments in a betrayal of our own people. The list was endless. In response we sneered at universality, at poets who wanted to be read after they were dead. We argued that it was better to write a poem that could help someone through three minutes of the worst moments of her life than to try and write a poem reeking of privilege, whining about loneliness. We refused to use death as a metaphor.

We moved to smaller backyard publishing houses where the income from our work was used to publish black writers. We turned prizes down or publicly donated the money to organisations assisting black readers and writers. We participated in rallies, we wrote in many languages, we learned to perform poetry instead of simply reading it, we have learned to respect oral work and enjoy the skill of oral poets.

*Under what circumstances does it become problematic to continue writing/ performing in a particular language, and preferable, even, to writel perform in another language?*

It is problematic to write in a language which has become the language of atrocities, when parts of it have died off, when the language has lost its humanity and become an armoured language. During the hearings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission all the victims testified in their mother tongues, but whenever they conveyed orders that had been barked out to them, the phrasing was in Afrikaans. The words used to humiliate, all the orders given to kill, belonged to the language of my heart. At the hearings many of the victims faithfully reproduced these parts of

their stories in Afrikaans as proof of the bloody fingerprints upon them. For four years, often the only Afrikaans heard in the halls of the Truth Commission hearings were words like *Hou jou bek* (Shut your trap), *Jy gaan kak* (You're going to get it), *Skiet hulle* (Shoot them), *meid* (Black bitch), *kaffer* (kaffir), and so forth.

It made me ask questions about the literature in my language. Is the writer not attuned to the unheard? Shouldn't the writer pick up what is happening? Where are the poems that match the horror experienced by the victims? Where is the novel explaining how ordinary people turn into brutal killers? I learn to live by poetry. Literature teaches me how to live. Why was I, and many others, shocked by the testimonies of the victims? Has my literature failed me? I put my own volumes next to the TRC report and, although I have been regarded as being too political a poet, what I had written was pathetic in the face of history. For this I have no excuse or explanation.

Fortunately I also have another memory. During the mid eighties, under quite dangerous circumstances, I was asked to take part in a Free Mandela rally. I agonised for days about what language to use. If I were to use Afrikaans I might find an audience of hundreds of youths turning their anger-against-the-oppressor towards me as the only visible Afrikaner target. On the other hand I wanted to make the point that it is precisely as an Afrikaner that I was standing there.

When I took the megaphone that day it was in a kind of disbelief. I stammered the first line. The main poet came and stood next to me, he shouted the first verse loudly and repeated it. I got the idea and yelled the first verse into the megaphone, my voice from another



planet. There was loud cheering. The main poet repeated the first line and I repeated it and the cheering doubled. By the third verse the crowd joined me rhythmically in Afrikaans: *Die vuus is Mandéla! Mandéla in Máokeng* (This fist is Mandela!) From there the poem took on a life of its own. Mandela was among us. Mandela in a coat—we saw him, we heard him stirring in the sirens, we sat with him behind the school desks, we saw his tracks in the dusty streets of the township, Mandela breathed among us, he ate in the outbuildings, he raised his fist in the prisons. From the dusty winds blowing across the plains, he would come to us and set us free. People jumped: Thaaa! Tha-thaa!: *Die vuus is Mandéla!* a mixture of Afrikaans and Sesotho. People furiously toyi-toyied, which then turned into an angry thumping dance in which everyone aimed imaginary AK-47's at the faces of the policemen, who, not to be outdone, were brandishing their own weapons across the fence.

Therefore, my own response to being a poet in a language linked to oppression and violence is to deliberately *stay* in that language, to open up spaces there, to expand the vocabulary, to undermine the official tone and grammar and syntax, to bring into that language the unheard. So I deliberately set out to find words for that silence, to pitch my white voice among black and coloured accents, sentiments, perspectives, to force the language of power to hear the unheard—not as my own inventions, but as things against which I myself as a writer have to answer for and position myself about.

I want to conclude this part with another anecdote. My last poetry volume, *Colour Never Comes Alone*, uses the word 'humane' and 'humanness.'—When it was reviewed in Holland by a panel on television, one panelist remarked how that word should actually

not be used because it has no meaning any more. Then another said but maybe that is precisely the reason why it should be used in South Africa and Africa. A third remarked that, if you read carefully, the whole volume is trying to give meaning to that word; and a fourth said: maybe we should all think about it: what happens in any language in any country when the word "humane" has lost its meaning?

*What is the role of translation, multilingual works, and so forth in responding to a history of violence that may be intimately connected with language and linguistic division?*

When your language is spoken by the powerful in your country, stay there, use it. That is the easy part. The difficult part is what do you do when your language has no power, or has lost it. What do you do when your language has become a cul-de-sac? When you are stuck there without ever able to form part of your broader community.

After 1994 I deeply wanted to become part of the broader debates, experiences, and interactions of my country. But English was the language where it all took place. For many years I felt ashamed of this desire to be read in English, as if I was selling out, betraying something, or revealing a shameful desire . . . and I was and still am not clear how much of it had to do with a resistance to colonization, giving in to power, being owned, accepted by the colonizer's hand—because English has become the door to the Father, if you know what I mean.

But was I interested in the Father?

No, I was not. I simply wanted to be read by people whom I like, and some of them happen not to know Afrikaans. So I got split. I write poetry in Afrikaans, I write prose in Afrikaans then translate myself into English. I earn my keep by English prose and earn my oxygen with Afrikaans poetry. I write everything first in Afrikaans and then translate it. In Afrikaans I have access to an enormous organ, in English I tinkle on a doll's piano.

As I find myself in translating mode most of the time in my life I suddenly became aware of the many other voices not in translation. In fact I became obsessed with translation. I see translation as essential for people to live together. We have to translate each other to ourselves. Through translation we recognise the fact that everybody has a heart filled with longing and loneliness; through translation we transform our behaviour into living a life acknowledging that we have no right to destroy another human being.

Let me share two translation experiences with you. Nelson Mandela wanted his autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom* to be translated into all the other 10 official South African languages. I was asked to do the Afrikaans translation.

It was a highly interesting project of which I will cite only one example: the word "African." Who and what is an African? Mandela uses the word "African" quite often in his book, but in a rather inconsistent way: at the beginning "African" means only Thembu, then Xhosa, and later on "African" refers to everybody who is black. During the Treason Trial he uses the word "African" for anybody who is not white, and while on Robben Island he told one of the Afrikaner warders that he was an African.

Although interpretation is part of a translator's work, I decided not to try and work out what he meant but to keep his own emotional enlargement of the concept of the word. But the biggest obstacle was the form of the word itself.

Of course the word "Afrikaan" is used in Afrikaans, but as a pronoun it causes real problems. A man from America is an "Amerikaanse man" or an "Amerikaner". A man from Africa ought to be an "Afrikaanse man" or an "Afrikaner", but white Afrikaans speakers had awarded themselves that title centuries ago. In contrast to what appears in German or Dutch translations, Mandela can now not be an "Afrikaansche" or "Afrikanische man"—unless of course a serious rethink and broadening of the scope of the term is on the cards! The alternative is to use "Afrikaan man" and "Afrikaan", even if it sounds grammatically incorrect. I phoned the people compiling the Afrikaans dictionary: Keep it like that, they recommended, Afrikaans speakers have to get used to that word some time or another.

Mandela forced Afrikaans to shed its tone of exclusion, to find in it a space with a name for all South Africans. Its lack of power made Afrikaans vulnerable, forcing it to find its human face. Translation opened up the rusted ribcage of Afrikaans, so for me it was very moving to see how the word "Afrikaan" for the first time found its balance in a paragraph and rigged its sails to the winds of change:

"n Afrikaan kind word gebore in 'n Afrikaan hospitaal . . . (An African child will be born in an African hospital, will go home in an African bus, will grow up in an African township and attend an African school . . .)

My people deeply resent the English, but they have always respected their poetry. I thought it high time to translate poetry from all the African languages into Afrikaans to fill that silence I was talking about. It was the single most rewarding thing I ever did in my life. Let me conclude with one remark about how translation is the only way one can learn about oneself in the world.

Xhosa and Zulu are of the first black languages that named whites in southern Africa. The first thing that struck them about whites was their blue eyes. So some of the earliest names for whites in African poetry were: *They-through-whose-eyes-the-wind-blows*, *They-whose-hair-washes-down-from-their-heads*.

After the Zulus had their first meetings with whites standing with their backs to the sun, they called whites *they-through-whose-ears-the-sun-shines*; the *pale-ears*. The physical appearance of whites led to a wide variety of nouns. Other than *red-cats* (lynxes) and *red-stomachs*, whites are also known as *those-whose-eyes-gitter-as-if-wild-rumours-had-been-whispered-into-them*. In the northern parts of the country whites are called: *they-whose-faces-crack-like-earthen-jugs*, *they-whose-noses-cast-shadows-across-their-faces*, *they-whose-beards-grow-like-feathers-but-shed-suddenly*, *they-who-point-with-sticks-from-which-fire-and-lightning-bursts*.

Thereafter the origins of whites started playing a role in their naming: *they-who-live-on-boats*, *they-who-come-over-the-water-like-swallows*, *they-who-live-where-it-is-always-wet*. As black people came into contact with a greater variety of white people, they started to differentiate between them. The English became known as *they-who-lisp*, or the *fish-eaters*—the Dutch as the *pig-eaters*.

Gradually the original inhabitants of southern Africa started gauging the nature of white people. Whites were called: *they-who-speak-to-others-as-if-they-are-bundles-of-washing*, *they-who-just-speak-their-own-language*, *blood spillers*, *they-who-cut-the-glands-from-the-meat-because-they-think-it-affects-the-taste-but-do-not-realise-it-is-the-truth-that-lies-so-bitterly-on-their-tongues*, *latecomers-who-soil-the-water-as-they-grab-everything-for-themselves*, *those-who-are-unable-to-share*.

If it wasn't for poets writing in and sticking to their own languages, as well as translators, we wouldn't have known how deeply we influence languages not our own.

## Country of grief and grace

• *Antjie Krog*

(a)

between you and me  
how desperately  
how it aches  
how desperately it aches between you and me

so much hurt for truth  
so much destruction  
so little left for survival

where do we go from here

your voice slung  
in anger  
over the solid cold length of our past

how long does it take  
for a voice  
to reach another

in this country held bleeding between us

(b)

in the beginning is seeing  
seeing for ages  
filling the head with ash  
no air  
no tendril  
now to seeing speaking is added  
and the eye plunges into the wounds of anger  
seizing the surge of language by its soft bare skull  
hear oh hear  
the voices all the voices of the land  
all baptized in syllables of blood and belonging  
this country belongs to the voices of those who live in it  
this landscape lies at the feet at last  
of the stories of saffron and amber  
angel hair and barbs  
dew and hay and hurt

(c)

speechless I stand  
whence will words now come?  
for us the doers  
the hesitant  
we who hang quivering and ill  
from this soundless space of an Afrikaner past?  
what does one say?  
what the hell does one do  
with this load of decrowned skeletons origins shame and ash  
the country of my conscience  
is disappearing forever like a sheet in the dark

(e)

deepest heart of my heart  
heart that can only come from this soil  
brave  
with its teeth firmly in the jugular of the only truth that matters  
and that heart is black  
I belong to that blinding black African heart  
my throat bloats with tears  
my pen falls to the floor  
I blubber behind my hand  
for one brief shimmering moment this country  
this country is also truly mine

and my heart is on its feet

(f)

because of you  
this country no longer lies  
between us but within

it breathes becalmed  
after being wounded  
in its wondrous throat

in the cradle of my skull  
it sings it ignites  
my tongue my inner ear the cavity of heart  
shudders towards the outline  
new in soft intimate clicks and gutturals

I am changed for ever I want to say  
forgive me  
forgive me  
forgive me

you whom I have wronged, please  
take me

with you

(g)

this body bereft  
this blind tortured throat

the price of this country of death  
is the size of a heart

grief comes so lonely  
as the voices of the anguished drown on the wind

you do not lie down  
you open up a pathway with slow sad steps  
you cut me loose

into light—lovelier, lighter and braver than song  
may I hold you my sister  
in this warm fragile unfolding of the word humane

## Reparation and Translation: Primo Levi's “Letters from Germans”

• *Mark Sanders*

When thinking about reparations it is usual to think of them as being made to a victim by a perpetrator.<sup>1</sup> With the publication of the last volumes of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report in South Africa in 2003, the debate revolved around who ought to pay reparations to the victims of apartheid, and how much—but it was never in doubt that it was the victims who would be paid. The most salient precedent may be the reparations—or *Wiedergutmachung*—to Israel agreed to by Germany in 1952. When we think about reparations in the narrow sense, then, responsibility clearly runs in a line from the author to the object of violence. Once we think of reparation in a general sense, though, can reparation be made by a victim to a perpetrator? And in what form? Would making such reparation be responsible? Would it be a responsible response to a legacy of violence?

