SECTION A

Ethics, Trauma and Interpretation
The two chapters in this section explore ethical and hermeneutic issues which arise from trauma studies, partly in a theoretical frame, and partly with reference to material concerning the Second World War. The question discussed in this chapter goes to the core of trauma studies and its difficult ethical negotiations: Who should speak for those who do not speak for themselves – the dead, the mute, the traumatized, those who cannot or will not tell their own stories, or those who have no story to tell? In his ‘Plaidoyer pour les morts’, Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel is adamant that no one has the right to speak in the place of the victims of atrocity: ‘Vouloir parler au nom des disparus [...] c’est précisément les humilier. [...] Laissez-les donc tranquilles’ (Le Chant des morts, p. 197).

We cannot speak on their behalf, nor should we even try to understand them:


We should not have the arrogance to assume that we can share some part of what happened to the victims. And yet not to speak for those who have been silenced, not to recall, not to study what happened to them in the hope of learning something from their stories, would be an act of barbarity in itself, hideously complicit with the forces which sought to eliminate them. As Wiesel puts it elsewhere, ‘Oublier les morts, serait les trahir. Oublier les victimes serait se mettre du côté de leurs bourreaux’ (Discours d’Oslo, p. 27).
Talking of the other’s trauma is an ethical minefield. The duty to preserve the memory of pain has been asserted so often that it has become difficult to contest. This chapter focuses rather on the less evident but insidious dangers inherent in secondary witnessing and vicarious trauma. In one of the key texts for the development of modern trauma studies, the psychiatrist Dori Laub says that ‘the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself’ (‘Bearing Witness’, p. 57). This may be psychologically correct, but I find Laub’s formulation ethically problematic. My argument here is that we do not participate in or co-own the other’s trauma; and the sense or desire that we do should be resisted because it gives us the potentially self-serving illusion of empathic understanding. Rather than the ‘unsettlement’ described by Dominick LaCapra,¹ the claim to participate in the other’s pain might be used to confirm the authority of the analyst and produce premature, unwarranted closure; and closure is not one of the aims of the current book. This chapter examines briefly two authors, Giorgio Agamben and Shoshana Felman, who represent different but equally worrying ways of encroaching on traumas which are not their own; and then at slightly greater length it considers Charlotte Delbo, whose book Mesure de nos jours seems to do precisely what I am arguing against by purporting to speak in the place of traumatized others. The chapter asks how it is that Delbo avoids the charge of over-hastily appropriating the other’s pain which I shall level against Agamben and Felman.

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

¹ On ‘empathic unsettlement’, see for example LaCapra, Writing History, Writing Trauma: ‘At the very least, empathic unsettlement poses a barrier to closure in discourse and places in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance or a benefit (for example, unearned confidence about the ability of the human spirit to endure any adversity with dignity and nobility)’ (pp. 41–42).
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the norms that enable my narrative are not authored by me, so they rob me of my singularity at the very moment I seek to assert it; and because every account is an account given to someone else, it is superseded by the structure of address in which it takes place (p. 39). As Butler puts it succinctly, ‘There is that in me and of me for which I can give no account’ (p. 40). We cannot offer narrative closure for our lives because we are, Butler argues, ‘interrupted by alterity’ (p. 64).

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

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

Agamben and the other’s truth

Giorgio Agamben’s Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive has rapidly become an important and widely cited text in Holocaust and trauma studies. It has not been exempt from criticism, though, particularly for its central move of making the so-called
'Muselmann' the principal figure for the understanding of Auschwitz.\(^2\) The word *Muselmann* (Muslim) was used at Auschwitz and some other camps to designate a type of prisoner who seemed to have given up on life, surviving precariously as a set of biological functions. The *Muselmänner* were, as Thomas Trezise puts it, ‘those who, in the eyes of other inmates, had come to stand (or lie) at or beyond the limit of the human, those “living dead” produced by the slow murder for which most of the concentration camps were designed’ (*Witnessing Witnessing*, p. 134). Drawing on a partial reading of Primo Levi, Agamben elevates these figures to being the key which will unlock the significance of Auschwitz. He describes the *Muselmann*’s status between life and death as ‘the perfect cipher of the camp’ (*Remnants*, p. 48); and he insists that ‘we will not understand what Auschwitz is if we do not first understand who or what the *Muselmann* is’ (p. 52). He then goes on to reveal to us the true meaning of the *Muselmann*, which is also the true meaning of Auschwitz and the whole concentrationary universe. Auschwitz appears as a kind of terrible experiment which lays bare ‘the hidden structure of all subjectivity and consciousness’ (p. 128). The *Muselmann* is what this experiment reveals to be the limit point of human existence: ‘he marks the threshold between the human and the inhuman’ (p. 55); and he is ‘the final biopolitical substance to be isolated in the biological continuum’ (p. 85).

