Traces of War

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Published by Liverpool University Press

Davis, Colin.
Traces of War: Interpreting Ethics and Trauma in Twentieth-Century French Writing.
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The previous chapter suggested that Camus’s first novel, *L’Etranger*, is informed by the tragedy of a war which it never once mentions. This chapter examines problems of interpretation and ethics in two later works in which reference to the war is either widely taken for granted (*La Peste*) or explicit (*La Chute*). Camus emerged from the Second World War as an established author, after the publication of *L'Etranger* and his philosophical essay *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* and the staging of his plays *Caligula* and *Le Malentendu*; and, more than Sartre and Beauvoir, his association with the Resistance was strong because of his work on the clandestine newspaper *Combat*. So he had a claim to both artistic and moral credentials. The ethical question for post-war, post-Absurdist Camus is how to move beyond the impasse of *L’Etranger*, in which one man kills another in part because he can see no good reason not to. His second novel, *La Peste*, on which he had begun work during the war, was published in 1947, and marked a new phase in both his writing and his ethical thinking. The move from individual isolation to solidarity and collective revolt would later be theorized in his book *L’Homme révolté*, leading to his bitter split from his one-time friends Sartre and Beauvoir, and to competing visions of him as the champion of even-handed moderation or an emblem of ineffective liberalism. In Debarati Sanyal’s words, Camus has been ‘either celebrated as an exemplary witness to the atrocities of the century or denounced as an accomplice of an imperialist imaginary’ (*Memory and Complicity*, pp. 57–58).¹ This

¹ Sanyal’s discussion of *La Peste* and *La Chute* in *Memory and Complicity* was published later than earlier versions of the material in this chapter, and I find many points of concordance with her searching readings, especially regarding
problem of interpreting his overall stature and achievement is matched by difficulties of restricting the sense of his most important works. In this chapter I want to suggest that the textual complexities of his two major post-war novels, *La Peste* and *La Chute*, frustrate the attempt to identify his writing confidently with any settled position.

*La Peste* does not mention the Second World War any more than *L’Étranger*; yet the assumption that Camus’s novel, set in the Algerian city of Oran, implicitly refers to the mainland French experience of Occupation was quickly accepted, and has remained so ever since its publication. Roger Quilliot’s analysis of the *triple sens* of the novel (as account of a plague, as description of the Occupation and as a metaphysical study) summarizes a consensus which still commands support (see *La Mer et les prisons*, pp. 168–70). Even the polemics of the 1940s and 1950s dealt mainly with the evaluation of the novel rather than its interpretation. Both sides of the argument seemed in agreement over the meaning of the work, and differed only in their attitudes to that meaning. Camus himself encouraged the reading of his novel which linked it to the experience of the Occupation. In 1955, responding to a dissenting article by Roland Barthes, Camus insisted on his right as author to control the reception of his work:

> Bien entendu, tous les commentaires sont légitimes, dans la critique de bonne foi, et il est en même temps possible et signifiant de s’aventurer aussi loin que vous le faites. Mais il me semble qu’il y a dans toute œuvre des évidences dont l’auteur a le droit de se réclamer pour indiquer au moins dans quelles limites le commentaire peut se déployer. (*Lettre à Roland Barthes*, in *Œuvres complètes II*, pp. 285–86)

Camus is trying here, and largely failing, to steer a course between the Scylla of critical anarchy and the Charybdis of authorial dogmatism. Barthes, Camus suggests, has the right to publish his article, but he was wrong in his reading; all commentaries are legitimate, but some are more legitimate than others. Camus adds that *La Peste* can be read ‘sur plusieurs portées’, but that its ‘contenu évident’ is the struggle against Nazism (*Œuvres complètes II*, p. 286); and describing the evolution from *L’Étranger* to *La Peste* he adopts a polemical firmness which contrasts strangely with the hesitations and precautions of the narrator of his own novel: ‘Comparée à *L’Étranger*, *La Peste* marque, *sans discussion*

the importance of history coupled with the difficulty of pinning it down. Sanyal’s reading also brings in the importance of the Algerian context, which is vital but beyond the scope of the current book.
possible, le passage d’une attitude de révolte solitaire à la reconnaissance
d’une communauté dont il faut partager les luttes’ (Œuvres complètes II,
p. 286; emphasis added).