An account of reparation not limited by a juridico-legal context can be drawn from the work of Melanie Klein, whose psychoanalytic theories, developed in the context of child analysis, elaborated those of Freud. In the 1930s, Klein began to use the term “reparation” (*Wiedergutmachung*; the same term used in German for post-World War I and Holocaust reparations) to describe the tendency of the human infant to attempt to “make good” symbolically the destruction that it has, in phantasy, inflicted on the mother's body. Feelings of guilt and fear of retribution accompany the tendency to undertake repair (*Wiederherstellung*) of the phantasied damage it has

done. (See Klein, *The Psycho-Analysis of Children*, “Love, Guilt and Reparation.”) This is at the core of Klein’s account of the formation of the super-ego, of the self as an ethical agent. Developing Klein philosophically, we can say that the self emerges with responsibility; the self is, in effect, the ethical agent (see Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* 14). What is most important is that it is one’s *violence* and response to it that are the conditions of possibility for ethical agency.

It is thus conceivable, from a psychoanalytic point of view, that reparation can be made by a victim to a perpetrator (or bystander: Levi’s “those”) even when the victim is in no position to have inflicted violence in ways matching that inflicted on him or her. This is not a capitulation: reparation implies the formation of the self; it is through responsibility that the “humanity” of the agent is constituted. When the dynamic involves, as it does (and perhaps must), symbolic violence and reparation-restoration (*Wiedergutmachung-Wiederherstellung*), literature has a special role. As much as witnessing atrocity and making it known, the reparation undertaken by the victim is a literary response to violence. Both elements can be observed in the writing of Primo Levi; *Survival in Auschwitz* (1958) famously bears witness. Here I concentrate on how, for the one who has returned and described the violence inflicted on him and others, witnessing can join with the making of reparation. For Levi this occurs in *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), his last book, in the chapter entitled “Letters from Germans.”

The chapter in fact begins not with letters from Germans but with a letter *to* Germans (or to *the* Germans). Violence is implicated in a larger crisis of address. In the preface to *The Drowned and the Saved* Levi tells us about how even those close to him refused to understand, believe, or even listen to his stories about Auschwitz

(*Drowned* 12). In more traditional terms, the “beloved” refuses to listen. The implied reader of the book (*Survival in Auschwitz* as well as those that follow) makes it possible to restore the pole of alterity vital to the self that Dori Laub in his and Shoshana Felman’s book on *Testimony* calls the “internal ‘thou’” (85). In “Letters from Germans,” the final chapter of *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi tells us that the implied reader will always have been German. When he heard, “around 1959,” that *Survival in Auschwitz* was to be translated into German, he tells us, he “felt overwhelmed by the violent and new emotion of having won a battle” (*Drowned* 168). This violent emotion brings about, or is at least accompanied by, a new sense of his implied reader, the one whom he addresses out of, and with, a triumphant violence. This emotion is so overwhelming, so invasive (*mi sentii invadere* [*Opere* 2:1124]) that it retroactively alters his interior object-world to the extent that his understanding of whom his book is for is revised:

In fact, I had written those pages without a specific recipient in mind . . . Yes, I had written the book in Italian, for Italians, for my children, for those who did not know, those who were not yet born, those who, willing or not, had assented to the offense; but its true recipients, those against whom the book was aimed like a gun were they, the Germans. Now the gun was loaded. (*Drowned* 168)

He has discovered the truth of his book—the Germans are the “true recipients” (*destinatari veri* [*Opere* 2:1125])—and that truth is violence.<sup>2</sup> The book is a loaded gun, now aimed at the Germans to coerce them: “Before they had been oppressors or indifferent spectators, now they would be readers: I would corner them, tie them before a mirror” (*Drowned* 168). The violence of these images

is quickly disavowed and displaced; it is “the hour of colloquy. I was not interested in revenge . . . My task was to understand them.” Levi is “satisfied intimately” with the flawed “modern morality” or “sacred performance” (*sacra rappresentazione* [*Opere* 2:1125]) of Nuremberg, and inwardly content that the “very just” hangings be carried out “by others, professionals.” Although criminal judgment and capital punishment are left to others, traces of sadism remain in the desire to understand (see Klein on the knowledge-drive [*Wisstrieb*]). If the book is a gun, violence will be done, will have been done, in the act of address. That means that, in order to be responsible (and ultimately restore the “internal ‘thou’” as addressee), reparation has to be made; good-making has to take place in relation to the object of violence. The figure of the addressee must be not subject to violence—or subject to violence for which reparation cannot be made.

The way in which this takes place is very interesting, and shows the fundamental role of translation in literary responses to violence. According to Levi, “experience then taught me that translation and compromise are synonymous” (*Drowned* 172). In the same way, Levi’s German translator functions for him as a compromise figure. “[A]n anomalous German,” he had studied in Italy, and during the war joined the Italian partisans fighting the Fascists: “He had no doubts, he felt more Italian than German, a Partisan and not a Nazi” (*Drowned* 170). Because of this partition of identity—the Partisan (*partigiano*) can become Levi’s partner (*partner*) (*Opere* 2:1128)—the translator can take the place of the initially imagined German reader for whom Levi cannot write: because not only does he not write in German, but he wants to kill or torture that reader. The impulse to do violence conflicts with, or is complicit with, the attempt to understand the Germans. Because he can be partitioned, and can partition himself, be Italian (or more Italian than German),

the translator can represent the German reader who has been repaired. The German is remade as Italian, just as he remakes Levi’s book in German as *Ist das ein Mensch?*<sup>3</sup> Without this mediation, Levi’s mistrust and “fear” at the news of the German translation contract (*Drowned* 170)—analyzable in Kleinian terms as fear of retribution—would presumably have been too strong to allow for the project to unfold as it did.

This sense is reinforced by a second crisis of address recorded in the chapter. When asked to write a preface to the German edition, he cannot do so: “I hesitated, then I refused. I had a feeling of confused reluctance, repugnance, an emotional block that choked off the flow of ideas and words *scrivere*,” (*Drowned* 173). He cannot pass judgment, and, more basically, cannot address “the German people” in the second person. There is a solution. He can address his “partner,” to whom he has been exchanging letters for a year, in the second person (albeit the polite *Lei*); so a compromise is reached and a decision made to attach as the book’s preface Levi’s letter to his translator marking the end of their collaboration.

The preface is packed with notable formulations about how Levi imagines his relation to Germans. The most interesting for my argument is Levi’s declaration that: “I never harbored hatred for the German people. And if I had felt that way, I would be cured of it after having known you” (*Drowned* 174). Psychoanalysis helps one to understand things when the work of the intellect is bound up with mental suffering. As the book makes its way into one language from another, hatred is admitted under negation—“never harbored hatred”/ “*Non ho mai nutrito odio*”/ “*nie gehasst*” (*Opere* 2:1130/ *Ist das ein Mensch?* 8), not only is the German or German people repaired and freed from destructive affect, but, through the figure of



the translator, Levi himself considers himself restored: “I would be cured of it” / “*sarei guarito*” / “*davon geheilt*”—“after having known you.”

This repair through mediation is a precondition for addressing the German people. It sets in motion the “echo” that he seeks from Germany, where the prefatory letter “is read as an integral part of the text” (*Drowned* 175). The part is integrated. The part-object is internalized. The partial identification of the translator becomes acceptable to German readers. The way is open for “Letters from Germans.” These say “yes” even when they say no; they accept even when they deny. But this is not as important as the fact that the translation allows Levi to do violence and to make good for it. The making of reparation must be open to the victim too. A complex figuring is required—a literary response to violence—when the violence is not just that inflicted on oneself by another, but is also one’s own. Translation is, in this case, what is needed to bring victim and perpetrator together (again), to (re)enact violence and reparation. The existence of one’s self—of one’s self as ethical agent—depends on its success. This will (or won’t find) its own way of happening. It depends on happenstance.<sup>4</sup> For Levi, the collaboration with Heinz Riedt was a felicitous accident; it is entirely conceivable that, without Riedt being the particular translator assigned by Fischer to *Survival in Auschwitz*, the translation would never have meant to Levi what it had come to mean once he came to write his last book.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of my argument, I pass over the complications introduced by practical measures that involve defining classes of perpetrators and victims, and identify representatives of those classes.

<sup>2</sup> German is the language in which he dreams at night of the encounter with the “others” (*Periodic Table* 215).

<sup>3</sup> The original Italian title of *Survival in Auschwitz* was *Se questo è un uomo*. An earlier English translation appeared under the title *If This is a Man*.

<sup>4</sup> Such are the circumstances described by Levi in the “Vanadium” chapter of *The Periodic Table* (1975). In 1967, six years after the publication of *Ist das ein Mensch?*, in the course of business correspondence with a German chemical firm, Levi receives letters, quite by chance, from the chemist who supervised the IG Farben laboratory at Auschwitz where Levi was a slave laborer. A personal exchange of letters ensues between Levi and the chemist, who is given the name Dr. Müller. Having persuaded a reluctant Levi to meet him on the Italian riviera, Müller, evidently in ill health, dies before he can leave Germany. As described in *The Periodic Table*, the chance encounter and ensuing correspondence tacitly repeat what had taken place between Levi and his German translator nearly a decade before. The desire for an encounter will have been “met only in part [*solo in parte*]” by letters from Levi’s German readers; like his translator, who, so to say, is part German and part Italian, those letters are a compromise. Levi’s desire is for a face-to-face meeting. Although he does not seek to “take . . . revenge,” there is still a problem: as Levi understands it, he will be unable to resist the tendency to undertake the reparation of the one whom he feels justified in making his “antagonist” and “adversary,” and with whom he ought to engage in “polemic”: “To find myself, man to man, having a reckoning with one of the ‘others’ had been my keenest and most constant desire since I had left the concentration camp. It had been met only in part by letters from my German readers: they did not satisfy me, those honest, generalized declarations of repentance and solidarity on the part of people I had never seen, whose other face I did not know, and who probably were not implicated except emotionally. The encounter I looked forward to with so much intensity as to dream of it (in German) at night, was an encounter with one of them down there, who had disposed of us, who had not looked into our eyes, as though we didn’t have eyes. Not to

take my revenge: I am not the Count of Montecristo. Only to reestablish the right proportions, and to say, ‘Well?’ If this Müller was my Müller, he was not the perfect antagonist, because in some way, perhaps only for a moment, he had felt pity, or just only a rudiment of professional solidarity. Perhaps even less . . . but the others around him had not even felt this. He was not the perfect antagonist: but, as is known, perfection belongs to narrated events, not to those we live” (215/ *Opere* 1:925-926). It thus takes an effort—an effort of and in writing—for Müller to be Levi’s “perfect antagonist,” for him to remain an “opponent” and not become a human being, which is the danger of the personal encounter: “I know myself: I do not possess any polemical skill, my opponent distracts me, he interests me more as a man than as an opponent, I take pains to listen and run the risk of believing him; indignation and the correct judgment return later, on the way downstairs, when they are no longer of any use. It was best for me to stick to writing [*continuare per lettera*]” (218/ *Opere* 1:928). In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi creates the impression that the encounter with Müller did not take place by chance, and that Hety S., with whom he corresponded from 1966-1982, was instrumental in finding him: “She . . . played an important role in helping me track down that Dr. Müller, the chemist in Auschwitz, later my supplier of chemical products and the penitent about whom I spoke in the Vanadium chapter in *The Periodic Table*. He had been a colleague of her ex-husband’s” (195). For further details on the role of Hety Schmitt Maass in locating Ferdinand Meyer, see Angier (581-582).