In his account of the *Muselmann*, Agamben draws on the testimony of a number of camp survivors, in particular that of Primo Levi. Indeed, *Remnants of Auschwitz* can be viewed as an extended commentary on a few passages from Levi’s work. In a quotation to which Agamben repeatedly refers, Levi describes the *Muselmänner* as ‘the true witnesses […] the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance’ (*The Drowned and the Saved*, pp. 63–64); but, ‘just as no one ever returned to recount his own death’ (*The Drowned and Other Monsters*, pp. 155–59; *The Parallax View*, pp. 112–13; ‘Neighbors and Other Monsters’, pp. 160–62).

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

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

3 See Levi, If This is a Man, and The Truce: ‘All the musselmans who finished in the gas chambers have the same story, or more exactly, have no story; they followed the slope down to the bottom, like streams that run down to the sea’ (p. 96).
‘in his stead’ because the *Muselmann* cannot speak for himself; but the survivor speaks in ignorance and incomprehension of the *Muselmann*’s experience. Agamben turns this into something rather different. In his account, the witness speaks for the *Muselmann*, and Agamben speaks for the witness. In the absence of the *Muselmann*’s testimony, he takes it upon himself to explain the meaning of the camps. This is confirmed by the final pages of *Remnants of Auschwitz*. Agamben’s book ends with texts by a number of *Muselmänner* who survived the camps. Agamben wants, he says, to leave ‘the last word’ to the *Muselmänner* (*Remnants*, p. 165). On the face of it, the words of the *Muselmänner* appear to contradict the claim that, by definition, they are unable to bear witness. Agamben is nevertheless unshaken, and concludes by insisting that the testimony of the *Muselmänner* ‘fully verifies’ (p. 165) the paradox according to which they are the witnesses who cannot bear witness. By this point he has stopped listening. He has already decided what meaning the lives and deaths of the *Muselmänner* should have.

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

Agamben’s understanding of the *Muselmann* entails, and is enabled by, a misreading of Levi’s comments. Showing how Agamben may not accurately represent the texts to which he refers (particularly works by Levi and Robert Antelme), Ruth Leys states her disapproval of ‘the partial and misleading way he has of reading certain crucial passages, expounding them in terms that are alien to the meaning of the texts in which they appear’ (*From Guilt to Shame*, p. 180). This misreading is not merely a matter of literary interpretation, since it has far-reaching consequences for Agamben’s thought. According to Leys, it underpins his view of the human subject as lacking intention and agency. Moreover, it is important because Agamben regards the concentration
camps not simply as an anomalous occurrence but, on the contrary, as the means to explain the modern world as a whole. The camps are, he tells us in *Homo Sacer* and elsewhere, ‘the hidden matrix and *nomos* of the political space in which we are still living’ (*Homo Sacer*, p. 166; see also *Means Without End*, p. 36); they appear ‘as an event that decisively signals the political space of modernity itself’ (*Homo Sacer*, p. 174). Through the suspension of the normal rule of law in the camps, the state creates for itself a place where it can fulfil what is now one of its main functions, according to Agamben: to manage ‘bare life’, which otherwise cannot be inscribed in the order of the nation (*Homo Sacer*, 174–76; *Means Without End*, pp. 41–44). The *Muselmann* manifests this bare life in its rawest form. So the *Muselmann* is presented as the key to understanding the camps, and the camps are the key to understanding the modern world. Agamben’s rushed appropriation of the other’s trauma in his account of the *Muselmann* underlies and risks discrediting his conception of modernity in general.

**Felman and the pedagogy of trauma**

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

They felt apart, and yet not quite together. They sought out each other and yet felt they could not reach each other. They kept turning to each
other and to me. They felt alone, suddenly deprived of their bonding to the world and to one another. As I listened to their outpour, I realized the class was entirely at a loss, disoriented and uprooted. (p. 48)

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

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

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

This is certainly a heady vision of teaching. Rather than enslaving ourselves and our students to the demands of the syllabus and examinations, we should be provoking crises and opening up ourselves and our students to traumatic encounters. It is striking, however, that this exposure to trauma does not lead Felman to question her authority as a teacher. On the contrary, her account of what teaching should be involves maintaining her dominance over the classroom. She seems confident that she has the ability, the right and the wisdom to decide (to a degree that I, for example, could not) what does or does not compromise the students’ bounds, and what does or does not drive other people crazy; and she appears to be comfortable with her prerogative to
put an end to the crisis by ‘[bringing] the students back into significance’ (p. 48). She provokes the crisis and then resolves it, comparing her role to that of a psychoanalyst who helps her patients work through their trauma (pp. 53–54).

