Introduction

Don’t Mention the War

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

Another striking feature of the correspondence between Sartre and Beauvoir is how little it has to say about the war. It is not that they had forgotten about it. Of course they hadn’t. It was the cause of their separation, and it affected every aspect of their lives. But it was as if it was too big to be seen, so totally present that it did not need to be mentioned. It is (relatively) unspoken and (absolutely) ubiquitous, ubiquitous because unspoken. The war was, according to Sartre at one
point in his *Carnets de la drôle de guerre*, ‘insaisissable’.¹ It is both there and not there. As their contemporary and sometime friend Albert Camus put it in his *Carnets* from the same period, ‘La guerre a éclaté. Où est la guerre?’ (*Œuvres complètes II*, p. 884).

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

¹ Sartre, *Les Carnets de la drôle de guerre*, p. 35. Future references to this and other quoted works are given in the main text with short titles. Full details of editions used are given in the Bibliography.
One of the premises of this book is that the war is present even, and perhaps especially, when it cannot be seen. I am concerned here with the great generation of French writers and thinkers who all had in common that they lived through the war, as combatants, prisoners, résistants and sometimes as passive or active collaborators. The book does not attempt to give a comprehensive overview or synthesis of the impact of the Second World War on the writing and thought of those who experienced it at first hand. Such a project would in all likelihood be interminable, though scholars and critics have made important progress with some of its key aspects. I have chosen here to concentrate on a number of writers – Sartre, Beauvoir, Delbo, Camus, Levinas, Ricœur, Althusser, Kofman, Wiesel, Semprun – whom I admire, but who do not give grounds to establish a consistent, unified story about the war and its lasting impact. My aim here is to seek out some of the traces of war in their writing. The guiding question is: What mark does war, and specifically the Second World War, leave on their work? I am particularly interested in how the war is present in their writing precisely when it is not the explicit topic. How is it there when it is not there? The theoretical tool I develop to explore this is what I call ‘traumatic hermeneutics’, which I introduce in Chapter 2.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> The day war broke out, my missus looked at me and she said, ‘What good are you?’
> I said, ‘How d’ya’ mean, what good am I?’
> ‘Well,’ she said, ‘you’re too old for the army, you couldn’t get into the navy and they wouldn’t have you in the Air Force, so what good are you?’
> I said, ‘I’ll do something!’
> She said, ‘What?’
> I said, ‘How do I know …? I’ll have to think.’
> She said, ‘I don’t know how that’s going to help you, you’ve never done it before, so what good are you?’

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

---

4 The full monologue can be heard at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=77sDEoYkT3U> [accessed 11/08/2017].
regards as the unreasonable scepticism of his wife. From the very first line, the monologue raises the question of how public events are linked to private relations. Neither we nor the narrator are initially sure how the chronology of the anecdote, which takes place on the day war broke out, relates to the wife’s taunting question: ‘What good are you?’ ‘How d’y’ mean, what good am I?’, the narrator immediately replies. What point is being made here? Is the suggestion that the husband is useless related to the war, or are the war and his uselessness independent from one another? In which respects is he no good? Perhaps he is no good as a husband, and specifically as a lover. We might recall that much popular British humour revolves around the male fear of sexual inadequacy. So, at first, we cannot know whether the wife’s complaint about her husband’s shortcomings is necessarily related to the outbreak of war, or whether it represents a more general dissatisfaction. As the monologue develops, it becomes clear that both are in fact the case: the war gives an outlet for the wife’s sense of her husband’s underlying inadequacy. And yet, the strange dignity of the monologue lies in the narrator’s knowledge that he is both useless and willing to serve. How, his wife asks, will he know if he comes across Hitler. ‘I’ve got a tongue in me ’ead, ’aven’t I?’, replies her embattled but not yet fully exasperated husband.

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