Foreword

SHOSHANA FELMAN AND DORI LAUB, M.D.

“We have all the answers,” Dostoevsky said: “It is the questions we do not know.” This is a book on memory and on questions. On questions that we do not know, that we do not as yet possess as questions, but which nonetheless compellingly address us from within contemporary art and from within contemporary history. As readers, we are witnesses precisely to these questions we do not own and do not yet understand, but which summon and beseech us from within the literary texts. What is the relation between literature and testimony, between the writer and the witness? What is the relation between the act of witnessing and testifying, and the acts of writing and of reading, particularly in our era?

What is, furthermore, this book will ask, the relation between narrative and history, between art and memory, between speech and survival? Through an alternation of a literary and a clinical perspective, the present study strives to grasp and to articulate the obscure relation between witnessing, events and evidence, as what defines at once the common ground between literature and ethics, and the meeting point between violence and culture, the very moment when, precisely, the phenomenon of violence and the phenomenon of culture come to clash—and yet to mingle—in contemporary history.

It is no coincidence if this book proceeds from the collaboration of two authors, engaged in separate, yet complementary, fields of endeavor: one of us is a professional interpreter of texts, the other—a professional interpreter of people; one of us is a literary critic and a literary educator at Yale University, training graduate and undergraduate students in the complex relationship between language and life and in the methods and techniques of reading, and of listening to, truths that are unspoken—or unspeakable—and that are yet inscribed
in texts; the other is a psychiatric educator trained to decipher traces
of trauma in human narrative, a psychoanalyst pragmatically engaged
in the treatment of trauma survivors, and the cofounder of a testimo-
nial enterprise: the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale.
This book has grown out of the mutual interest we each had in the
other's work, and has gradually evolved—over a period of six years—
out of the encounter and the dialogue between these two professional
perspectives, and between the mutually enhancing lessons of these
different practices.

The chapters that will follow, while primarily conceived and written
(as their signature will indicate) by one of us or by the other, are in
fact the product of this intellectual and conceptual interaction and of
this continuous dialogue of insights, that has served both as the
motivating and as the enabling force in the process of the writing.

With the exception of the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-
century writers and theorists discussed in Chapter 1 (among them
Freud, Dostoevsky, Mallarmé), the major texts, films and documents
submitted to the scrutiny of this book (Camus' novels, de Man's essays,
the poetic project of Celan, videotaped Holocaust testimonies, and
the film Shoah by Claude Lanzmann) were all written and produced
consequent to the historic trauma of the Second World War, a trauma
we consider as the watershed of our times and which the book will
come to view not as an event encapsulated in the past, but as a history
which is essentially not over, a history whose repercussions are not
simply omnipresent (whether consciously or not) in all our cultural
activities, but whose traumatic consequences are still actively evolving
(Eastern Europe and the Gulf War are two obvious examples) in
today's political, historical, cultural and artistic scene, the scene in
which we read and psychoanalyze, and from within whose tumult and
whose fluctuations we strive both to educate and write.

If our readings, in the studies that will follow, thus extend, indeed,
not merely to the texts themselves but to the intellectual, political,
historical and biographical context of their actual production, it is
not, however, so as to return, once again, to the purely academic
"mirror-games" between "novel" and "life" and to the traditional, all-
too-familiar critical accounts of the mutual "reflection" (or "representa-
tion") between "history" and "text." It is rather, and more challeng-
ingly, so as to attempt to see—in an altogether different and explor-
atory light—how issues of biography and history are neither simply
represented nor simply reflected, but are reinscribed, translated, rad-
cially rethought and fundamentally worked over by the text. In order
to gain insight into the significance and impact of the context on the
text, the empirical context needs not just to be known, but to be read;
to be read in conjunction with, and as part of, the reading of the text.
We thus propose to show how the basic and legitimate critical demand
for contextualization of the text itself needs to be complemented,
simultaneously, by the less familiar and yet necessary work of tex-
ualization of the context; and how this shuttle movement or this shuttle
reading in the critic's work—the very tension between textualization
and contextualization—might yield new avenues of insight, both into
the texts at stake and into their context—the political, historical, and
biographical realities with which the texts are dynamically involved
and within which their particular creative possibilities are themselves
inscribed.

In moving in between the questions of the text and the questions
of the context, the overriding effort of the chapters that will follow is
to offer new articulations of perspective: we underscore the question
of the witness, and of witnessing, as nonhabitual, estranged concep-
tual prisms through which we attempt to apprehend—and to make
tangible to the imagination—the ways in which our cultural frames
of reference and our preexisting categories which delimit and deter-
mine our perception of reality have failed, essentially, both to contain,
and to account for, the scale of what has happened in contemporary
history.

The various chapters cover a whole spectrum of concerns, issues,
works and media of transmission, moving from the literary to the
visual, from the artistic to the autobiographical, and from the psycho-
alystical to the historical. In the end, what is maintained is the
multilayered vision offered by all these perspectives held together,
and by the mutual light the various media shed on one another.
The outline of the book revolves around a movement, a dynamic, a
development based in the increasingly articulate pursuit, and in the
increasingly complex progression, of some organizing questions. The
exploratory structure and process of unfolding put in motion by the
book is underscored at once by the concrete transitions from one
chapter to another, by the momentum marking the progression of the
table of contents as a whole, and by the shifting global vision offered
by the volume, as it moves from concrete questions of practice into
vaster questions of the mutual interaction between theory and history.
"We have all the answers: it is the questions we do not know." This
book indeed is looking not so much for answers as for new enabling questions, questions that would open new directions for research and new conceptual spaces for the yet unborn answers.