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

There is, moreover, a normative, even coercive, element in this transformation of the classroom into a site of vicarious trauma. After the outbreak of the crisis Felman reports how she called the students ‘who had failed to contact [her]’ to discuss their reactions to what was occurring (‘Education and Crisis’, p. 48; my emphasis). It turns out, then, that not all students were affected to the extent that they felt obliged to contact their teacher; and this response or absence of response is designated as a failure. They are at fault for not participating in the crisis to an adequate degree or in the right way. Failing to be traumatized might lead to failing the class. Felman’s narrative seems to recommend forcing students into crisis, sharing it with them and then imposing one’s authority as teacher to resolve it:
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I lived the crisis with them, testified to it and made them testify to it. My own testimony to the class, which echoed their reactions, returning to them the expressions of their shock, their trauma and their disarray, bore witness nonetheless to the important fact that their experience, incoherent though it seemed, made sense, and that it mattered. My testimony was thus both an echo and a return of significance, both a repetition and an affirmation of the double fact that their response was meaningful, and that it counted. (‘Education and Crisis’, pp. 54–55; emphasis in original)

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

Delbo and the other’s story

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

4 From the growing body of work devoted to Delbo, my understanding of her writing has benefited in particular from the following: Thatcher, A Literary Analysis of Charlotte Delbo’s Concentration Camp Re-Presentation, and Charlotte Delbo: Une voix singulière. Mémoire, témoignage et littérature; Hutton, ‘Conclusion: The Case of Charlotte Delbo’, pp. 210–19; Jones, “A New Mode of Travel”: Representations of Deportation in Charlotte Delbo’s Auschwitz et après and Jorge Semprun’s Le Grand Voyage’, pp. 34–53; Marquart, On the Defensive. Some of the issues discussed in this chapter, such as the question of community and the use of the first person, are brilliantly analysed in Trezise, ‘The Question of Community in Charlotte Delbo’s Auschwitz and After’.
suggest, it manages to avoid the appropriative assumption of authority which problematizes the work of Agamben and Felman. Delbo was 28 in March 1942 when she was arrested in occupied France along with her husband, Georges Dudach, for resistance activities. She was allowed to visit her husband for the final time in May of that year on the day he was executed. She was subsequently deported to Auschwitz and later to Ravensbrück. She was one of the 49 survivors from the 230 women on the convoy in which she was transported to Auschwitz. After the war she published, among other things, three remarkable works grouped together as a trilogy under the title *Auschwitz et après*, which describe and comment on experiences in Auschwitz, Ravensbrück and post-war France. In the current context, it is the third part of the trilogy, *Mesure de nos jours*, which is of most interest. The book presents a series of accounts of the lives of camp survivors after their return to France. Most – though not all – of the survivors are women, and most are named in the title of the section which presents their story: Gilberte, Mado, Poupette, Marie-Louise, Idà, Loulou, Germaine, Jacques, Denise, Gaby, Louise, Marceline, Françoise. Most of these accounts are in the first person singular. No explanation is offered of how the narratives were gathered or composed, and no generic marker on the book indicates whether the reader should take them as biographical or fictional. It would seem that Delbo is doing exactly what I have been objecting to: speaking in the place of others, presenting their stories as first-person narratives when the words they use may not be their own.

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

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5 Delbo attempts to piece together the lives and deaths of the women in her convoy in *Le Convoi du 24 janvier*. 
fact no easier; some endeavour to forget the past, others insist on the
importance of remembering. In a passage quoted above, Cavarero asserts
that ‘your story is never my story’; Delbo does not ask us to recognize
ourselves in the stories of others. There is no thematic consistency to the
lives of survivors which would allow us to interpret Mesure de nos jours
monolithically as a work of, say, despair or hope. The text implies that
there is no Story of the return from Auschwitz, rather we are offered a
multiplicity of stories without overarching sense.