Camus’s exchange with Barthes gives an insight into the author’s
attempts to apply the hermeneutic brake to a text which, eight years
after its publication, was escaping him. His desire to place constraints
on the reception of his work can be explained in part by historical and
biographical determinants. In 1947, when La Peste was published, an
existentialist ethics seemed both urgent and possible; Sartre was still
working on the posthumously published Cahiers pour une morale
promised in the final sentence of L’Etre et le néant. Moral and political
controversies created unfavorable ground for decadent aestheticism.
Camus’s novel indicates his desire to participate in the debate. But by
1955 Camus was feeling wounded and misunderstood; and Barthes’s
article gave him the opportunity both to defend himself and to reappr-
opriate his earlier work. Yet today, the terms of ethical debate having
changed, La Peste may be more interesting for what remains unresolved
in and by the novel than for the particular clarities which Camus wished
to foreground. In what follows, I focus on some difficulties of reading
posed by the novel and their ethical resonance.

**Interpreting La Peste**

The epigraph to *La Peste*, taken from the preface to the third volume
of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, serves as an invitation to interpret: ‘Il est
aussi raisonnable de représenter une espèce d’emprisonnement par une
autre que de représenter n’importe quelle chose qui existe réellement par
quelque chose qui n’existe pas’ (*La Peste*, in Œuvres complètes II, p. 33).
We are warned or informed that what follows needs to be interpreted.
The literal meaning of the work does not exhaust its potential to signify.
This is in itself banal. The fundamental question is not whether the
novel can be read in a variety of ways (it clearly can), but whether the
potential meanings can be exhausted, totalized and reconciled.

The invitation to interpret is taken up within the text itself with
the appearance of the rats in Oran. This gives rise to considerable, but
inconclusive, hermeneutic activity. Rieux’s initial observation that ‘ce
rat n’était pas à sa place’ (p. 38) leads him to consider its presence as
‘bizarre’ (p. 38); for the concierge, on the other hand, it constitutes a
‘scandale’ (p. 38) and can only be explained as a practical joke: ‘Bref,
il s’agissait d’une farce’ (p. 38). According to the old asthmatic, the appearance of the rats is due to hunger: ‘c’est la faim!’ (p. 39); and Rieux discovers that ‘tout le quartier parlait des rats’ (p. 39). Rambert declares that ‘cela m’intéresse’ (p. 42) and is echoed by Tarrou, who describes the appearance of the rats as ‘une curieuse chose’: ‘Mais je trouve cela intéressant, oui, positivement intéressant’ (p. 42). Initially, Rieux pays little attention to the rats. When asked by his wife: ‘Qu’est-ce que c’est que cette histoire de rats?’ (p. 40), he replies: ‘Je ne sais pas. C’est bizarre, mais cela passera’ (p. 40). To Judge Othon’s enquiry about the rats, he replies that ‘ce n’est rien’ (p. 41). Rieux’s mother seems equally unconcerned: ‘Ce sont des choses qui arrivent’ (p. 43).

It is possible to read the varied reactions to the rats in the opening pages of the novel as a mise en abyme of reading itself, oscillating between sanguine indifference and the tendency to naturalize the unfamiliar by accommodating it to expected patterns; and the service de dératisation that Rieux calls upon (see p. 43) corresponds to the desire to disambiguate the text, to rid it of its troubling enigmas as the city must be rid of its rats. The rats eventually disappear, but the need for interpretation persists. In key passages, the text picks up the invitation to interpret made in the epigraph and signals that the story of the plague should not be understood only in literal terms. In particular, this purpose is served by the discussions between Rieux and Tarrou, Paneloux’s two sermons and some of the narrator’s interventions. These passages indicate that the hermeneutic activity set in motion by the appearance of the rats continues even when they are no longer present in Oran or the text. They can be seen as attempts both to extend and to restrict the interpretation of the novel as a whole, since they illustrate the presence of non-literal meanings while placing controllable parameters on them.

La Peste can be understood, then, as the endeavour to put the rat back in its place, that is, to control the disturbance of meaning, by understanding, explaining and overcoming its unwarranted appearance, in short by making out of it a narrative which will lead to the rats’ expulsion (albeit, as the final sentence of the novel concedes, their provisional expulsion) from a now properly tidied textual space. The rats need to be interpreted (see Davis, ‘Interpreting La Peste’); and in the current chapter I want to add that they are something to be interpreted ethically. They represent a residue or semantic excess through which the questions of ethical choice and action are posed. Yet the novel shows, and to some extent epitomizes, the failure to respond adequately.
Tidiness is preferred to mess, even if the imposition of narrative order comes at the cost of simplification and repression. The novel can be read as an act of containment, in which what is at stake is how to eradicate the threat of the unwanted other.