In the space engendered by—and in between—the disciplines we work in, the process of the questioning starts here in medias res, in the midst of the fulfillment of our daily tasks. The opening chapters thus proceed from a description of the differing nature of our practices—the practice of reading and the practice of listening—insofar as those two practical approaches bring into focus the different emphases, the different kinds of pragmatic situations and the different kinds of difficulties inherent to the exercises of the disciplines in which we work and by which our insights and our methods are informed: literature on the one hand, psychoanalysis on the other.

But into those two practices, we propose to introduce the dimension of the real—the events and implications of contemporary history. Both practices will thereby here confront at once their limits and their critical dimensions. As our ventures will bear witness to and as the concrete examples we narrate will show, the encounter with the real leads to the experience of an existential crisis in all those involved: students as well as teachers, narrators as well as listeners, testifiers as well as interviewers.

Chapter 1 narrates, indeed, the story of a class in which the reading of a chain of testimonial literary texts in conjunction with the viewing of videotaped autobiographical accounts of Holocaust survivors, brings about such an encounter with the real that the class, all of a sudden, finds itself entirely at a loss, uprooted and disoriented, and profoundly shaken in its anchoring world views and in its commonly held life-perspectives.

The book thus moves from the description of the unexpected educational experience of this crisis—and from the pedagogical lesson learnt in its wake—to a more directly focused clinical analysis, in Chapter 2, of the risks and the vicissitudes of listening: of listening to human suffering and to traumatic narratives. Even when the listener—in his capacity as psychoanalyst—is trained by discipline and by profession to treat trauma and to be its witness, the experience of the witnessing—of the listening to extreme limit-experiences—entails its hazards and might equally, like reading and like viewing in the story of the previous chapter, suddenly—without a warning—shake up one's whole grip on one's experience and one's life. The professionally trained receivers of the testimonies which bear witness to the war atrocities—the listeners and interviewers whose own listening in fact enables the unfolding of the testimonial life accounts of Holocaust survivors—cannot fulfill their task without, in turn, passing through the crisis of experiencing their boundaries, their separateness, their functionality, and indeed their sanity, at risk. They have to learn how to recognize these hazards, how to integrate these pitfalls of the witnessing into the fulfillment of their professional and human task, and how to bond with the narrator in a common struggle to release the testimony which, in spite of inhibitions on both sides, will allow the telling of the trauma to proceed and to reach its testimonial resolution.

The practical hazards of listening—of coming to know—lead to a thinking of the crucial role the (always threatened) preservation of the truth, of knowledge and reality, plays in the enablement of psychological survival—in the very ability to sustain and to continue life after catastrophes. Chapter 3, in this way, moves from a description of the practice of the testimonial to a first attempt at venturing out a theory of testimony—at theorizing, that is, both the historical and philosophical lessons, and the psychoanalytic implications, of this practice. On the basis of a close analysis of concrete examples of historical and autobiographical accounts, the process of the testimony indeed sheds new light, both on the psychoanalytic relation between speech and survival, and on the historical processes of the Holocaust itself, whose uniquely devastating aspect is here interpreted for the first time as a radical historical crisis of witnessing, and as the unprecedented, inconceivable, historical occurrence of "an event without a witness"—an event eliminating its own witness.

Chapter 4 (on Camus' *The Plague*), Chapter 5 (on de Man's mature work in its historical and philosophical relation to his early writings) and Chapter 6 (on Camus' *The Fall*) test, attest and amplify this theory through the close analysis of postwar critical and literary texts which, indirectly or directly, testify precisely to this catastrophic trauma. From Camus' *The Plague*, a wartime piece of writing and an immediate postwar publication, to Camus' *The Fall*, written a decade after the war but here interpreted as a crucial transformation and revision of *The Plague*, as a delayed effect and a belated thinking—and rethinking—of the trauma, literature—of which Camus becomes in our analysis a profound emblem—undergoes at once a stylistic and a philosophical transvaluation. We read both this stylistic transformation and this philosophical transvaluation taking place in Camus' writing.
as the indirect expressions of—or the belated testimonies to—the radical crisis of witnessing the Holocaust has been, and to the consequent, ongoing, as yet unresolved crisis of history, a crisis which in turn is translated into a crisis of literature inssofar as literature becomes a witness, and perhaps the only witness, to the crisis within history which precisely cannot be articulated, witnessed in the given categories of history itself.

Surprisingly, but with an eloquence whose objective and coincidental nature is almost uncanny, it is a similar kind of philosophical and ethical transvaluation that we find in Paul de Man's critical writings (to which we turn in Chapter 5). Like Camus' The Fall, we read de Man's work—both his philosophical and existential dealings with literary theory and his practical engagement with specific texts (Rousseau, Shelley or Benjamin)—as a testimony, similarly, to a radical crisis of the literary text which is itself a witness to the crisis—and to the critical dimensions—of a history that nonetheless remains, as such, at once unspeakable and inarticulable—a history that can no longer be accounted for, and formulated, in its own terms.