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## Finding Words in an Age of Violence

• Faith Smith

*You remember thinking while braiding your hair that you look a lot like your mother. Your mother who looked like your grandmother and her grandmother before her. Your mother had two rules for living. Always use your ten fingers, which in her parlance meant that you should be the best little cook and housekeeper who ever lived.*

*Your mother's second rule went along with the first. Never have sex before marriage, and even after you marry, you shouldn't say you enjoy it, or your husband won't respect you.*

*And writing? Writing was as forbidden as dark rouge on the cheeks or a first date before eighteen. It was an act of indolence, something to be done in a corner when you could have been learning to cook.*

*Are there women who both cook and write? Kitchen poets, they call them. They slip phrases into their stew and wrap meaning around their pork before frying it. They make narrative dumplings and stuff their daughters' mouths so they say nothing more.*

These are the words of Edwidge Danticat, a young Haitian-American writer who narrates the trauma of Haitian people in the bloody 1990s against the backdrop of earlier terrors: the slaughter of thousands of Haitians in 1937 by citizens of the Dominican Republic on the orders of President Balaguer, and the centuries of violence leading up to and following the Haitian Revolution (Trouillot and Fiehrer). In the fragment here, writing is deemed to

be inappropriate, unfeminine. The daughter's writing incurs violence from the family (stuffing the daughter's mouth so she will say nothing more), in order to ward off state-endorsed violence against writers.

The silencing by one generation of another is sometimes more passive: both Yigal Schwartz and Rachel Talshir remark that their parents never spoke of the Holocaust to them. Recall the end of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: "This is not a story to pass on." In her text, the stories of slavery are too painful to pass on to succeeding generations. They are *unspeakable*. We might then regard Yigal Schwartz, Rachel Talshir, Toni Morrison, and Edwidge Danticat as ignoring the edicts of previous generations, in order to attempt to undo violence, or to bear witness to the violence, or to provide a way to cope with the violence of their forebears.

Boris Diop speaks about responding to the violence of a constituency that is not "his own," and suggesting that his text is a sort of stop-gap, an emergency measure. In time, he suggested, the real novels commemorating 1994 will be written by the Rwandans themselves. In telling us that Rwandans begged him not to write a novel, but simply to "tell what happened," Diop also prompts us to think about the appropriate *form* for responding to violence—indeed, whether poetry and fiction are appropriate at all.

Antjie Krog also refers to writing in an "armored language," a language of "atrocities," of having to "struggle to put language in a place where it had never been before." In 1968, at the height of the Black Arts Movement in the United States, itself a response to the violence of the period, the poet Nikki Giovanni suggested that writing was inappropriate:

i wanted to write  
a poem  
that rhymes  
but revolution doesn't lend  
itself to be-bopping . . .

and it occurred to me  
maybe i shouldn't write  
at all  
but clean my gun  
and check my kerosene supply

perhaps these are not poetic  
times  
at all

Violence, then, is perhaps deserving of a more appropriate response than literature, one that is also aesthetically satisfying. Literature *as* violence. Under what conditions can we imagine literature as an appropriate response to violence?

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## A Personal Story

• *Rachel Talshir*

I want to tell you a little story, a private story; somehow it's about finding words in an age of violence.

My children, who are still young, tried to convince me not to go to Boston.

Ima, mummy, asked my older daughter - she is eighteen and her name is Dana - you really want to go to a place where people are going to talk all day about the Holocaust and other catastrophes?

Mummy, asked my younger daughter - she is nine and her name is Talia - do you like the Holocaust?

At first I was shocked because for me it is almost a crime to combine such words - "to like" and "the Holocaust."

Yali, my son—he is almost 14—smiled as if nothing strange had happened and said: Our Mummy must somehow learn to like the Holocaust. If not for the Holocaust she would not have been born and, of course, we would not have had the chance to exist.

Yali is right. My father was 21 in 1939 when he came all the way from Lodz to a small village in Boleros in order to convince all the Jewish families to send their children to a Zionist summer camp. He succeeded in convincing all of them except for one communist family. After the war he checked what had happened to the

communist family and heard that only one daughter survived. He wrote a letter to the communist girl, she replied. They met, they fell in love, and she was my mother, my children's grandmother.

My children were born after my mother died. They never met her sad smile, they never saw her lonely look. When I was a child we did not say a word about why our mummy was so sad and lonely. I don't remember my parents using the word Holocaust, *shoah* in Hebrew, and I can't remember if there was another word to express what they had been through. Maybe they said *sham* (there). Maybe they said *az* (then). But as far as I can remember they tried to seal their lips and to live as if nothing special had happened to them. When my mother died I was 20, and I can assure you that she really did her best to keep me far away from her past.

It took me more than 20 years to write my first novel about the Holocaust. I remember there were days I felt so frustrated because that mission of finding words and naming names seemed to be totally impossible. Instead of writing I began to hang around old people. My favorite victims were those who had emigrated from Eastern Europe. Have you ever heard about abuse of the elderly? I'm afraid that sometimes I really abused them.

Usually my old people were satisfied with me. They told me about horrors and heroism, they cooked gefilte fish and I ate. Everyone had their very own version of stuffed fish. They were satisfied and I felt bored and fat. They were satisfied until the moment I began to ask about love and passion. I'll never forget my favorite old woman asking me to leave her house. She was sweet and lonely and very well dressed, and her stuffed fish was excellent. I already knew then that

she was a beautiful young woman in the camps and that her beauty was the main force that kept her and her friends alive. When I asked her about the abortion she had been through in the labor camps she asked me to leave her house. It was a painful moment but I knew that as a writer I had found a clue.

My first novel *Love Macht Frei* offers a statement heretofore unheard: That youth "there" and "then" was evil and violent, yet it also contained rare moments of beauty and passion. When I first brought this novel to an editor and he said it would be published, he looked at me and said that he liked it and asked me: who wrote it? He could not believe a woman like me wrote such a novel. I never asked him how this woman should look because I don't want to hear the answer: very miserable, starving, sad, old like the *Welshmerz* itself.

This novel is a story of three Jewish girls, set in Sangomor, a small town on the Polish-Russian border. A story of teenage girls gave me an opportunity not only to describe how the heroines survive first the ghettos and then the camps, but also to portray the camp's bunks as an unlikely rendezvous for first loves. The choice of teenage girls is also responsible for the title of the novel, which expresses the belief that it is not labor that sets free (*Arbeit Macht Frei*), but love. In the face of catastrophes only love can set the soul free from the chains of prison, where the ugly side of the human spirit rules.

An old woman named Mirka is at the center of the plot of my latest novel *Meeting on the Brink of the Evening*. She is 85 years old and a member of a kibbutz in the south of Israel. She is anxiously waiting to meet an unknown character from her past. The one she misses desperately is not her only daughter, not her missing husband and

not her admirable nephew but a young German soldier called Dolfi Munich with whom she fell in love while she was a prisoner in a Nazi camp. While she waits she has to deal with the question why Dolfi is still her favorite after all these years? Because with him she was young? Because with him she was on the edge? Because we always seek impossible situations?

While telling you about my last novel and Mirka, I ask myself what compelled me to create beautiful moments in the heart of the catastrophe? How did I come to write about the Holocaust in terms of passion and desire? What makes my children able to ask me if I like the Holocaust? Is it all a matter of how far away from the horrors you are standing? It's not easy for me to accept that even the deepest pain fades with time, blown away by the wind.

I was born in Israel to Holocaust-survivor parents and my children were born to what we used to call "second generation." I feel that as time passes our ability to deal with the catastrophe grows as if it has become a source of inspiration, a metaphor in which all the colors of emotions are more intense.

In Israel *Yom Has Shoah*, Holocaust Memorial Day, is still a very special day of sorrowful silence. To be honest it's already not the same as it used to be in my childhood and one can already sense in the air that in a few years it's going to be one more holiday no different from all the others we have plenty of. Hanukkah. Pesach. Purim. All of them commemorate what were once meaningful catastrophes and are now only an occasion for a barbecue.

Should we be happy or sad about the new barbecue? I guess that in this case our feelings are not relevant.

## Afterword

Dear Dad,

"Why?"—so you asked me after my first novel was published—"Why did you choose this subject to write about? Your mother and I did all we could to keep our children free of that horror."

I have just returned from a conference at Brandeis, and the most wonderful thing there (besides the food, the jokes, and the weather) was the opportunity to find myself among a support-group of addicts of holocausts—holocausts of all kinds, from every country and period. It seemed to all of us entirely natural and sensible to talk about holocausts all day long, to compare them, to laugh about them. At Brandeis I met normal-seeming, actually quite nice people who have chosen to devote their talents and energies to the comprehension through writing or research, of catastrophes, of evil, of suffering, of pain, and of loss. Nobody asked anyone else *why*?

Your question *why* it is the Shoah in particular that I write about derives from your concern for my welfare. You, who survived the Shoah, are so sure that it is best to forget, to repress and to move on. But you are not the only one asking why the Shoah in particular. This question paralyzes anyone who researches or writes about catastrophes. I often encounter a similar question among readers, colleagues, and critics. They say they are sick of it; that what's done is done; they say, too, that there are enough other topics, much more entertaining and marketable.

While I was sitting at Brandeis trying to absorb all of the holocausts that were running about on the same stage, over three days, each getting mixed up in the other, I recalled a meeting I'd had recently

with an Israeli publisher. He offered me an advance on the condition that I write about something more fashionable than the Holocaust of the Jews of Europe (a love affair between an Israeli Jew and an Israeli Arab; or perhaps a love affair between an Israeli man and a female guest worker from the Philippines). He, like many others, asked me yet again, and with great wonder, why does it have to be the Shoah?

The most original idea this publisher had was to write about the Holocaust of the Jews of Europe but in the style of science fiction. “Listen,” so he tells me, “this is the genre of the future, a genre with a rating, with possibilities. And you—I tell you this for your own good—you have got to get yourself off of ‘Holocaust shelf,’ and fast. I’ve read all the demented horrors you’ve made up in your books and I’m sure that a sick imagination like yours would be perfect for science fiction.”

Then at Brandeis I had a vision of an ultimate holocaust—a super-holocaust that borrows the most hideous ingredients from every holocaust that has ever been: the careful cold calculation of the Nazis, the destruction of a people’s self-esteem for generations as with Black slavery, the despair and helplessness, the terror, the paranoia and, of course, vengefulness everywhere. It’s necessary to have rows of people committing suicide, people who have nothing left to lose and blow themselves up at the first opportunity. This super-holocaust could wipe out the faith that people’s lives are worth something. A stunning, amazing holocaust, so spectacular that it would be suitable for science fiction, for isn’t that the genre that’s top of the line—at once trendy, marketable and entertaining?

When I awoke from my vision I understood that I’ll never write science fiction. I am incapable. Maybe because everything I read of this genre as a girl now appears anachronistic, the palest imitation of the reality that actually came about later on—reality usually outstrips anybody’s imagination—but mainly because it has lots of technique but not a drop of compassion, it offers no balm and no comprehension. As a reader and as a writer I want a book to give solace and to bind my wounds with a soft bandage.