*La Peste* oscillates between a sense that no interpretation or ethical choice can have guaranteed precedence over any other and an endeavour nevertheless to establish some sort of hierarchy of options: it is better to face up to the truth than to avoid it, better to call things by their name than to lie, better to resist the plague than to consent to it. The hesitation between a potentially dizzying insecurity and actually reassuring stability has been reproduced in critical readings of the novel, which have often conceded its openness only in order then to tie it down to relative interpretive certainties.² John Krapp’s ‘Time and Ethics in Albert Camus’s *The Plague*’ illustrates this in discussion of the novel’s ethical ambiguities, as it ends up confirming a critical consensus which it purports to contest. Contrary to those who see the novel as a more or less disguised sermon about solidarity and revolt, Krapp finds in it ‘a vital moral dialogue among competing ethical positions’ in which ‘no single ethical position is permitted to dominate the others’ (‘Time and Ethics’, pp. 655, 662).³ Even so, Rieux’s views are given particular weight. His moral voice ‘successfully promotes solidarity through an experience of shared, material conditions and serves as an ethical position that resonates compellingly in the text’s moral dialogue’ (‘Time and Ethics’, p. 668; emphasis added).⁴ So the novel establishes a dialogue in which no voice dominates others, yet one character’s viewpoint is more successful and more compelling than those which disagree with it. Krapp concludes: ‘While no single voice ever obviates all its competition in a moral dialogue [...] some moral voices are nevertheless more potent, more persuasive, than others’ (‘Time and Ethics’, p. 669). No one is absolutely right, but some characters are more right than others, and Rieux is more right than anyone else. The dialogue that the novel was supposed to stage in fact turns out to be pretty much settled in advance, and readers have only to allow themselves dutifully to be compelled and persuaded.

² For discussion of this, see Davis, ‘Interpreting *La Peste*’, especially pp. 125–27.
³ A revised version of the article is published in Krapp, *An Aesthetics of Morality*, pp. 70–98.
⁴ The revised version of Krapp’s article slightly tones down the claims made here: the word ‘compellingly’ is omitted from the quoted passage; see Krapp, *An Aesthetics of Morality*, p. 90.
This tension between pinning down the novel to a particular reading and conceding its resistance to interpretive certainty emerges in a different form in Shoshana Felman’s provocative and brilliant discussion of the novel in her and Dori Laub’s *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. Felman describes *La Peste* as ‘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’ (‘Education and Crisis’, p. 8). She goes on to identify the plague even more specifically with the Holocaust, bringing out the resonance of some passages and issues in the novel, such as the link between the quarantine camps and the Nazi concentration camps and the difficulty of bearing witness to unprecedented, unspeakable trauma. This reading, like Krapp’s, gives particular authority to Rieux; and, like Krapp, Felman also overlooks problems arising from his dual position as character and narrator. Subsequently in *Testimony* (as will be discussed in the second half of this chapter) Felman goes on to show how *La Chute* would later dramatize the disintegration of the integrity and authority of the witness. Felman seems not to discern that this disintegration can already be observed in the earlier novel, emerging for example through Rieux’s unexplained decision to mask the fact that he is the novel’s narrator until its closing pages. Felman does, however, acknowledge at the end of her chapter on *La Peste* that there is an element in the novel which does not fit easily with its status as ‘a transparent allegory’. The scene at the end of the text where Cottard shoots at the crowd is ‘a residue of violence and madness’ and an ‘incongruent episode’ which is not accounted for in Rieux’s testimony; it represents the ‘residue of a radical and self-subversive question’ (‘Camus’ *The Fall*, p. 118) about the ability of the doctor’s testimony to exhaust the lesson of the plague and of the novel that describes it. Rieux wants to speak for all, but he does not speak for everyone. The central issue in the current discussion of *La Peste* concerns the extent and significance of the ‘residue’ which Felman recognizes, and which the critical heritage has tended to tidy away. Perhaps, if the mess is removed too quickly, something is lost which might have been worth preserving.
The rejection of mess in *La Peste* can be related to the repudiation of otherness in Camus’s ethics and aesthetics. The stakes of Camus’s thinking in these areas are shown up through his hostility towards Hegel, to whom (I shall suggest) he is nevertheless closer than he might appreciate. In his chapter on Hegel in *L’Homme révolté*, Camus describes the dialectic of the master and slave as a struggle to destroy the other which has played an important role in the development of both modern nihilism and left-wing totalitarianism (see *Œuvres complètes III*, pp. 174–87). The Hegelian battle for supremacy takes place in a world without transcendence, so that there are no values other than the norms of the given historical moment. Each consciousness seeks to be recognized in order to be complete, so it attempts to impose itself upon other consciousnesses and thereby gain acceptance as a master among slaves. To be triumphant, consciousness must be ready to kill or to be killed, so that the search for recognition is a life and death struggle. Each consciousness wants the death of the other, even if the other’s death would curtail her ability to recognize my ascendancy over her. According to Camus, Hegel’s nihilist heirs aspired to become masters of their own lives by killing and dying outside society’s laws; his Marxist heirs sought to overcome the masters by revolutionary means, justifying killing by the ends it served. In both cases, Hegel is the godfather of violence.