Although de Man's political position, at its starting point, is very different from Camus; although Camus' war pieces are written by a member of the French Resistance, whereas de Man, at the beginning of the war, writes as a collaborating journalist, the transformation they both undergo from their early to their later writings bears striking underlying similarities. Paul de Man's personal and literary journey from his youthfully, simplistically embraced position as the journalistic chronicler and as the would-be historian of World War II, to his withdrawal into silence, and to his consequent retreat into a prose profoundly questioning the very possibility of representation, and into the ascetic, self-denying and uncompromising rigor of the author of the later writings, seems to follow the same cognitive itinerary as the one which leads Camus from the naive, idealistic faith in witnessing embodied by The Plague to the sobering discovery, narrated by The Fall, of the failure and of the betrayal of the witness, as well as of the radical collapse inherent to the historical experience of witnessing as such.

The failed confession of The Fall could thus stand in the place of de Man's missing confession: insobar as it belatedly accounts for the aftermath of the trauma—and for the belated transformation—occasioned by the war, The Fall indeed can be read as de Man's unspoken autobiographical story.

And yet, in its deliberate conception and design, The Fall in fact enacts the story of Camus and Sartre—the story of the rupture of their friendship and of the disruption of their intellectual alliance, through the polemics of their views on history and the explosive political and philosophical debate that marks the parting of their ways. Encompassing uncannily the story of de Man as well as that which separates Camus from Sartre, The Fall turns out to be—beyond the personal and beyond any reductive psychological trivialization—the fated and ill-understood story of the baffling fall of an entire generation, a story (and a history) from whose bewildering complexity and from whose chaotic implications we have not as yet emerged.

In the final chapter of the book, however, Claude Lanzmann's Shoah—the ground breaking film which we here consider as the work of art of our times—takes us one step further. From the impossible confession of the Holocaust, pronounced as such and testified to philosophically and literarily both by Camus' The Fall and by the later writings of de Man, both by the ex-Belgian and former collaborator who has radically broken his ties with his country and his past, and by the French Resistant and the former wartime spokesman for Free France, Shoah leads us, through an exploration of the depths of history defined precisely as historical unspeakability, to a retrieval of the possibility of speaking and to a recovery and a return of the voice.

The impossible, unspeakable confession reverberates as well, throughout the film, in the bewildered muteness of the survivors of the holocaust themselves, who have continued, willingly or not, to be "the bearers of the silence," the very bearers, that is, of the secrecy and the secret of contemporary history. In its interviews with the survivors, the ex-Nazis, the bystanders, Shoah acutely shows how the Holocaust still functions as a cultural secret, a secret which, essentially, we are still keeping from ourselves, through various forms of communal or of personal denial, of cultural reticence or of cultural canonization. The film bursts this secret open. Its whole effort is, precisely, to decanonize the silence, to desacralize the witness and, in so doing, to enact the liberation of the testimony from the bondage of the secret. The film thus accomplishes at once a journey into history as fall to silence and a triumph, a return and a repossession of the living voice, for which art has now recovered the historically lost power to transmit and to convey.

It is this power which has summoned our act of listening in this book, and to whose call and whose imperative we have tried, in the essays here presented, to respond.
Foreword

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

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

ONE

Education and Crisis,
Or the Vicissitudes of Teaching

SHOSHANA FELMAN

I

Trauma and Pedagogy

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

Psychoanalysis, as well as other disciplines of human mental welfare, proceed by taking testimonies from their patients. Can educators be in turn edified by the practice of the testimony, while attempting to enrich it and rethink it through some striking literary lessons? What does literature tell us about testimony? What does psychoanalysis tell us about testimony? Can the implications of the psychoanalytic lesson and the literary lesson about testimony interact in the pedagogical experience? Can the process of the testimony—that of bearing witness to a crisis or a trauma—be made use of in the classroom situation?

What, indeed, does testimony mean in general, and what in general does it attempt to do? In a post-traumatic century, what and how can testimony teach us, not merely in the areas of law, of medicine, of history, which routinely use it in their daily practice, but in the larger areas of the interactions between the clinical and the historical, between the literary and the pedagogical?
**Education and Crisis**

**The Alignment between Witnesses**

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

I found those letters more gripping and absorbing than any literary work I have read for years past. They belong among those singular memoirs, autobiographies, collection of letters from which Kafka himself drew sustenance. He himself . . . [read] over and over again, the letters of Kleist, of Flaubert, and of Hebbel . . . To call these letters documents would be saying too little, unless one were to apply the same title to the *life-testimonies* of Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Dostoevskv. For my part, I can only say that these letters have penetrated me like an actual life.¹

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

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

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


⁴Ibid. emphasis mine.