Dad, after that vision at the Brandeis conference, I believe that the motive of those of us who are holocaust addicts is to try to humanize, somewhat, the most monstrous holocausts. We are driven, compelled by the need to fit the holocaust, any holocaust, into some sort of reasonable narrative of the human race, to understand how it is possible that the most horrid things to have happened to people throughout history were brought about by human beings, not by natural disasters or gods.

Dad, the last time you asked me why the Shoah in particular, I asked you whether you preferred tea or coffee. Perhaps next time we’ll be able to talk, perhaps I’ll have an answer—perhaps. I’m not sure.

Yours with love,

Rachel



## Holocaust Literature: Myth, History, and Literature

• *Yigal Schwartz*

Almost 60 years have passed since the end of the Second World War and the destruction of European Jewry by the Nazis and their collaborators—60 years, during which thousands of attempts have been made by artists and writers to come to grips with this traumatic event. Each attempt is unique and special and deserves a separate discussion. However, for our conference, which is designed to take the form of a dialogue, suffice it for me to challenge the validity of two widely-held assumptions found in discussions on “Holocaust literature” and suggest an alternative hypothesis for consideration or, more precisely, put forward a question for discussion.

We can ostensibly dispense with one famous assumption. Theodor Adorno’s contention that after Auschwitz it is impossible to write poetry any more, and similar arguments by George Steiner, Eli Wiesel, and others, for the most part, have been proved wrong. Once again it has become clear that there is no more perfect way to deal with traumas than by telling stories.

The second basic assumption that we may retire concerns the nature of Holocaust stories, and responds to the question: “Are Holocaust stories, and perhaps all ‘post-Holocaust’ stories, in essence different from the ‘pre-Holocaust’ stories?” Jean-Francois Lyotard contends that there is a difference and argues that the stories people tell to organize large collections of problems compactly in their minds are no longer supported, as they were until the Holocaust, by meta-

narratives—great literary settings (such as the models of Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Levi-Strauss)—but by mini-narratives—literary settings with a reduced ambit—of limited validity. Lyotard, I would note, brilliantly identified the trap of writing about the Holocaust and after it. He argued, quite justifiably, that it is impossible to write in the same way after the Holocaust as before it, because of the betrayal of language, literature, and culture, and that it is impossible to write about the Holocaust in a language that developed after it. He put his finger precisely on the problem, but his suggestion that there is a shift from meta- to mini-narrative—does not, in my opinion, hold true for a significant portion of the corpus of Holocaust literature.

Indeed, a study of Holocaust literature reveals quite the opposite. I would argue that one of the most striking features of Holocaust literature—and non-Holocaust literature written after the Holocaust, is the blurring of boundaries between the three great literary modes—boundaries that were apparent until the middle of the previous century. To put it differently, I am speaking of a blurring of the boundaries between the three archetype-narratives of culture—any culture. Blurring, at least in Western literature, of the distinctions among myth, history, and literature.

This phenomenon, which has far-reaching implications, may be illustrated with two examples. The first is a text found in the literature section of any library. The second is a text found on the history shelves of any library.

The first is a passage from the book *Pipl*, one of the books in the *Salamander* series written by Ka-Tzetnik, the pen name of Yehiel De-Nur, whose “Holocaust” stories were formative texts for several

generations of readers. The scene depicts a concentration camp prisoner who had managed to survive thus far because the SS soldiers used him as a clown. Suddenly—for no apparent reason—the guards spread jam all over him and offer him as food to the prisoners.

I remember reading that passage when I was 13 or 14—incidentally, these texts were introduced at some point into the Israeli state education curriculum—and I was convinced—in my heart of hearts, I still am—that this was a modern myth, a twentieth century version of the Nibelungen, or, alternately, a pornographic fantasy formed in the author’s twisted mind.

And then, 20 years later, I read journalist Tom Segev’s article about a manuscript that Ka-Tzetnik gave him, in which Ka-Tzetnik sums up the experiences he relived while undergoing psychotherapy in Holland. Segev’s summary included the following:

He [Yehiel De-Nur] saw a fellow prisoner from his barracks being beaten to death on his backside after his pants had been pulled down, and he saw another friend who was only alive because in his wretchedness he amused the SS men, like a clown, until they spread jam all over his head and sent him to the starving prisoners to lick it off his head, and a thousand prisoners scrambled over the man and suddenly everything became a lump of hands and feet: Everyone was biting and licking his friend. The Germans roared with laughter and a bleeding, chewed, and devoured carcass was left strewn on the parade ground as if it has been gnawed by a rat. He saw an SS man murder the boy he had used for sexual gratification, roasting his body on skewers and swallowing his flesh chunk by chunk. De-Nur saw his sister Daniella among the camp

whores and his mother, stripped naked, standing in line for the crematorium, with all the others, and he saw them go up in smoke. He saw himself in the *Selektion* of Dr. Josef Mengele, the man who determined who would live and who would die by raising a finger. Time and again he was selected to live. He experienced psychedelic visions; the sights reminded him of Salvador Dali's paintings. He saw kings and demons. He saw God, in green, pink, and yellow. In the smoke rising from the crematorium chimney at Auschwitz, he saw Nucleus, who was destined to become the king of the world: Nucleus is the atom. He was tortured by his nightmare visions and he was tortured by the nightmares about his identity: Who is Ka-Tzetnik and who is Yehiel De-Nur?" (Segev 6–7).

After reading this passage, almost all the contents of which appear in *Salamander*, which is presented in its paratext as both a novel and a testimony of the "other planet," would the librarian in Beersheva, Tokyo, or Boston not ponder whether this book belongs in the history, literature, or mythology section, or perhaps all of them?

The problem of separating the three archetype narratives becomes even more complicated when faced with the astounding—perhaps even alarming—similarity between Segev's matter-of-fact journalistic reporting on Yehiel De-Nur's experiences and the following passage from *Agadat Ha-agamim ha-atzuvim* (*The Legend of the Sad Lakes*), a short novel by Itamar Levy, considered one of the outstanding authors of the "second generation" in Israel:

Since Grandpa Grynszpan refused to build the city of death for them and insisted on collecting two zloty transit tax, the

Nazis stood and brutalized him. They flogged him on the back and hands. They forced him to clean the pavement with acid that burned his wounds. They threatened his life if he did not sing "Heil Hitler" aloud as he scrubbed. Afterwards, they shaved off his Jewish beard with their daggers, tearing off facial flesh with the hair. They ordered him to pray and don phylacteries and finally poured petrol over him and threw him into the burning synagogue of Plock; because the Jew came out unharmed, because there was not even a smell of ashes on his skin, they accused him of separatism—read: communism—and continued to brutalize him. They made him bend his knees again and again, for six hours nonstop, in the hot sun, under a shower of lashings. They pushed pins under his nails, gave him electric shocks. They gave him a postcard and pencil and forced him to write a message to his loved ones: "I have arrived safely. I am well. I am happy, and I am in good condition." They squeezed his testicles and joined his fingers together. They ordered him to carry stones from one place to another, just like that, for no reason, to dig pits and fill them in again . . . They tied his limbs on the "rack," which tore his body apart. They put hungry mice into his pants and shot at bottles placed on his head. Finally they took him to the forest where they shot at him for fun—after all, they could no longer remember what they wanted from him—in the back of his head, in his back, and his stomach, and his temples, and his mouth, and his heart. God performed a miracle for him, my grandfather, and although he died, He did not let the blood pour out of his body, but created a "miracle" blood that only dripped from the wounds in his pants and the scratch on his shirt. The layers of his skin were smooth and clean. (Segev 31).

Itamar Levy has created a literary-historical-mythological hybrid plot. The text is replete with the type of events that have taken place in extra-literary reality, even if it is painful for us to accept this: the building of “Cities of Death,” shaving [the beards of] the old men, burning down the synagogue in Plotzk, accusations of separatism, of communism, of sending postcards home from the work camps and the death camps, the signs in the camps, the hideously “creative” tortures. An historical effect is already created in Levy’s introductory section:

In this incidental pause will be told the annals of the death of my grandfather Noah Grynspan, father of the orphan Naomi [mother of the narrator]. In the month of November of nineteen hundred and thirty-eight, a distant relative of Noah, Herschel Grynspan, used his evil feminine creative force to murder the life of His Majesty the Third Secretary to the German Ambassador to Paris, Ernst vom Rath. A new era collapsed on the synagogues in Germany, on the grocery stores and the watchmakers, and pulverized them into thousands of slivers of crystal, of broken glass.” (Levy16-17).

This is an unmistakable hybrid text, a sort of lyrical chronicle. It refers to salient historical events such as the murder of Ernst vom Rath in Paris and the events of Kristallnacht within the fictitious framework of the narrator’s family saga. Even this saga is patently fraudulent: common sense tells us that one cannot narrate “death annals.” The historical-literary hybrid nature of the text is reinforced by the use of clusters of sentences with detailed fictitious descriptions that are based on a kernel of truth, such as a relevant date and a real place, as in the example below:

On the thirty-first of August 1939, at 10:00 PM, a great play started in the Karol opera-house of Berlin, called “The Eternal Patience of the German Nation,” with the participation of the members of the Reichstag, the Fuhrer in his gray field uniform, the reconnaissance unit of Schleswig-Holstein, and the Polish nation. Hitler opened with the aria “Ode to Peace” in a sleep-deprived, cracked tenor voice. Afterwards the German soldiers sang the hymn, “The Dawn of the First of September.” The climax of the opera was a battle scene on Tuchel Hill, in which a Polish unit of horses fought a company of German tanks with great sensitivity and majesty.” (Levy 19)

The hybrid quality of Levi’s text is also the result of the blurring of the distinction between the literary mode created by the First Generation of Holocaust writers (Aharon Appelfeld, Ida Fink, Eli Wiesel, Primo Levi and others) and the mythic mode. This blurring occurs here, as well as in dozens of other places in Levi’s text and in the texts of many other authors of the Second Generation of Holocaust writers (David Grossman, Ami Devir, Art Spiegelman, and others).

This blurring is accomplished by two techniques. In the first technique, many mythical elements are integrated into the telling of the story, as the very title of the book conveys (*Legend of the Sad Lakes*). One traditional mythic element that is repeated in many texts of Levi’s generation is the Jew who refuses to die or dies in a miraculous way. Here it is the grandfather: “God performed a miracle for him . . . although he died, He did not let the blood pour out of his body, but created a ‘miracle’ blood that only dripped

from the wounds in his pants and the scratch on his shirt.” The second technique, which is tied to the first, is Levi’s repudiation of the principle of representation which was a fundamental tenet of First Generation prose in particular, and of mainstream Western fiction in general (at least starting from the Renaissance era). The representation assumption held that a single literary figure or a small group of figures could represent or mirror the destiny of entire nations, communities, or civilizations. Levi introduces the literary character of Grandfather Noah Grynszpan and in one concise paragraph that is tied to a brief extra-literary time period, he sentences his character to an immeasurable barrage of decrees that have fallen on tens, hundreds, or thousands of human beings in the reconstructed extra-literary reality. Let us try to examine, declares Levi, whether one literary figure can actually represent the entire six million. This attempt fails and is ostensibly meant to prove that Holocaust literature, in its previous format, is not effective. Simultaneously, the failure indicates that the Holocaust has left a black hole that has swallowed and shattered the three major archetype-narratives of culture. Thus we now have, perhaps, returned to the hybrid transmission that characterized the ancient major cosmogenic texts.

The second example concerns the blurring of the boundary between history and myth in a thoroughly scholarly context. Following are two brief passages from *The Holocaust: Some Historical Aspects* (1982) by Yehuda Bauer, one of the most distinguished historians of the Holocaust. Both passages are from the chapter entitled “Against Mystification—The Holocaust as History.”