Camus’s account of Hegel clearly owes a great deal to the anthropological interpretation promoted in the 1930s by Alexandre Kojève and echoed in the conflict of consciousnesses described in Sartre’s *L’Etre et le néant* and the existentialist ethics of Beauvoir’s *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*.⁵ Camus concedes that the reading of Hegel which takes the German philosopher to be justifying murder and death overlooks important aspects of his work. Even so, Camus’s own discussion of Hegel does little to correct partial and schematic misreadings. It is true that Hegel describes consciousness as engaged in a life-and-death struggle with the other, staking its own life and seeking the death of its opponent; but only in a very literal reading is this tantamount to endorsing killing and dying

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⁵ For Kojève’s interpretation of Hegel, see Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*. Kojève’s lectures, delivered in Paris between 1933 and 1939, were attended by some of the most promising young intellectuals of the day, and influenced a generation of French thinkers.
(see Phenomenology of Spirit, pp. 113–14). Moreover, by insisting solely on the negation of the other, Camus neglects the central point of the Hegelian dialectic, which is to negate and to conserve at the same time. In Hegel’s account, self-consciousness is both affirmed and changed through its encounter with the other:

First, it must proceed to supersede the other independent being in order thereby to become certain of itself as the essential being; secondly, in so doing it proceeds to supersede its own self, for this other is itself. This ambiguous supersession of its ambiguous otherness is equally an ambiguous return into itself. For first, through the supersession, it receives back its own self, because, by superseding its otherness, it again becomes equal to itself; but secondly, the other self-consciousness equally gives it back again to itself, for it saw itself in the other, but supersedes this being of itself in the other and thus lets the other again go free. (Phenomenology of Spirit, p. 111; emphasis original)

Self-consciousness returns to itself as other; it does not overcome otherness so much as find itself changed by the encounter with it. As Jean-Luc Nancy explains, ‘Soi est précisément sans retour à soi, soi ne devient pas ce qu’il est déjà: devenir: c’est être hors de soi – mais pour autant que ce dehors, cette ex-position, est l’être même du sujet’ (Hegel, p. 86; emphasis original). Self-consciousness comes to know itself by venturing outside itself and then returning to itself transformed by its expedition. So the encounter with the other is a self-loss which is also a self-discovery. Fundamentally bound up with the other’s desire and the desire for the other, the struggle of consciousnesses is not a justification of violence; rather, it is, as Nancy provocatively puts it, the reality of love (Hegel, p. 93).