**Education and Crisis**

**The Appointment**

It is a strange appointment, from which the witness-appointee cannot relieve himself by any delegation, substitution or representation. "If someone else could have written my stories," says Elie Wiesel, "I would not have written them. I have written them in order to testify. And this is the origin of the loneliness that can be glimpsed in each of my sentences, in each of my silences."³ Since the testimony cannot be simply relayed, repeated or reported by another without thereby losing its function as a testimony, the burden of the witness—in spite of his or her alignment with other witnesses—is a uniquely noninterchangeable and solitary burden. "No one bears witness for the witness," writes the poet Paul Celan.⁴ To bear witness is to *bear the solitude* of a responsibility, and to *bear the responsibility*, precisely, of that solitude.⁵

And yet, the *appointment* to bear witness is, paradoxically enough, an appointment to transgress the confines of that isolated stance, to speak for other and to others. The French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas can thus suggest that the witness's speech is one which, by its very definition, transcends the witness who is but its medium, the medium of realization of the testimony. "The witness," writes Levinas, "testifies to what has been said *through* him. Because the witness has said 'here I am' before the other."⁶ By virtue of the fact that the testimony is *addressed* to others, the witness, from within the solitude of his own stance, is the vehicle of an occurrence, a reality, a stance or a dimension *beyond himself*.

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

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

⁵Celan's verse, "No one bears witness for the witness," is in effect so charged with absolute responsibility and utter solitude, so burdened with the uniqueness of the witnessing, that it becomes itself not a simple statement but a speech act which repeats, performs its own meaning in resisting our grasp, in resisting our replicating or recuperative witnessing. It thus performs its own solitude: it puts into effect what cannot be understood, transmitted, in the mission of transmission of the witness. It is the resonances of this *bearing*, of this burden of the performance of the witness, that will become, in all the senses of the word, the *burden* of this book—its leitmotif. In different forms and in a diversity of contexts, Celan's verse will indeed itself return through the various chapters of the present volume, like a compelling, haunting melody, like a directed beacon, an insistent driving force in the quest toward something which is not entirely within reach.

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

The Scandal of an Illness

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

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

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

Camus' choice of the physician as the privileged narrator and the designated witness might suggest that the capacity to witness and the act of bearing witness in themselves embody some remedial quality and belong already, in obscure ways, to the healing process. But the presence of the doctor as key-witness also tells us, on the other hand, that what there is to witness urgently in the human world, what alerts and mobilizes the attention of the witness and what necessitates the testimony is always fundamentally, in one way or another, the scandal of an illness, of a metaphorical or literal disease; and that the imperative of bearing witness, which here proceeds from the contagion of the plague—from the eruption of an evil that is radically incurable—is itself somehow a philosophical and ethical correlative of a situation with no cure, and of a radical human condition of exposure and vulnerability.

In an Era of Testimony

Oftentimes, contemporary works of art use testimony both as the subject of their drama and as the medium of their literal transmission. Films like *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann, *The Sorrow and the Pity* by Marcel Ophuls, or *Hiroshima mon amour* by Marguerite Duras and Alain Resnais, instruct us in the ways in which testimony has become a crucial mode of our relation to events of our times—our relation to the traumas of contemporary history: the Second World War, the Holocaust, the nuclear bomb, and other war atrocities. As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference.

What the testimony does not offer is, however, a completed statement, a totalizable account of those events. In the testimony, language is in process and in trial, it does not possess itself as a conclusion, as the constitution of a verdict or the self-transparency of knowledge. Testimony is, in other words, a discursive practice, as opposed to a pure theory. To testify—to vow to tell, to promise and produce one's own speech as material evidence for truth—is to accomplish a speech act, rather than to simply formulate a statement. As a performative speech act, testimony in effect addresses what in history is action that exceeds any substantialized significance, and what in happenings is impact that dynamically explodes any conceptual reifications and any constative delimitations.

Crisis of Truth

It has been suggested that testimony is the literary—or discursive—mode par excellence of our times, and that our era can precisely be defined as the age of testimony. "If the Greeks invented tragedy,
the Romans the epistle and the Renaissance the sonnet," writes Elie Wiesel, "our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony." What is the significance of this growing predominance of testimony as a privileged contemporary mode of transmission and communication? Why has testimony in effect become at once so central and so omnipresent in our recent cultural accounts of ourselves?

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

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

II

The Story of a Class

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

I did not know then that I would myself, one day, have to articulate my testimony to that class, whose lesson—and whose unforeseeable eventness—turned out to be quite unforgettable, but not in ways that anyone could have predicted. I had never given—and have never given since—any other class like it, and have never been as stupified by the inadvertent lessons and the unforeseeable effects of teaching as I was by the experience of this course. I would like to recount that uncanny pedagogical experience as my own "life-testimony," to share now the peculiar story of that real class whose narrative, in spite of its unique particularity, I will propose as a generic (testimonial) story (in a sense to which I will return, and from which I will later draw the implications): the story of how I became, in fact, myself a witness to the shock communicated by the subject-matter; the narrative of how the subject-matter was unwittingly enacted, set in motion in the class, and how testimony turned out to be at once more critically surprising and more critically important than anyone could have foreseen.