In the first passage Professor Bauer begins with the dictionary meaning of “mystify” to make his point:

Mystify—The dictionary explanation is: “To wrap in extreme secrecy, to blur.” Recent treatment of the Holocaust has contributed much ambiguity and vagueness—and no wonder. The event was of such vast proportions that it cannot be grasped by a normal human mind. It is therefore natural to run away from the subject, to deny it, and to reduce it to forms and dimensions that we can understand from our life experiences. I refer, of course, to attempts at mystification that have no other motives. (Bauer 71)

Bauer thus comes out strongly against the mystification of the Holocaust, the most blatant form of which is treating the Holocaust as an event that deviates from the continuum of history, and against the mystification of historical figures; i.e., presenting them as heroes in some metaphysical drama.

And then, just a few pages after these vociferous contentions, we read the following:

It is clearly impossible to escape the basic characteristic of the Nazi regime, which was satanic; i.e. evil from its foundations. It is not possible to exonerate Hitler and say that he was not a demon, because the truth is that he had [emphasis in the original] an extremely evil personality and he functioned in a context where only an absolutely evil person could exist. The concept of “evil”—the esteemed historian takes pains to explain—denotes the absolute opposite of the precepts set out in the Ten Commandments and all that pertains to them in the social, economic, religious, philosophical spheres or any other. (Bauer 79)

What, then, should be the appropriate response to these passages from a scholarly work of history? Should Professor Bauer be expelled from the university? Or at least demoted for breach of academic standards? Or would it be enough to instruct the librarian of your institution to remove his book from the history shelves and place it in the literature section or the section on mythological research?

Either way, from both examples—the horrifying as well as the more humane, somewhat benign—it once again becomes clear that a discussion of the Holocaust and artistic responses to it can no longer reside comfortably within the old disciplines, whose familiar, secure borders engender a false tranquility. The collapse of the lines that separate the three great literary modes, the three archetype narratives, demands a new conscious, emotional, and methodological reappraisal.

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## African Authors in Rwanda: Writing by Duty of Memory

• *Boubacar Boris Diop*

Over the last decade, the name Rwanda has become more and more familiar to more and more people, even those who have never before shown the least bit of interest in Africa. Unfortunately, it took a great deal of suffering to arouse interest in this tiny, resource-poor country.

The speed with which the international community recognized the Rwandan genocide was equaled only by that of the genocide itself. The UN reports that the massacres from April to July 1994 caused 500,000 to 800,000 deaths. Rwandan authorities, who have not yet finished calculating the number of victims, estimate them at more than 1,000,000, a figure that is probably not exaggerated. To give you an idea of what happened in Rwanda, suffice it to say that 10,000 people were killed every day for three continuous months.

This enterprise of extermination did not come about suddenly, as an irrational reaction to the pressure of unforeseen political circumstances. On the contrary, it had been meticulously planned. A very centralized state put its army, paramilitary forces created just for the occasion, and an entire administration at the service of eliminating a part of the Rwandan population for belonging to a certain “ethnicity.”

Few commentators at the time understood the gravity of what was happening. Almost all of them preferred to see this genocide as just another cycle of “interethnic massacres,” or a kind of “civil war”

between two communities who had hated each other since time immemorial. The repeated use of such expressions convinced the entire world that there were neither executioners nor victims, that the Rwandan government, overwhelmed by the situation, was doing its best to restore law and order to the country. After all, everyone said, these chaotic tropical atrocities don't lend themselves to rational political analysis. This last idea, which explains in part the passivity of the international community, was reinforced by the image of the continent portrayed by the media.

Of course it would be absurd to pretend that the international press conspired to facilitate the killers' work. It had nothing in particular against Rwanda. The truth is simpler, and perhaps even more terrible: nobody cared. Although it's true that certain Western countries connected to the conflict managed to find conscious conduits for their disinformation among all the special envoys and reporters, many of the envoys and reporters simply couldn't be bothered to see through their own prejudices. In an Africa viewed as the natural site of all the world's disasters, the Rwandan massacres were just one more tragedy to add to those in Somalia, Algeria, and Liberia. This attitude demonstrates a racism so complacent that it no longer even knows it exists.

Thus it is not surprising that the Rwandan genocide continues to have such an unusual status today. Almost nobody dares at this point to contest its blinding reality. However, as soon as we try to blame its perpetrators, some serious difficulties arise. We all know that the great infamies of history have often been personified to help keep their memories alive: the names of Hitler and Pol Pot immediately evoke gas chambers and killing fields. The Rwandan genocide,

however, has no name. Instead, everything about this case seems to indicate that, no matter how sorry we might feel for the victims, they're still far from innocent.

Having said all this, honesty compels me to admit that the Rwandan tragedy provoked, if possible, even less interest in Africa than in the rest of the world.

This apparent paradox is easily explained. The breaking up of the African continent into barely viable states, a phenomenon so often denounced by Cheikh Anta Diop and Kwame Nkrumah, has led to a number of completely unexpected circumstances in today's world. One of these unplanned results is the fact that today's Africa must learn about its own political problems from the North. As strange as it may seem, many Francophone Africans didn't hear anything about the Rwandan genocide except what was reported by the Agence France Presse reports, the major French daily papers, and the television news programs hosted by Poivre d'Arvor and Bruno Masure.<sup>1</sup> The free African press, which was only in its embryonic stages at the time, didn't have the means to counter this tendency. It's not even clear that it wanted to. The truth is, all of Africa's failures have caused the continent to lose its self respect. Whatever happens in Africa, African analysts explain it either by our mysterious incapacity to adapt ourselves to the modern world, or, even more problematically, by some long-lost ancient curse.

As a result, among the rare cries of indignation heard during the genocide, almost none came from Africa. Nelson Mandela, who had just been elected to lead post-apartheid South Africa, was a welcome exception. In the best of cases, African intellectuals and artists turned



their backs on the situation even as they mumbled words of shame and disgust. Most often, however, they simply seemed completely indifferent.

It's this deafening silence on the part of African intellectuals and artists that gave birth to the project called "Rwanda: Writing By Duty of Memory." Let me provide a brief overview of the structure and meaning of this project to help clarify the expression of my ideas.

It all began in 1996, on the occasion of the fifth edition of Fest' Africa, a festival of African literature organized in Lille by Nocky Djedanoum and Maimouna Coulibaly, two journalists who had been living in France since finishing their university studies. That year, the festival was mourning the death sentence and subsequent hanging of Nigerian writer Ken Saro-Wiwa. The authors present at Fest' Africa demonstrated their disapproval by a public declaration against the military dictatorship of Sani Abacha. However, they still claimed their pens were powerless to stop the killers. This bitter recognition changed, though, over the course of several months, into an increasingly urgent desire to make themselves heard. Discussions with Rwandans convinced them of the necessity of looking deeper into the 1994 genocide. So they proposed sending a group of writers from various African countries to Rwanda as writers-in-residence.

Things turned out to be not quite as simple as we had imagined. It took two full years to convince the Rwandan authorities, who were very reluctant at first, to let us enter their country. I must admit that the majority of Francophone authors in the project was hardly reassuring to them, because they saw France as having actively

supported the genocide's organizers. Nocky Djedanoum was able to get them to agree only by saying, firmly but amicably: "As an African I claim the right to go wherever I want to in Rwanda and you have no choice but to accept." After the necessary discussions, things fell into place.

Koulsy Lamko and Nocky Djedanoum of Chad, Monique Ilboudo of Burkina Faso, Meja Mwangi of Kenya, Vèronique Tadjò of Ivory Coast, Abdou Rahman Waberi of Djibouti, Tierno Monenembo of Guinée, Jean-Marie Vianney Rurangwa and Venuste Kayimahe of Rwanda, and myself from Senegal, all spent July and August 1998 in Rwanda. This visit gave us the opportunity to go to the sites of the Genocide Memorial, to speak with NGOs such as Lawyers Without Borders or the Pro-Women Collective, and to meet with the Association of Journalists and Writers as well as the staff of the Hope Polyclinic, which cares for orphans and women who were raped during the genocide. We also lectured at the University of Butare and in secondary and primary schools. Of course, we talked with survivors—among others, those who had gathered in Ibuka—and with some of the 120,000 prisoners who were accused of having participated in the massacres. Huge chunks of time were reserved for individual research and putting our notes in order.

Out of the 10 works originally planned, nine have already been published and the last one, (*Great Sadness* by Meja Mwangi), may soon appear in print. Our works were presented to the Rwandan people in June 2000, during an international conference in Kigali and Butare. Playwright Koulsy Lamko made a wonderful play by combining pieces of all the texts, "Bodies and Voices, Rhizome Words."

Along the way, other initiatives arose from the project, in other artistic domains. Thus Cameroonian filmmaker François Woukouache took it upon himself to make a 180-minute film called *We Are Dead No Longer* and Senegalese filmmaker Samba Félix Ndiaye made an ambitious documentary on the same subject, entitled *Writing by Duty of Memory*. South African artist Bruce Clarke plans to create a gigantic stone monument dedicated to the victims, called the Garden of Memory, on the Nyanza Hill.

Ever since they appeared in March 2000, our texts have been discussed in the media and at African and European literary conferences. In November 2000 in Lille, a book fair was dedicated especially to the works resulting from the project “Rwanda: Writing by Duty of Memory.” Such an initiative obviously entails its own set of problems. I shall not try to hide them.

The first such problem involves the project itself. There aren't many examples in the history of literature where writers have come *together* on the site of a tragedy so that each one could write his own fictional version of it. Writing is the solitary act par excellence and literary texts are somehow supposed to spring, fully formed, from the unconscious. Novelists, who are used to paradoxes, still like to believe that when it comes to their works, they are in control from beginning till end. That's why they hate writing texts on commission. Whatever the reason, writing in this way seems to lessen authors' creative freedom, which lies at the root of their choice to become writers in the first place.

This is probably why we welcomed the idea of going to Rwanda with both enthusiasm and trepidation. For example, I remember having told Nocky Djedanoum that I wanted to return from Rwanda with

a simple travelogue. Today, with the benefit of hindsight, I can see how my attitude was actually one of defiance. I didn't think I had anything to say about what I still considered to be a somewhat routine, if deplorable, explosion of tribal barbarity. Perhaps, too, the habit of producing texts where I proudly manipulated reality however I chose, made me uncomfortable at the prospect of being in a situation where the facts existed all on their own, independently of and prior to their telling. I was, in fact, having trouble with the idea that my imagination would be restrained by reality. We knew from the beginning that simple respect for the victims would keep us from taking liberties with their testimony. Furthermore, as soon as they understood why we'd come to Rwanda, some survivors begged us: “Please don't turn what we tell you into novels; report faithfully our words as we have spoken them; the whole world must be told exactly what happened here.” One other fact is worth mentioning: the organizers gave us permission to write nothing if we didn't feel like it. Still, nine works out of the planned 10 are now available. That's because the real commission to write came to us, in fact, from the survivors and the dead. I shall try to explain a bit later how easy it was for this group to outwit our artistic pretensions.

The other difficulty was the risk of losing all desire to write when faced with the unspeakable. Zimbabwean novelist Chenjerai Hove, who had been asked to become part of the group, had after much hesitation decided to decline the offer. He explained why in Lille last November with these remarkably frank words: “I was afraid of becoming so overwhelmed that I'd have to give up writing novels altogether.” And in fact, going through the looking glass—the mirror that reflects so many failures and so much cowardice—often leads people to madness and despair rather than mastery of their destiny.

One might also question the point of such an activity coming four years after the genocide. Rwandese schoolchildren often asked us, for good reason, with more bitterness than anger: “Why are you just coming now? Where were you four years ago, when these things were happening in our country?”

These objections are serious and sometimes troubling. However, once all these obstacles were identified, they ceased to bother us and instead became real stimulants. This adventure was, of course, a collective one, but each of us dove into it with his own priorities and his own itinerary. The tension produced by the clash of the real and the imaginary was new for all of us. It had the rare merit of making us recover our taste for authentic feelings. Faced with real pain, we could test how our intellectual responsibilities measured up against the deadly force of prejudice.

But did we really need to go to Rwanda to feel the madness of our era? After all, in Africa today, the writer’s work-table is never far from a mass grave. Wasn’t it bad faith to pretend not to know?