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

6 This is evident in the earliest accounts by survivors of the concentration
camps, such as Robert Antelme’s L’Espèce humaine, first published in 1947.
The opening words of the book’s introduction describe the survivors’ dilemma,
desperately wanting to speak yet unable to recount or identify with their own
experiences (p. 9). For further discussion of this issue, see chapters 3 and 10.
This sense of the necessary unintelligibility of one’s own story is given further poignancy when the speaker insists that she is dead. In Edgar Allan Poe’s story ‘The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar’, the titular M. Valdemar says of himself ‘I am dead’ (p. 277; emphasis original). Poe’s text repeatedly marks its awareness that this claim will appear nonsensical, defying his narrator’s and reader’s frame of understanding. Delbo’s Mesure de nos jours issues the same challenge. The section attributed to Mado begins with the words ‘Il me semble que je ne suis pas vivante’ (p. 47). Listing the dead – ‘Mounette, Viva, Sylviane, Rosie, toutes les autres, toutes les autres’ (p. 47) – Mado believes that no one could return from the camps alive. This recalls the title of the first volume of Auschwitz et après, Aucun de nous ne reviendra. The fact that the book exists suggests that, contrary to the title, some will return and that they will tell of their survival in Auschwitz. But they return with a sense that in fact they have not survived. Their temporality is incommensurable with ours because they died in Auschwitz and return to tell of their deaths. Mado concludes:

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

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

7 This is suggested by the play on the word revenir and the description of the female survivors as revenantes, which also means ‘ghosts’, implying that in some sense they have died. For discussion, see Davis, ‘The Ghosts of Auschwitz: Charlotte Delbo’, pp. 93–110.
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are back among you. The dead cannot tell their own story. The living would not, could not and – it is implied – should not understand it. The title of the second volume of *Auschwitz et après, Une connaissance inutile*, implies that what the dead know would be of no use to us. It can teach us nothing that will help us live more fully. We are better off not knowing.

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

The merging of voices becomes most evident in the section entitled ‘L’Enterrement’. A group of camp survivors, including the narrator of this section, who is addressed as Charlotte, meet at a railway station on their way to attend the burial of one of their former comrades. Some of
the women have not seen each other for years, yet they fall easily into a familiar conversation, exchanging and sharing memories and news. Much of the section is set out as dialogue, sometimes with no indication of who the speaker is at any given moment. It barely matters. The narrator explains the ease with which the group converses: ‘Entre nous, il n’y a pas d’effort à faire, il n’y a pas de contrainte, pas même celle de la politesse usuelle. Entre nous, nous sommes nous’ (pp. 193–94). This final sentence, ‘Entre nous, nous sommes nous’, emphatically insists on the persistence of identity within the group of survivors. The first person plural contains and exceeds the first person singular. Each can tell the story of the other because, in this haunted community of survivors, each story belongs to all of them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

10 Trezise’s focus is slightly different from mine in that he is interested in the possibility of community between survivors and the ‘you’ to whom Delbo sometimes refers, whereas I use the word ‘community’ in the current discussion to refer to the group formed by the survivors. In his nuanced and subtle reading of parts of Aucun de nous ne reviendra, Trezise suggests that the irreducible difference between survivors and non-survivors does not preclude the possibility of a form of community which includes both groups: ‘the tension between identification and estrangement is not a misfortune to be surmounted but a condition of community to be maintained’ (‘The Question of Community’, p. 886). See also Trezise, Witnessing Witnessing, pp. 104–21.
what we can know. Charlotte and her comrades are both the source of the text and the only audience capable of receiving it fully. Indeed, we are warned that we are better off not comprehending, since only the dead can understand the dead, so that to take a share in their narratives would be to forego life. Delbo, the author, may speak in the voice of dead others; but that does not entitle the excluded reader to appropriate their stories and to respond to their pain as if it were our own. Agamben wants to tell us the meaning of the Muselmann’s experience and its relevance for the post-Holocaust world; Felman wants to participate in the suffering of others and then to reassert her authority by conferring significance on it. Delbo, by contrast, issues no invitation to explain or to share.

**Conclusion**

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


12 For discussion and references, see Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, for example pp. 39–41, 87–93, 122–25. Kaplan states that, ‘Arguably, being vicariously traumatized invites members of a society to confront, rather than conceal, catastrophes, and in that way might be useful’; but she goes on to say that ‘On the other hand, it might arouse anxiety and trigger defense against further exposure’ (p. 87).
between, for example, those who were in Auschwitz and those who were not. Delbo reminds us uncompromisingly that those who survived the camps are unintelligible in the terms of those who did not know it at first hand. We are not the victims; we do not share or feel their pain. Dominick LaCapra insists that ‘a historian or other academic, however empathetic a listener he or she may be, may not assume the voice of the victim’ (Writing History, p. 98). I would add that he or she may not assume the victim’s trauma either. It should be possible to speak of these difficult topics with moral urgency, but also analytically and with respectful distance. Following Butler, we may not be able to give a final account of our life, and even less an account of others’ lives; and we have no mandate to assume the pain or decide the meaning of the lives and deaths of others. As readers, the best we can do may be to try to attend as honourably as possible to the traces of that which remains foreign to us.

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