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

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

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

Narrative and Testimony: Albert Camus

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

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

Thus, the narrator-doctor-witness feels both obligated and compelled to “chronicle” the “grave events” of the catastrophe he has survived and to “play the part of a historian” (6), to “bear witness,” as he puts it, “in favor of those plague-stricken people, so that some memorial of the injustice done them might endure” (287). Since The Plague is a transparent allegory for the massive death inflicted by the Second World War and for the trauma of a Europe “quarantined” by German occupation and desperately struggling against the overwhelming deadliness of Nazism; since, indeed, a fragment of the novel was published literally as an underground testimony, as a French Resistance publication in Occupied France (in 1942), the witness borne by the doctor underscores, and at the same time tries to grasp and comprehend, the historical dimension of the testimony.

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

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

Confession and Testimony: Fyodor Dostoevsky

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

I’m a sick man . . . a mean man. I think there’s something wrong with my liver . . . But, actually, I don’t understand a damn thing about my sickness; I’m not even too sure what it is that’s ailing me. I’m not
under treatment and never have been, although I have great respect for medicine and doctors. Moreover, I’m morbidly superstitious, enough, at least, to respect medicine. With my education, I shouldn’t be superstitious, but I am just the same. No, I’d say I refuse medical help just out of contrariness. I don’t expect you to understand that, but it’s so. Of course, I can’t explain who I am trying to fool this way. I’m fully aware that I can’t spit the doctors by refusing their help. I know very well that I’m harming myself and no one else. But still, it’s out of spite that I refuse to ask for the doctors’ help. So my liver hurts? Good, let it hurt even more.”


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

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

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

IV

Psychoanalysis and Testimony: Sigmund Freud

It was at this point that psychoanalysis was introduced into the course, and that the import of its lesson brought about a turning point in the insight of the class. We studied in particular Chapter 2 of The Interpretation of Dreams, with Freud’s detailed account and interpretation of his “Irma dream.” In our tentative awakening into the latent clinical dimension of the literary testimonies we had been examining, it was significant to note that Freud’s narrated dream at once derives from (in reality), and enacts (in phantasy), the problematization of a setting that, this time explicitly, is clinical: the dream is triggered by the doctor’s concern with his only partially successful treatment of his patient Irma: “the patient was relieved of her hysterical anxiety but did not lose all her somatic symptoms.” In the dream, the patient Irma is in fact complaining to the doctor, Freud, about her suffering and her continued pain. When Freud, while thinking of his dream, resorts to writing down for the first time ever all his free associations, he unexpectedly discovers, all at once, the dream’s specific latent meaning, an unprecedented method of dream interpretation and a theory of dreams as psychic fulfillments of unconscious wishes:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thus the recognition of the illness as hysteria makes little difference to the patient; but to the doctor quite the reverse. It is noticeable that his attitude towards hysterical patients is quite other than towards sufferers from organic diseases. He does not have the same sympathy for the former as for the latter. Through his studies the doctor has learned many things that remain a sealed book to the layman... But all his knowledge—his training in anatomy, in physiology and in pathology—leaves him in the lurch when he is confronted by the details of hysterical phenomena. He cannot understand hysteria, and in the face of it he is himself a layman. This is not a pleasant situation for anyone who as a rule sets so much store by his knowledge. So it comes about that hysterical patients forlorn his sympathy. He regards them as people who are transgressing the laws of his science—like heretics in the eyes of the orthodox. He attributes every kind of wickedness to them, accuses them of exaggeration, of deliberate deceit, of malingering. And he punishes them by withdrawing his interest from them.10

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

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

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

10First lecture, Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis, 1909 in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XI (1910), pp 11-12. Consequent references to Freud's works (other than The Interpretation of Dreams) will refer to this edition under the abbreviation Standard, followed by volume number (in Roman numbers) and page number (in Arabic numbers).
entirely known, given, in advance, prior to the very process of its utterance. The testimony will thereby be understood, in other words, not as a mode of statement of, but rather as a mode of access to, that truth. In literature as well as in psychoanalysis, and conceivably in history as well, the witness might be—as the term suggests and as Freud knew only too well (as is evidenced by his insistence on “der Zeuge”—the one who (in fact) witnesses, but also, the one who begets, the truth, through the speech process of the testimony. This begetting of the truth is also what Freud does, precisely, through his witness and his testimony to the Irma dream, out of which he will give birth to the entire theory of dreams, and to its undreamt of implications.

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

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

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

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

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

V

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

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

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

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

They have done violence to verse ...

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

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

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

14 “Les gouvernements changent: toujours la prosodie reste intacte: soit que, dans les révolutions, elle passe inaperçue ou que l’attentat ne s’impose pas avec l’opinion que ce dogme dernier puisse varier.”
Education and Crisis

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

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

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

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

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

They have done violence to verse...

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

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

Consciousness in us is lacking of what, above, explodes or splits.¹⁶ [643-647; emphasis mine]

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

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

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

Le conscient manque chez nous de ce qui là-haut éclate..
cussions, in their very uncontrollable and unanticipated nature, still continue to evolve even in the very process of the testimony.