With your permission, I’d like to answer these questions by examining the example I know best: my own. Before this novel on the genocide, I’d published another, *Le Cavalier et son ombre* (The Horseman and His Shadow), in which I pay a lot of attention to Rwanda. I had not, however, ever set foot in the country and I had some doubts about the sincerity of my feelings. That’s why the only moment of the story where the heroine Khadidja really represents the author is in fact the one where she confesses her distress and secretly realizes the painful insincerity of her own anger. The fact that Khadidja pretends to be “suffering from Rwanda” has, in fact,

no meaning. The real suffering was for others. The author, very far from the events, simply wanted to give a semblance of reality with a thousand and one tricks of style. He succeeded only in putting himself through ridiculous esthetic torture. I was trying, with great pride, to play tricks with reality so I could find a way to pin down moving and ephemeral forms in words. I believe, therefore, that I am in a good position to know what separates a novel on genocide written from far away, in the comfort of one’s daily routine, from another, written in the very odor of death. In the first case, the temptation to play with words is very strong because in Africa, reality, with all its madness and cruelty, seems constantly to be engaging in a kind of unfair competition with fiction. The African novelist, who understands this quite well, is often obliged to exaggerate in fantastic proportions just to stay in the race. This one-upmanship is exhausting, even for the boldest writer. It’s also risky for his credibility. Before going to Rwanda, I felt no need to respect facts. It was difficult for me to understand how some people felt that writing meant: Here is the truth. Trying to arouse doubt seemed much more exciting to me. I had always seen the writer as a child lost in the forest. I savored that writer’s solitude so aptly expressed by the poet Birago Diop when he said, “when memory goes off to gather dead wood, it brings back whichever sticks it pleases.” Let’s stop for a minute to imagine the confusion of someone in the middle of the forest going about “gathering dead wood.” He goes from one bush to another, often doubling back, wondering constantly—and anxiously—which direction to take, and he never seems to know what he’s doing or why. He simply feels like confessing that he doesn’t know the road and can’t show it to anybody. Since he has no idea where he’s going, he can’t very well proceed straight ahead with a determined stride.

This desire to write with memories rather than ideas, to write with the echoes of buried words that seem far away and obscure, might appear arrogant. But going to Rwanda made me see that it was in fact a sign of despair and impotence.

To wander among bones and talk with the survivors made us both humbler and more conscious of what our books could do to fight evil. Only little by little did the scope and human implications of the Rwandan tragedy become evident to us. Complete terror lay in wait for us with each testimony. For so many people to have been killed in a few weeks, hundreds of thousands of assassins had to be working in broad daylight, and not nearly all of them have been arrested. That means in the hills and in the streets of Kigali, Butare, or Gitarama, victims and executioners continue to cross one another's paths today. They recognize each other, as bloody images from a recent past swirl in their memories, and then they go on their way because, after all, life must go on.

After several days, we all felt that the only way to reproduce this distress in all its magnitude was to try to do so with great simplicity. In reading our works on the genocide, people quickly perceive that they all have a common starkness and modesty. What kind of writers would we have been if we'd come back from Rwanda all proud of ourselves, wanting only to show off our talent for metaphors and verbal pirouettes?

Ever since our books came out in March 2000, people have asked us what they are meant to add to all the newspaper articles, documentaries, historical accounts, and testimonies. This is an essential question, since it calls for reflection upon the usefulness of

fiction in the battle against forgetting. It seems even more pertinent in the context of African literature. Nobody is so often besieged by doubt and discouragement as the African writer. Writing in a foreign language for a public that is too busy surviving to read, anyway, he almost always feels like he's howling his rebellion in the desert. The violence of the continent's civil wars poses relentless questions demanding immediate answers. Thus he often experiences his fiction apologetically, as a delicate and useless exercise, subject to the constant pressure of political emergency.

But that is, in fact, precisely the reason novels are essential for preserving memories of genocide. Specialized texts, of course, have the advantage of precision. Less attractive and less accessible to the public at large, they are aimed at an intellectual elite who dissect them without emotion. Everyone knows the old joke: specialists don't read each other, they *spy on each other*. Like a journalist facing a deadline, forced to jump from one massacre to another, the historian has no choice but to let the dead bury the dead. The novelist, on the other hand, tries to bring them back to life. I recall that in Rwanda, when we would visit places where the victims' bones can still be seen, I kept feeling the need to find a little life around me, just as one cracks open a window to let a bit of fresh air into a hermetically sealed space. One of these episodes is briefly recounted in my novel. I didn't understand that kind of feeling until later. Actually, a toy lying beside the shattered skull of a child can tell you much more about a genocide than the most scholarly analyses. We must put faces on events rather than just state facts and reel off statistics. The delirious cruelty of the killers is hard to understand, but not as senseless as it might at first seem. They intentionally humiliated innocent people before hacking them to pieces with machetes

because they had to convince both the victims and themselves that the people being slaughtered were totally devoid of humanity, that their presence on this earth was an error of nature. This may be why genocide negationists always seem a bit astonished when you contradict them with facts and figures. In their view, nobody died, because the people everyone is making such a fuss about never had the right to exist at all. In this sense, fiction is an excellent way to fight back against genocide. It restores souls to the victims; even if it can't bring them back to life it can at least give them back their humanity through a ritual of mourning in which the novel becomes a sort of funerary monument.

After the Holocaust, many Germans were able to say, with what seemed like completely good faith, that they hadn't known anything about it. Even this lie was impossible in Rwanda. The Rwandan genocide was quite distinctive in that the state managed to implicate the majority of the population in it. It took place amidst sound and fury, with hundreds of thousands of cadavers littering the streets and a radio gleefully coordinating the massacres amidst cries of hate and terror. Can the historian's serenity convey these unleashed, crazed passions? I don't think so. The novel, which meets the killer on his own turf—that of lies and emotions—seems to me more able to fulfill this role. It may even be the best way to rouse good people from their passivity; people who, when they see their fellow humans being butchered all around them, raise their arms to the sky and say they can't do anything because, after all, there are only 24 hours in a day, and there's just not time to get involved in everyone else's business. While they know they have no desire to kill anybody, they're still not necessarily aware that they're serving the purposes of fanatics who are ready to exterminate entire peoples. The novel

can almost whisper into the ear of these family men lounging on the couch in their living rooms and reawaken in them a desire to become human once again.

The realm of the imagination is all the more appropriate for telling about such a genocide because Rwanda's recent history is, to a great degree, the result of a conflict between fiction and reality. Everything began with the fantasies of a certain colonial ethnology that *invented*, with a disconcerting disdain for science, a non-African history for an African country.<sup>2</sup>

One might say, all modesty aside, that the project "Rwanda: Writing by Duty of Memory" is currently playing a considerable role in preserving the memory of the genocide. These texts have given rise to debates that will continue all over the world. This proves, by the way, that different forms of expression are not necessarily in conflict. Because of our novels, journalists are returning to the subject and asking questions of themselves. We used, to a great extent, the work of historians and journalists to create our own lies, which in the end have become even more profound truths.

It's interesting to imagine 10 writers landing in a country ravaged by war, wandering among ruins and bones, pens in hand and hearts beating loudly. It's easy to see how proud they are of themselves. Here they have a solid subject, an immense tragedy that's a thousand times more powerful than their usual nonsense about the struggle between tradition and modernity in Africa. This image, which is deliberately satirical and doubtless also somewhat unjust, takes us to the heart of the debate, because it marks one of the rare moments when the imagination meets reality once and for all. Yet the most

important meeting was that of each one of us with our self. It's easy to understand how such a tragedy can't just be closed up and put away. Going beyond even the duty of memory, this journey to the end of horror has turned out to be a formidable history lesson.

So the same question kept occurring to us: Why? There has been no lack of explanation. People told us about traditional obedience to authority, the contagious violence of longstanding historical feuds, a failed evangelism—or, more accurately, a perfectly successful evangelism—that robbed an African nation of everything African. I was particularly shocked by the active and determined support offered by Mitterand's France to the genocide's organizers. France had trained both the *Interahamwe* militias and the Rwandan army. It permitted the leaders of the genocide to leave Rwanda with total impunity thanks to *Opération Turquoise*, a so-called “humanitarian” initiative that turned out to be anything but humanitarian. These discoveries made me realize more than ever how dangerous it is to come from a small country that is totally controlled by others, which is also the case of my own Senegal.

We knew we'd never be the same after leaving this nation-cemetery that had chosen to leave all the remains of the genocide victims exposed for everyone to see. This was anything but a literary contact with reality. We had to learn to listen to irreparably broken human beings recounting our own novels to us before we could write down even the first word. It was a strange battle between us and our future characters, who were hardly more believable than their stories. They naturally saw us as potential traitors. Were we going to be able to speak of their pain and for their dead?

I firmly believe that the great literature about the April 1994 genocide will be written later by Rwandans themselves. Before this can happen, it will doubtless be necessary for the mourning process to have come to an end, for the pain to have been passed down through several generations and for the sons, waking up from a long period of stupefaction, finally to find the words to recount their fathers' madness. This may be the reason that Jean-Marie Rurangwa and Venuste Kayimahe, the two Rwandan authors in our group, wrote texts of reflection rather than fiction.

Our only merit is at least to have tried to do something, despite the ambiguities of our enterprise. We have, I believe, succeeded in expressing that part of the Rwandan people's suffering that calls out to every human being. This aspiration to universality has permitted us to inscribe the genocide more forcefully in the path of history. Destined to be read and discussed by generations of high school and college students, our novels are beginning a long voyage in time and space. Other creators are now taking inspiration from them, for film adaptations, choreography, and the like.

The memory of a genocide is, by definition, paradoxical. Whatever the negationists do, the more time goes by, the less one will tend to forget.

• *Translated from the French by Jane Alison Hale*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The French equivalent of Ted Koppel and Dan Rather.

<sup>2</sup> The colonial ethnology of the late nineteenth century applied its own totally inadequate racial categories to Rwandan society, thus deforming the country's history.

## Reflections on Our Murderous Century

• *Eugene Goodheart*

Here is the challenge laid down by Saul Bellow; it could have been an epigraph for our conference: “You religious and enlightened people, you Christians, Jews and Humanists, you believers in freedom, dignity and enlightenment—you think you know what a human being is. We will show you what you are. Look at our camps and crematoria, and see if you can bring your hearts to care about these millions.”

Caring, genuine caring, about millions is impossible. For the mind, millions are an abstraction. The literary imagination depicts the horrors by focusing on individuals and leaving it up to the reader or spectator to multiply its effect in imagination. But no multiplication can possibly encompass the enormity of what took place. All words, all art are inadequate to the actual events. And yet as Boris Diop says of Cornelius in *Murambi: The Book of Bones*: “[He] was a little ashamed to have thought of making a play out of this [the Rwandan horrors]. But he didn't reject his desire for words, a desire dictated by despair, by powerlessness before such enormous evil and doubtless by a guilty conscience. He didn't intend to resign himself to the definitive victory of the assassins with his silence.” If the enormity cannot be encompassed by words, what can be represented is the way individual persons have experienced the violence. The effect of the personal story is to rescue the person from statistical anonymity. We have diaries of those who perished as well as the testimonies (a sample of which was provided by Ilana Rosen) and memoirs of those who have survived. There is a wide range of response: endurance

with or without dignity, opportunism, collaboration, and rebellion. We of course do not have the memoirs of those who are in denial or have been traumatized. In her novel *Love Macht Frei*, Rachel Talshir speaks of the desire, “doomed to failure to put the horror behind, to cast off memories, to continue on her way as if nothing had happened.” We have testimony from children of survivors frustrated by the unwillingness of their parents to talk about their experiences. There is now a literature by the children who have felt the need to recover the stories of their parents partly because they wish to know them and partly in the interests of their own psychic health. One of my graduate students, a daughter of a survivor, devoted her dissertation to that literature.