Camus’s interpretation of Hegel overlooks the extent to which otherness is necessary to the operation of the dialectic; and although he condemns the destruction of alterity in the actions of Hegel’s nihilist and Marxist heirs, Camus strikingly reproduces this destruction in his conception of solidarity, which subsumes the whole of humanity in a seamless unity. Moreover, the endeavour to tidy and to unify is reproduced in Camus’s aesthetics as formulated in L’Homme révolté and to some extent instantiated in La Peste; and here again the comparison with Hegel is informative. Hegel’s aesthetics entail an excursion into

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6 For further discussion of the denial of otherness in L’Homme révolté and other texts by Camus, see Davis, Ethical Issues in Twentieth-Century French Fiction, pp. 64–85.
otherness, which may seem initially unwelcome but which turns out to play a positive role in mankind’s self-production. In his *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel describes man’s aim ‘to strip the outer world of its stubborn foreignness’, and in the process to produce and to recognize himself (p. 36). Art is a means of achieving this, and as such its role is akin to that of thought. In art, the mind ventures outside itself into the external, material world, and by exploring what lies outside itself it undergoes what Hegel calls ‘an alienation from itself towards the sensuous’ (*Introductory Lectures*, p. 15). But the mind then recognizes itself in its alienation and is restored to itself. This is not a self-forgetting or surrender of the self; rather, in art, that which is other than the self is comprehended and brought back to the self, so that consciousness recognizes itself better and differently. This entails neither a simple negation nor a blunt denial of the world’s messy otherness. Rather, alienation contributes to the work of self-production and self-possession. As in the struggle for recognition by other consciousnesses, the journey into otherness is indispensable. In *L’Homme révolté*, Camus describes the artist’s relation to the external world as more ambivalent. Creation is ‘exigence d’unité et refus du monde’ (*Œuvres complètes III*, p. 278); fiction implies ‘une sorte de refus du monde’, even though this refusal can never be ‘une simple fuite’ (p. 284). Unable to escape or negate the world entirely, the artist instead corrects it, turning life into destiny: ‘Voici donc un monde imaginaire, mais créé par la correction de celui-ci, un monde où la douleur peut, si elle le veut, durer jusqu’à la mort, où les passions ne sont jamais distraites, où les êtres sont livrés à l’idée fixe et toujours présents les uns aux autres’ (p. 288). In this corrected world, ‘l’homme peut régner et connaître enfin’ (p. 280).

In the aesthetics of revolt described in *L’Homme révolté*, the world is not negated but its otherness is cleansed from it. Everything about it which resists our desires is transformed so that love and grief, for example, do not diminish with the passing of time. This corrected creation resembles the tidied world to which aspects of *La Peste* aspire. When Rieux takes a night-time swim with Tarrou, they occupy for a moment a world entirely cleansed of otherness. They swim ‘dans le même rythme’, ‘avec la même cadence et la même vigueur’, and they share ‘le même cœur’ (*Œuvres complètes II*, pp. 212–13). The hostility of the external world and the impenetrability of other selves have been temporarily overcome. The repeated use of ‘même’ insists that there is no trace of difference or conflict here. This is nothing like the Hegelian model of alienation and self-recovery because otherness has disappeared rather than being
dialectically superseded. The rest of this discussion questions whether La Peste aims more generally for the triumph of sameness achieved briefly in Rieux and Tarrou’s night swim, or whether it preserves, perhaps despite itself, some trace of the other’s messy presence.

Cleaning up the rats

Rieux’s initial discovery of a rat raises from the very beginning of the novel much of what is at stake here, so it is worth quoting the paragraph in full:

Le matin du 16 avril, le docteur Bernard Rieux sortit de son cabinet et buta sur un rat mort, au milieu du palier. Sur le moment, il écarta la bête sans y prendre garde et descendit l’escalier. Mais, arrivé dans la rue, la pensée lui vint que ce rat n’était pas à sa place et il retourna sur ses pas pour avertir le concierge. Devant la réaction du vieux M. Michel, il sentit mieux ce que sa découverte avait d’insolite. La présence de ce rat mort lui avait paru seulement bizarre tandis que, pour le concierge, elle constituait un scandale. La position de ce dernier était d’ailleurs catégorique: il n’y avait pas de rats dans la maison. Le docteur eut beau l’assurer qu’il y en avait un sur le palier du premier étage, et probablement mort, la conviction de M. Michel restait entière. Il n’y avait pas de rats dans la maison, il fallait donc qu’on eût apporté celui-ci du dehors. Bref, il s’agissait d’une farce. (p. 38)