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

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

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

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

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

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

To write—

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

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

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

20"Tu remarques, on n'écris pas, lumineusement, sur champ obscur ... ; l'homme poursuit noir sur blanc." L'Action restreinte, in Mallarmé, op. cit., p. 370.
21"Ecrire—L'encrier, cristal comme une conscience, avec sa goutte, au fond, des ténèbres ... écarte la lampe." Ibid., p. 370.
Poetry and Testimony: Paul Celan, or The Accidenting of Aesthetics

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

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

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

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

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

In spite of his mastery of many languages and of his fluency in many literatures, in spite of his own choice to live in Paris and to be conversant with French culture, Celan could not give up writing in German. "I do not believe in bilingualism in poetry," he said, in reply to a question about his linguistic choices. "Poetry—that is the fateful uniqueness of language."23 To his biographer, Israel Chalfen, Celan explained his loyalty to German: "Only in one's mother tongue can one express one's own truth. In a foreign language the poet lies."24 Yet, this bonding to the mother tongue, this intimate connection to the spoken legacy of his lost mother as the only language to which truth—his own unique truth—can be native, is also, quite unbearably, an indissoluble connection to the language of the murderers of his own parents, a subjugation to the very language from which death, humiliation, torture and destruction issued, in a verdict of his own annihilation. Celan’s poetic writing therefore struggles with the German to annihilate his own annihilation in it, to reappropriate the language which has marked his own exclusion: the poems dislocate the language so as to remodel it, to radically shift its semantic and grammatical assumptions and remake—creatively and critically—a new poetic language entirely Celan’s own. Mallarmé’s crisis of language here becomes the vital effort—and the critical endeavor—to

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

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

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

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

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

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

To seek reality is both to set out to explore the injury inflicted by it—to turn back on, and to try to penetrate, the state of being stricken, wounded by reality [wirklichkeitswund]—and to attempt, at the same time, to reemerge from the paralysis of this state, to engage reality [Wirklichkeit suchend] as an advent, a movement, and as a vital, critical necessity of moving on. It is beyond the shock of being stricken, but nonetheless within the wound and from within the woundedness that the event, incomprehensible though it may be, becomes accessible. The wound gives access to the darkness which the language had to go through and traverse in the very process of its “frightful falling-mute.” To seek reality through language “with one’s very being,” to seek in language what the language had precisely to pass through, is thus to make of one’s own “shelterlessness”—of the openness and the accessibility of one’s own wounds—an unexpected and unprecedented means of accessing reality, the radical condition for a wrenching exploration of the testimonial function, and the testimonial power, of the language: it is to give reality one’s own vulnerability, as a condition of exceptional availability and of exceptionally sensitized, tuned in attention to the relation between language and events.

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

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

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

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

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

The entire poem is, indeed, not simply about violence but about the relation between violence and language, about the passage of the language through the violence and the passage of the violence through language. The violence enacted by the poem is in the speech acts of the German master, the commandant who directs the orchestra of the camp inmates to musically accompany their own grave digging and to celebrate, in an ecstatic death fugue, at once the wounding of the earth and their own destruction and annihilation. But it is already in the very practice of his language that the commandant in effect annihilates the Jews, by actively denying them as subjects, by reducing their subjective individuality to a mass of indistinct, debased, inhuman objects, playthings of his whims, marionettes of his own pleasure of destruction and musical instruments of his own sadistic passion.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{he whistles his Jews out in earth has them dig for a grave} \\
\text{he commands us strike up for the dance} \\
\text{He calls out jab deeper into the earth you lot you others sing} \\
\text{now and play} \\
\text{jab deeper you lot with your spades you others play on for the} \\
\text{dance} \\
\text{He calls out more sweetly play death death is a master from} \\
\text{Germany} \\
\text{he calls out more darkly now stroke your strings then as} \\
\text{smoke you will rise into air} \\
\text{than a grave you will have in the clouds there one lies} \\
\text{unconfined}
\end{align*}
\]

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

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{we drink and we drink you} \\
\text{A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes} \\
\text{he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair} \\
\text{Margarete}
\end{align*}
\]

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

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

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

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

Your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith

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

Your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith

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

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

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink and we drink you
A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes
he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair
Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith we dig a grave in the breezes there
one lies unconfined

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

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

The necessity for art to de-aestheticize itself and to justify hence-
forth its own existence, has been forcefully articulated by the German
critic Theodor Adorno, in a famous dictum which defines, indeed,
Celan's predicament but which has become itself (perhaps too readily)
a critical cliché, too hastily consumed and too hastily reduced to a
summary dismissal of Celan's troubling poetic efficacy in poems like
"Death Fugue": "After Auschwitz, it is no longer possible to write
poems."57 The aesthetic principle of stylization," writes Adorno, "...

make[s] an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning; it is transfigured, something of its horror is removed. This alone does an injustice to the victims ... [Some] works ... are even willingly absorbed as contributions to clearing up the past.²⁰ In Adorno’s “critical conception, it is, however, not just these specific works, nor simply lyric poetry as genre, but all of thinking, all of writing that has now to think, to write against itself.

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

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

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

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

The whole endeavor of Celan’s poetic work can be defined, precisely, in Adorno’s terms, as poetry’s creative and self-critical resistance to the verdict that it is barbaric, henceforth, to write lyrically, poetically; a verdict which the poetry receives, however, not from the outside but from inside itself; a verdict which “Death Fugue” encompasses already, and in fact enacts and sets in motion through the master’s usurpation of the singing of the inmates.