The result is a terrible irony: a displacement of focus from those responsible for the horrors to those who endured them, the effect of which is the shifting of the burden of guilt to the victims themselves. Reviewing life in the camps, the survivor worries, indeed obsesses about what he or she did or failed to do in order to survive. It is as if the torturers had turned the tables on the victims, who become guilty for the crimes committed against them. We know that the number of survivor suicides exceeds by far that of those in the camps. In the camps, the victims did not have the time to reflect upon their behavior and the enormities they suffered. Uppermost was the instinct for survival. Reflection came after liberation. Choices, if one can call them choices, had been made in situations of extremity that were intolerable. (William Styron has presented us with one such choice in his novel *Sophie's Choice*.)

One way of thinking about survivor guilt is to remember that the aim of the mass murderers is not simply the extermination of their

victims, but their dehumanization as well. There is no guilt for disposing an object, a thing, a piece of garbage. The executioners in Rwanda believed that the dead of Murambi “were missing what it is that makes them human.” They lacked soul. The torturers had immunized themselves to the threat of a guilty conscience. In the process of dehumanizing or attempting to dehumanize their victims, they dehumanized themselves. Survivor guilt then is a way of refusing victory to the murderers. If the murderers had divested themselves of conscience, the survivors would not allow theirs to die. Of course, guilt can be self-destructive, and it cost the lives of survivors. And here literature (in particular the memoir) has a role to play. First to remember (that is, not to allow others who had not undergone the ordeal to forget). And then to understand oneself, one's fellow victims and to mourn and show compassion. The problem for the writer is to achieve an appropriate understanding and judgment.

The most humane writing makes distinctions among those who initiated the crimes, those who collaborated under duress, “the little perpetrator” in the language of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, those who were opportunists and those who fought back. Primo Levi names the zone of collaboration and compromise the gray zone. Those who inhabited the gray zone should be understood, even shown compassion and not condemned to Hell. Who among us knows how he or she would act in extremity? What needs to be remembered, however, are not only the torture, the humiliations, the compromises, the betrayals and self-betrayals but also the acts of courage and kindness in spite of everything. Levi remembers Lorenzo, who saved his life and preserved his faith in humanity. “I believe that it was really due to



Lorenzo that I am alive today; and not so much for his material aid as for his having constantly reminded me by his presence, by his natural and plain manner of being good, that there still existed a just world outside our own, someone still pure and whole, not corrupt, not savage, extraneous to hatred and terror, something difficult to define, a remote possibility of good, but for which it was worth surviving.”

Jean Améry remembers the following encounter.

“In Auschwitz [Juszek, a camp guard] once hit me in the face because of a trifle; that is how he was used to dealing with all the Jews under his command. At this moment—I felt it with piercing clarity—it was up to me to go a step further in my prolonged appeals case against society. My human dignity lay in this punch to his jaw—and that it was in the end I, the physically much weaker man, who succumbed and was woefully thrashed, meant nothing to me. Painfully beaten, I was satisfied with myself. But not, as one might think, for reasons of courage and honor, but only because I had grasped well that there are situations in life in which our body is our entire self and our entire fate. I was my body and nothing else: in hunger, in the blow that I suffered, in the blow that I dealt. My body, debilitated and crusted with filth, was my calamity. My body, when it tensed to strike, was my physical and metaphysical dignity.”

These memoirs and others are an answer to Bellow’s challenge. Freedom, dignity and enlightenment were not totally extinguished, even in the camps.

And what of those who initiated the crimes: the Hitlers, the Stalins, the Pol Pots, and their henchmen, the willing executioners? They deserve no mercy, but they need to be understood, if we wish to learn something about the nature and motives of the crimes, the kind of knowledge that may help prevent their recurrence. To consign them to the category of the monstrous and unspeakable is to render them opaque and perhaps contribute to our sense of hopelessness. In attempting to understand, however, one needs to be vigilant about resisting sympathy, the fault of Gita Sereny’s otherwise admirable study of Albert Speer, Hitler’s architect and factotum. But even this fault reveals the difference between the two sides. One side dehumanizes its enemies, the other side humanizes them. The effort at understanding the victimizers is of course not the responsibility of the victim, who would require heroic self-possession to overcome feelings of rage, resentment, and despair. Primo Levi is rare among the victim survivors in his self-possession and freedom from resentment. The South African model of Truth and Reconciliation that Antjie Krog describes in her remarkable book, *Country of My Skull*, seems to me a model (for all its difficulties, partial realizations, and even failures) for transcending the cycle of violence.

How then should we think of the question of the collective guilt of the victimizing nation? Does it exist? Should we hold the Germans as a nation responsible for the Holocaust, the Hutus as a collectivity for the massacre of the Tutsis, the Serbs for the sufferings of the Bosnians, the Turks for the Armenian genocide? The list is endless. In his book *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid*, Mark Sanders calls attention to Karl Jaspers’s little book, *The Question of German Guilt*. (There are of course a number of substitutions one can make for German in the title.) Jaspers resists the idea of collective

guilt when he writes: “Only individuals have a will and can therefore be held responsible.” Actually, he is not consistent throughout the book, because elsewhere in distinguishing among kinds of guilt (criminal, political, moral, and metaphysical), he has this to say about political guilt. “Political guilt: This involves the deeds of statesmen and of the citizenry of the state whose power governs me and under whose order I live. Everybody is co-responsible for the way he is governed.” And elsewhere, he asserts: “It would, indeed, be an evasion and a false excuse if we Germans tried to exculpate ourselves by pointing to the guilt of being human.” (Culpability in the political sense is not in Jaspers’s view criminal. It does not entail jail time.)

The question of collective guilt needs sorting out. If it means the blanket condemnation of all Germans or the citizens of any other victimizing nation, then to do so would be a travesty of justice. There were Germans who resisted and perished at the hands of the Nazis. There is the question of degree of complicity. The passive bystander and the person behind the closed door need to be distinguished from those who actively and not under duress perpetrated the crimes. Primo Levi’s lesson about the gray zone applies to Germans and Jews, Serbs and Bosnians, Hutus and Tutsis. Not all Germans were responsible for the Holocaust and there are different degrees of responsibility. Moreover, one wants to avoid the racist implications of a judgment that would visit the sins of a generation on ancestors and descendants. Beethoven, Goethe, Schiller, and even Nietzsche bear no responsibility, and neither does the generation that came into existence shortly before and after 1945.

And yet as Jaspers himself demonstrates in his inconsistency, the idea of collective guilt is hard to avoid. What should we make of the

actions of a crowd in which the individual surrenders his will to a charismatic leader? I do not think that it is enough to say that every individual in the crowd or tribe or nation must be held responsible. There is the phenomenon of crowd behavior that I don’t believe can be reduced to the individual wills that compose the crowd. In understanding and judging the behavior of the crowd, we need not only a knowledge of the will of crowds in general, but also of the culture of particular crowds. Not all group behavior is noxious. The Danes refused to collaborate with the Nazis and helped Jews escape to Sweden, a neutral country, while the Bulgarians selectively protected their own Jews. In order to comprehend the behavior of the Danes and the Bulgarians we need to know something more than individual psychology. What is it in their cultures and histories that distinguished their behavior from that of, say, the Poles and the French? Similarly, what in the culture and the history of Germany led to the Holocaust? By reducing the question of guilt to the individual person, we effectively deprive ourselves of learning what it is in the culture of Germany (note, not the genes of the Germans) that produced the Germany of 1933-45, and we also allow the Germans to ignore their own history and responsibility.

Collective guilt is a potentially racist concept. I have tried to define or redefine it in a way that would foreclose racism. I am open to dialogue and debate on the matter. What I would fiercely resist, however, is the idea that there is a moral equivalence between the racists and their perpetrators and those who would indict the nation responsible for the atrocities. According to Jaspers, the view that “the Germans are guilty of the Holocaust is as absurd as claiming that the Jews are guilty of the crucifixion.” The symmetry is facile and misleading. The sentence conceals a parallel between the Nazi stereotyping and mass murder of the Jews and the judgment of

collective guilt passed, for instance, by Jean Améry, a camp survivor. The accusation that the Jews crucified Christ, the rationale for centuries of anti-Semitism, paradoxically minimizes the enormity of Nazi atrocities. The treatment of the Jews and other non-Aryan nations and groups was a monstrous unprovoked cruelty. The judgment of the Germans by Jewish survivors and others is a reaction to cruelty unaccompanied by genocide or even a lesser violence. Nazi stereotyping and its consequences and the view that the Germans are collectively guilty (even if one wishes to quarrel with the view) do not belong in the same discourse. There is an asymmetry between the murderous behavior of the victimizer and the resentful, even violent reaction of the victim. In saying this, I don't mean to condone violent revenge. But truth and justice require the right discrimination between victimizer and victim. "Truth and Reconciliation" is still the best model.

I have focused on Germany and the Jews. It is the subject with which I have the greatest familiarity and it has been the exemplary event or series of events in the terrible history of mass violence in the twentieth century. But it should be clear that what I have been saying applies to all genocides. Which leads to the question of whether the Holocaust was a unique event in history. For many, to even raise the question is sacrilege. Its uniqueness, that is its radical uniqueness is beyond question. Here are some tentative thoughts. Certainly there are unique features to the Holocaust, especially in the technical efficiency with which it accomplished in record time the dehumanization and extermination of six million Jews. It was unparalleled in the secrecy in which it took place and in its cold blooded systematic aspect. The Jews are the exemplary victims, dispersed throughout the world, universally mistrusted and despised for their alleged betrayal of the messiah and envied for their infiltration into positions of power and influence.

All true. But the risk of seeing the Holocaust as radically unique is to fail to see it as comparable to other genocides (and human history is replete with them), in effect depriving us of the knowledge that might prevent their recurrence. There is of course no guarantee that such knowledge will prevent their recurrence, but the view that the Holocaust is *sui generis* does guarantee that we will learn nothing from it. To which I would add the following. All mass murders, genocides, catastrophes (however we wish to name them) are not the same. The differences are as significant as what they have in common. There is, for example, a difference between a genocide that has been generally acknowledged (the Holocaust) and one that has not been generally recognized (the Armenian catastrophe). Unrecognized catastrophe only intensifies the suffering, as evidenced in David Kazanjian's work on Armenia. These differences however should not become the occasion for establishing a hierarchy of suffering. Comparative suffering does not have a place in the curriculum.

Everyone who has experienced mass violence and murder has reflected on the difficulty, if not impossibility, of representing it. Words, necessary as they are, are inadequate. As was demonstrated persuasively in the session on languages by Eric Cheyfitz and Antjie Krog, the particular language one uses is charged with political and moral difficulty both for writer and audience. And then there is the literary tradition that does not provide the writer with the necessary resources. In *At the Mind's Limit*, Jean Améry writes: "No bridge led from death in Auschwitz to *Death in Venice*." He could have substituted for Mann's novella Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych* or any other modern tale of suffering and death. We are dealing here with incommensurable events. (For one thing in the death of Aschenbach and Ivan Ilych there is no dehumanization.) Reading Améry's sentence, I made another substitution: "No bridge led from Auschwitz to the *Iliad*." Why the

*Iliad*: It is the archetypal work of the Western imagination of heroic mass violence. Homer sings “the wrath of Achilles,” whose murderous course throughout the epic fills the river Xanthus with blood and even rouses its god to do battle with the hero. The *Iliad* is one of the glorious works of literature and Achilles is one of its greatest heroes. But his is a destructive heroism impossible for the modern sensibility conditioned by the horrors of war and by a desire for peace to accept. Writing brilliantly against the grain of the poem, Simone Weil reads it as an anti-war poem.