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

NO MORE SAND ART, no sand book, no masters.
Nothing won by dicing. How many
dumb ones?
Seventeen.
Your question—your answer.
Your song, what does it know?
Deep insnow,
Eep innow,
Ee-i-o.

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

Deep in Time’s crevasse
by the aloeate
waits, a crystal of breath,
your irreversible
witness.³²

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

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

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

Deepinsnow,
Eepinnow,
Ee-i-o.

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

35 ... Flashes the Fountain," in Hamburger, p. 151.
Poems in this sense are always under way, they are making toward something.

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

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

As one speaks to stone, like you,
from the chasm, from
a home become a sister to me, hurled
towards me, you,
you that long ago
you in the nothingness of a night,
you in the multi-night encountered, you
multi-you—.37

and at times when
only the void stood between us we got
all the way to each other.38

Crossing the Void, or Poetry as Setting Free

Along with the above-sketched journey of the various writers, theorists and poets, the class traveled its own path. Opened up to the diversity and touched by the concrete peculiarities of literary, clinical, historical and poetic testimonies; captivated and surprised by the unexpected ways in which the very different texts nonetheless unwittingly evolved into each other, came to engage each other's depth and put each other in an increasingly complex perspective, the students reemerged from each textual encounter somewhat changed. The formal and historical vicissitudes of Celan's poetry found them ready: ready to receive the silent counterpoints of the breakage of the words and of the poem's broken sounds; ready to be solicited by the namelessness of Celan's experience; ready, in other words, to assume the position of the "thou," to become the "you" that "in the nothingness of the night" the poetry was seeking. Through its responsive yet subdued, contained vibrations (vibrations evident both in the students' writing and in the keenness of attention in the class discussions), the class became, in fact, this responsive "you," this deeply attentive addressee, prepared to accompany the poet into the very place—the very night, the very silence—from which his poems had originated.

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

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

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

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

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

36'Bremen Speech. Emphasis mine.
38"So many constellations," in Hamburger, p. 135.
monies—of autobiographical life accounts given by Holocaust survivors to volunteer, professionally trained interviewers, most of whom are psychoanalysts or psychotherapists. Within the context of these dialogic interviews, many of these Holocaust survivors in fact narrate their story in its entirety for the first time in their lives, awoken to their memories and to their past both by the public purpose of the enterprise (the collection and the preservation of first-hand, live testimonial evidence about the Holocaust), and, more concretely, by the presence and involvement of the interviewers, who enable them for the first time to believe that it is possible, indeed, against all odds and against their past experience, to tell the story and be heard, to in fact address the significance of their biography—to address, that is, the suffering, the truth, and the necessity of this impossible narration—to a hearing "you," and to a listening community. In the spirit of Celan's poetical endeavor, though on an altogether different level, the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale is thus, in turn, the endeavor of creating (recreating) an address, specifically, for a historical experience which annihilated the very possibility of address.

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

In the context of the course we have previously explored in sequence, one after the other, the historical (Camus/Dostoevsky), the clinical (Camus/Dostoevsky/Freud), and the poetical (Mallarmé/Celan) dimensions of the testimony. Neither dimension taken in itself, however, truly captures the complexity of what the testimony is, since this complexity, as we have seen, always implies, in one way or another, the coexistence of all three dimensions and their mutual interaction. The Holocaust testimonies in themselves are definitely, at least on their manifest level, as foreign to "poetry" as anything can be, both in their substance and in their intent. Yet many of them attain, surprisingly, in the very structure of their occurrence, the dimension of discovery and of advent and the power of significance and impact of a true event of language—an event which can unwittingly resemble a poetic, or a literary, act. The very real, overwhelming and as such, traumatic aspect of these narratives engages, on the other hand, both the clinical and the historical dimensions of the testimony. The clinical and the historical dimensions are implied, as well, by Celan's poetry. What makes Celan's poetry crucially poetic (even in its post-aesthetic, antipoetic stage) is, as we have seen, its
formal insistence on the unpredictability of its own rhythm. In thus insisting on the unpredictability of its own music and its “turns of breath,” Celan’s poetry insisted, in effect (as did Mallarmé’s), on the risky unpredictability of the endeavor of the witness, who does not master—and does not possess—his testimony or his “message in the bottle,” which may or may not reach a “you.” I would suggest, indeed, that both the mystery and the complexity of the endeavor of the testimony and of its compelling power derive, precisely, from this element of unpredictability, from what is unpredictable, specifically, in the effects of the exchange and the degree of interaction between the historical, the clinical and the poetical dimensions of the testimony.

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

The Determination to Survive

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

The woman’s story is the story of a catastrophic, overwhelming loss which leads, however, to an insight into the joint mystery of life and of the need for testimony. The testimony is, precisely, to the experience of the narrator’s repetitious crossing of the line dividing life from death. Starting at age fifteen, the testifier had to live through the successive deaths of nearly all the members of her family—her father, her mother, her youngest brother, her sister-in-law, and a baby (the last three dying in her presence, in her arms). The sole survivor of her family is her newly wedded husband, himself lost during the war but miraculously refound after liberation. Each one of them is, in turn, the only one to survive his or her own family. Although estranged at the time of their reunion, they stay together after the war because, she says, “he knew who I was”:

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

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

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

Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, Yale University, T 58, Helen K.
Education and Crisis

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

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

Liberation from Silence

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

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

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

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

I was unable to read any books . . . I didn't read a word about the Holocaust . . . It just wasn't there. 14

For the past thirty five years I've been trying to convince myself that it never happened, that . . . maybe it happened, but I wasn't affected. I walked under the rain without getting wet. 15

But I never realized that I never talked about it, neither with my wife nor with my children. 16

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

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

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

14Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, T. 152, Menachem S.
15ibid.
16ibid.

...we are dealing with lost generations. It's not only us. It's the generations to come. And I think this is the biggest tragedy of those who survived. 17

VII

The Class in Crisis

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

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

That turn of events took place after the screening of the first Holocaust videotape, recounting the story of the woman. The tapes were screened in the informal privacy of an apartment, with the students sitting on the carpet, all over the floor. During the screening some were crying, but that in itself is not an unusual phenomenon. When the film was over, I purposely left the floor to them. But even though this class, throughout the course, had been particularly literate and exequient, they remained, after the screening, inarticulate and speechless. They looked subdued and kept their silence even as they left. That in itself is not unusual either. What was unusual was that the experience did not end in silence, but instead, fermented into endless and relentless talking in the days and weeks to come; a talking which
could not take place, however, within the confines of the classroom
but which somehow had to break the very framework of the class (and
thus emerge outside it), in much the same way as the writers we
examined somehow all broke through the framework of what they had
initially set out to write.

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

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

After we discussed the turn of events, we concluded that what was
called for was for me to reassume authority as the teacher of the class,
and bring the students back into significance. I therefore called the
students who had failed to contact me, to discuss with each one his
or her reactions to the “crisis-session.” Next I prepared a half-hour
lecture as an introduction to the second screening in the form of an
address to the class which opened, in effect, the next and final session.
This address was divided into two parts: the first part summarized,
and returned to the students, in their own words, the importance and
significance of their reactions; the second part attempted to articulate
for them an integrated view of the literary texts and of the video-
tapes—of the significance of all the texts together, in relation to their
own reactions.

The following are excerpts from this introduction.48

The Address to the Class

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

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

A strange lostness
Was palpably present.49

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

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

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

*Given and tape recorded on December 4, 1984, and consequently transcribed.
"Dumb Autumn Smells," in Hamburger, p. 139.
could say to an outsider to convey a sense of the event was just
fragments: they could not convey the whole experience. "I was com-
pelled," said one student, "to speak about the Holocaust testimonies,
the class, etc., to friends who were not disinterested but who were
perhaps a bit surprised. This speaking was at best fragmentary, dissol-
voring into silence: at moments, lapsing into long, obsessive monologues.
It was absolutely necessary to speak of it, however incoherently. It was
the most fragmented of testimonies. At times, I felt that I would simply
have to abduct someone and lock them up in my room and tell them
about the ‘whole’ thing."

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

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

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

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

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

those happenings. Went through and could come into the light of
day again, ‘enriched’ by all that. (Bremen Speech)

This, I would suggest, is also what has happened now to the language
of the class: it passed through its own answerlessness.

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

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

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

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

It is appropriate to talk about it now already, much like an invited traveller who, without delay, in breathless gasps, discharges himself of the testimony of an accident known and pursuing him . . .

Celan in turn puts an emphasis on the precocity of testimony:

I have gotten ahead of myself (not far enough, I know).50

But after all, literature, too, often shoots ahead of us. La poésie, elle aussi, brûle nos étapes.51

I am inviting you, in turn, to “shoot ahead of yourselves” precisely in this way and to go, in turn, your precious testimony.

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

IX

Pedagogical Transvaluation

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

50The Meridian,” p. 33.

51Ibid., p. 34.
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Crisis. Testimony cannot be authentic without that crisis, which has to break and to transvaluate previous categories and previous frames of reference. “The poem,” writes Celan, “takes its position at the edge of itself.” In a post-traumatic age, I would suggest that teaching, equally, should take position at the edge of itself, at the edge of its conventional conception.

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

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

Teaching as Testimony

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

In much the same way as the psychoanalyst serves as witness to the story of the patient, which he then interprets and puts together, so did I return to the students—in their own words—the material I had compiled and formed of their own reactions. When the story of the class—the story I am telling now—was for the first time, thus, narrated to the class itself in its final session, its very telling was a “crisis intervention.” I lived the crisis with them, testified to it and made them testify to it. My own testimony to the class, which echoed their reactions, returning to them the expressions of their shock, their trauma and their disarray, bore witness nonetheless to the important fact that their experience, incoherent though it seemed, made sense, and that it mattered. My testimony was thus both an echo and a return of significance, both a repetition and an affirmation of the double fact that their response was meaningful, and that it counted.

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

Epilogue

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

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

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

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

The second paper was, in contrast, written by a man (a man who—

Ibid., p. 36.
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the testimony, which found a particular reverberation in my own life.

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

TWO

Bearing Witness
or the Vicissitudes of Listening

DORI LAUB, M.D.

I

A Record That Has Yet to Be Made

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

By extension, the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself. The relation of the victim to the event of the trauma, therefore, impacts on the relation