My reason, however, for evoking the *Iliad* is to show how far we have come in the imagination of mass violence in the modern period. The code of honor that the Greek and Trojan warriors embraced has disappeared. Modern soldiers no longer do battle for glory in the eyes of gods and men. When Achilles encounters an enemy, he acknowledges his value. Indeed, it is the victory over an enemy himself capable of glory that enhances the value of the victory. The representations of violence in contemporary culture (in cinema, television, and fiction) have for the most part trivialized it by deliberately effacing its consequences. We are not made witness to the suffering, the physical horror that Homer unblinkingly represents. The devaluation of heroic violence may have begun in World War I in which soldiers in the trenches became lost in anonymity. But I am not sure that there is even a bridge from World War I to the Holocaust and the other mass murders of our century in their systematic dehumanizing aspect. War on the battlefield is between equals. There is no equality between the mass murderer and his unarmed victim.

What does the representation of the camps, the crematoria, the death marches consist of? Scenes of emaciated inmates, the remains of the victims: hair, shoes, bones, ashes, barren landscape, railroad tracks,

the grid of barracks. There may be an occasional scene of revolt as of the revolt of the Warsaw Ghetto or of the Forty Days of Musa Dagh in which the Armenians rose up against the Turks. But there are few battle scenes, mostly in fact an absence of depicted violence and an eerie silence in those scenes. Much of the representation (as in the case of the work of Aharon Appelfeld) is indirect. The genocide haunts the lives of characters before and after the event. There is a similar indirection in the poetry of Taha Muhammad Ali, for example, in his wonderfully moving poem, “Ambergris,” about exile and longing. One pitfall to be avoided in writing about mass violence is what Primo Levi calls “the lechery of aestheticism.” Boris Diop says of his book: “I wrote my most simple novel, this time forgetting about formal acrobatics, aesthetics, and the little narrative devices. I would like young people to read it, to understand it, to discuss it.” There is no aestheticism in Peter Dale Scott’s *Coming to Jakarta*, but rather a cool, almost understated mixture of personal reflection and a sharp wide-ranging observation of event in his indictment of American complicity in the outrages of our time. There is the remarkable range of Antjie Krog’s lyric voice, at once delicate and fierce, in facing the reality of possession and dispossession, longing for reconciliation between oppressor and oppressed in a common humanity. And then there is the brave effort of Rachel Talshir in looking through the horrors to the redemptive possibility of love. The writers we value are without illusions, faithful to the truth in all its harshness and complexity, imaginative, here meaning both inventive and compassionate. They write with courageous self-possession and resist the temptations of fatalism and indifference.

## Suggested Readings

A complete list can be found at [www.brandeis.edu/ethics](http://www.brandeis.edu/ethics).

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## Participant Biographies

**Taha Muhammad Ali** is one of the leading poets on the contemporary Palestinian literary scene. Born in 1931 in the Galilee village of Saffuriya, he fled to Lebanon with most of the inhabitants of his village during the Arab-Israeli war of 1948. A year later he slipped across the border with his family and found his village destroyed. He then settled in Nazareth, where he has lived ever since. Audiences worldwide have been powerfully moved by Taha Muhammad Ali's poems of political complexity and humanity. *Never Mind: Twenty Poems and a Story* (Ibis Editions) is the poet's first collection to appear in English.

**Boubacar Boris Diop** was born in 1946 in Dakar, Senegal, where he attended a French school. Before completing his secondary education, he described his experiences with racism in a novel which was never published. Diop went to Kigali, Rwanda for two months in 1998 to take part in the "Rwanda: écrire par devoir de mémoire" project along with other artists. Diop's most recent novel, *Murambi*, is based on accounts by survivors of the Tutsi genocide in 1994, when almost half a million people were killed. Originally published in French, *Murambi* is presently being translated into English. Diop lives in Dakar and has been writing for *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* for several years.

**Eugene Goodheart** recently retired as the Edytha Macy Gross Professor of Humanities after 18 years at Brandeis University. He is the author of over 200 articles and reviews. Goodheart has published numerous books including *The Reign of Ideology* and *Does Literary Studies Have a Future?* In 2001 he published his memoirs, *Confessions of a Secular Jew*.

**Jane Alison Hale** has taught French, humanities, and comparative literature as a professor at Brandeis for 20 years. Previously, she worked as a high school English teacher with the Peace Corps in Chad, a second grade teacher in rural North Carolina, and at many odd jobs in equally odd places. Hale travels frequently to Senegal, where, as a Fulbright Senior Scholar, she met Boris Diop in 1994.

**Anna Elizabeth Krog** was born in 1952 on a farm in the Freestate, South Africa. She has published 10 volumes of poetry, two volumes of verse for children, a short novel published by Heinemann and a book, *Country of My Skull*, an account of her reporting for SABC radio on the work of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Krog has recently translated Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* into Afrikaans. Krog has conducted workshops for the South African Congress of Writers in rural areas and worked closely with the Poetry School at Bloemfontein as well as the Poetry Laboratory at the University of Stellenbosch under the guidance of poet D.J. Opperman.

**Ilana Rosen**, born 1962 in Jerusalem, is a senior lecturer in the department of Hebrew literature at Ben Gurion University. She is a scholar of Jewish oral lore from Central and Eastern Europe, particularly of Jewish memories of the inter-war period and the Holocaust. Rosen earned a BA and MA in English Literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a PhD in the Folklore Program of the Hebrew Literature Department of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Her major publications include: *There once was... The Oral Tradition of the Jews of Carpatho-Russia*, which focuses on the inter-war period and its lore; *Sister in Sorrow—A Journey to the Life Histories of Female Holocaust Survivors from Hungary*; *In Auschwitz We Blew the Shofar—Carpatho-Russian Jews Remember the Holocaust*;



and *Hungarian Jewish Women Remember the Holocaust—An Anthology of Life Histories*, a selection of previously unpublished documented life histories.

**Mark Sanders** is assistant professor of English and American Literature at Brandeis University. He is the author of *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid* (Duke University Press, 2002), as well as numerous essays in South African literature and intellectual history. A recipient of the ACLS Charles A. Ryskamp research fellowship, he is currently writing a book on the testimony of witnesses before South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

**Yigal Schwartz** was born in Ramat Gan, Israel, to Hungarian emigrant parents who were Holocaust survivors. He acquired his formal academic training at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Schwartz's research examines different areas of Hebrew literature over the past 150 years. In the course of his academic career, he has won many awards of distinction from various institutions, among them the Dov Sadan Award, the Academia Award in Hebrew Language, and the Alon Award Scholarship. He has lectured at many symposia in Israel and throughout the world, and served as a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and Harvard University. Schwartz is the author of many articles and books on modern Hebrew literature including the most recent *Aharon Appelfeld: From Individual Lament to Tribal Eternity* (Brandeis University Press, 2001). He has edited more than 100 books by well known authors, as well as young and promising Israeli writers. Schwartz directs Heksherim—The Research Center for Jewish and Israeli Literature and Culture at Ben Gurion University.

**Peter Dale Scott** is a former Canadian diplomat and professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley. Born in Montreal in 1929, he is a poet, writer, and researcher. His poetry includes the three volumes of his trilogy *Seculum: Coming to Jakarta* (1988), *Listening to the Candle* (1992), and *Minding the Darkness* (2000). His prose works include *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK* (1996) and *Drugs, Oil and War* (2003). In 2002 he received the Lannan Poetry Award. His website is <http://ist-socrates.berkeley.edu/~pdscott>.

**Faith Smith** is associate professor of English and American Literature, focusing on the Anglophone Caribbean.

**Leigh Swigart**, associate director of the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life, manages the development of seminars for professionals, including the Brandeis Seminars in Humanities and the Professions and the Brandeis Institute for International Judges. A cultural anthropologist by training, her academic work and publications have focused on language use in post-colonial Africa and on the role of community associations in the lives of African immigrants in the United States. Her experience in international education includes a tenure as director of the West African Research Center in Dakar, Senegal, and she has served as the assistant director of the African Studies Center at the University of Pennsylvania. Swigart holds a Ph.D. in sociocultural anthropology from the University of Washington, Seattle, WA.

**Rachel Talshir** was born in Israel in 1957 to Holocaust survivors and grew up in Beersheba. She completed her military service as a reporter for the IDF radio station. She earned her BA in Psychology and her MA in Literature and worked as a reporter and editor for

Israel's *Ha'aretz*, *Ha'ir*, and *Ma'ariv* newspapers. Talshir has published three books to critical acclaim, including her two latest novels: *Love Macht Frei* and *Meeting on the Brink of the Evening*. She currently lives in Tel Aviv.

**Daniel Terris**, director of the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life, has been at Brandeis University since 1992. Programs initiated under his leadership at the Center and as assistant provost at Brandeis have included: the Slifka Program on Intercommunal Coexistence, the Brandeis Institute for International Judges, the Brandeis International Fellowships, Community Histories by Youth in the Middle East (CHYME), the Ethics and Student Coexistence Fellowships, Brandeis in the Berkshires, Genesis at Brandeis University, and the University's continuing studies division. He has offered courses on individualism, poverty, American literature, and the roots and causes of September 11, as well as teaching in the Brandeis Seminars in Humanities and the Professions, which uses literary texts to engage professionals in discussions on professional values and ethics. Dr. Terris received his Ph.D. in the history of American civilization from Harvard University, and he has written on 20th century history, literature, and religion. His current book projects are *Ethics at Work: Creating Virtue in an American Corporation* and *The International Judge: Challenges and Opportunities in an Emerging Global System*.

## Conference Program

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### Literary Responses to Mass Violence

September 16-18, 2003

Hassenfeld Conference Center

Brandeis University

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TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 16

#### *Responding to Political Violence and National Catastrophe: Literary Readings and Discussion*

Moderator: Mark Sanders

Participants: Peter Dale Scott, Taha Muhammad Ali

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 17

#### *Literature and Testimony*

Moderator: Jane Hale

Participants: Peter Dale Scott, Ilana Rosen, David Kazanjian

#### *Nations, Populations, Language*

Moderator: Leigh Swigart

Participants: Antjie Krog, Eric Cheyfitz,  
Taha Muhammad Ali, Mark Sanders

#### *Responding to Political Violence and National Catastrophe: Literary Readings and Discussion*

Moderator: Christopher Lydon

Participants: Boris Diop, Rachel Talshir, Antjie Krog

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 18

*Finding Words in an Age of Violence*

Moderator: Faith Smith

Participants: Boris Diop, Rachel Talshir, William Flesch,  
Yigal Schwartz

*Luncheon and Closing Remarks*

Closing remarks: Eugene Goodheart

## About the Centers

- **International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life**

The mission of the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life is to develop effective responses to conflict and injustice by offering innovative approaches to coexistence, strengthening the work of international courts, and encouraging ethical practice in civic and professional life.

- **Tauber Institute for the Study of European Jewry**

The Tauber Institute seeks to study the history and culture of European Jewry in the modern period. It has a special interest in studying the causes, nature, and consequences of the Holocaust and explores them within the context of modern European diplomatic, intellectual, political, and social history. The Institute is organized on a multidisciplinary basis and supports research, lectures, and conferences, as well as a monograph series published by Brandeis University Press.

- **Department of English and American Literature**

With particular strengths in postcolonial studies, critical theory, and cultural studies, as well as in the traditional fields of British and American literature, the Department's mission is to train undergraduate and graduate students in the formal analysis of literary texts in historical, political, and intellectual context.

• **Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Israel**  
**“Heksherim”—The Research Center for Jewish and Israeli  
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Heksherim—The Research Center for Jewish and Israeli Literature and Culture was created to examine literature in its unique social, cultural, economic and ideological contexts through interdisciplinary approaches that combine literary history, humanist geography, and the history of ideas. Its programs are designed to deepen our understanding of our cultural heritage—including works composed by the Jewish people in Hebrew, English, Yiddish, Ladino, and Judeo-Arabic—and create dialogue among the diverse ethnic groups and nationalities coexisting in Israel. Heksherim promotes the work of scholars, writers and poets whose joint projects combine academic excellence with cultural sensitivity and social responsibility.

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