From the beginning, the rat is a curious and paradoxical beast. Rieux initially pays scant attention to it and the concierge denies its existence (‘il n’y avait pas de rats dans la maison’). It is nevertheless, as I have suggested, something which calls for interpretation. It is ‘insolite’ or ‘bizarre’, or perhaps more significantly, ‘un scandale’ or ‘une farce’. The paragraph even wavers over whether or not it is dead. At first it is described confidently as ‘un rat mort’, but a few lines later it is only ‘probablement mort’. Are we to assume that the narrator has changed his mind, and that having at first decided it was dead he now thinks it may be only asleep, wounded or resting? Even Rieux’s view that ‘ce rat n’était pas à sa place’ calls for explanation. Rieux seems to believe that rats have their place, and that they should stay there; and wherever such a place might be, it certainly isn’t on the landing outside his office. Moreover, the phrase ‘ce rat n’était pas à sa place’ echoes the opening sentences of the novel: ‘Les curieux événements qui font le sujet de cette chronique se sont produits en 194., à Oran. De l’avis général, ils n’y
éttaient pas à leur place, sortant un peu de l’ordinaire’ (p. 35). The events described in the novel, like the rat on the landing, are not where they should be. But then again, what is the proper place for curious events to occur? Like the rats, they are out of place as soon as they become conspicuous. As long as they remain unseen, they need not trouble the course of the everyday world.

Rieux’s first response on seeing the rat is to brush it aside: ‘il écarta la bête sans y prendre garde’. Rieux’s action is then reproduced by the attitude of the concierge who, Rieux’s testimony notwithstanding, is categorical that ‘il n’y avait pas de rats dans la maison’; or alternatively, ‘il fallait donc qu’on eût apporté celui-ci du dehors. Bref, il s’agissait d’une farce’. The suggestion of a logical process conveyed by the word *done* is misleading here, since the inference that the rat had been brought in from outside flatly contradicts the insistence that there is no rat at all. At the very least, for his reasoning to make sense the concierge would have to concede that there might, after all, be a rat in the building, contrary to his refusal to countenance such a possibility. But in any case, he is following the dictates of his desire rather than rational reflection. Adopting a version of what is known in French as *le raisonnement du chaudron,* the concierge mounts incompatible defences: it’s a scandal that there is a rat in the building; there are no rats in the building; the rat in the building was brought there by someone as a practical joke. The point is not the truth or falsehood of any of these claims; rather, each of them serves the same purpose, which is to deny that the concierge could have any responsibility for the rodent’s presence. The rat constitutes a potential reproach for not doing his job properly, so he denies its potential significance to him by all available means. Like Rieux, in his way he pushes it aside.

The rat is out of place, and as such it demands to be explained and thereby tidied away. Yet this opening paragraph to the narrative itself exhibits some of the untidiness which the rat represents, with its

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7 The *raisonnement du chaudron* is described by Freud: ‘A. borrowed a copper kettle from B. and after he had returned it was sued by B. because the kettle now had a big hole in it which made it unusable. His defence was: “First, I never borrowed a kettle from B. at all; secondly, the kettle had a hole in it already when I got it from him; and thirdly, I gave him back the kettle undamaged”’ (*Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, p. 100). Freud observes that each of the defences is valid in itself but that taken together they contradict one another. From the standpoint of the unconscious, this mutual exclusion is irrelevant, because in the unconscious contradictory thoughts do not cancel each other out.
contradiction, denial and resistance. So what we have here is an early instance of the text representing the endeavour to dismiss the rat while itself becoming a vehicle for the intractable messiness which it figures. The following pages reproduce this process, as dead and dying rats appear throughout Oran and become the talking point of the whole city. The *service de dératisation* is called upon to get rid of them, but the more they are countered, the more they proliferate:

Le matin, dans les faubourgs, on les trouvait étalés à même le ruisseau, une petite fleur de sang sur le museau pointu, les uns gonflés et putrides, les autres raidis et les moustaches encore dressées. [...] Nettoyée à l’aube de ses bêtes mortes, la ville les retrouvait peu à peu, de plus en plus nombreuses, pendant la journée. [...] On eût dit que la terre même où étaient plantées nos maisons se purgeait de son chargement d’humeurs, qu’elle laissait monter à la surface des furoncles et des sanies qui, jusqu’ici, la travaillait intérieurement. (p. 44)

At moments, the description of the dying rats is starkly realistic; yet there is also the persistent implication in the text that some sort of elemental or even moral significance lies behind their appearance. So the rats are not just rats; they are bearers of meaning, though no one can quite settle what that meaning might be. Despite all attempts to clear them away, they keep on returning because they embody something which resists and defeats physical or intellectual attempts to be rid of them definitively; until, that is, they disappear as abruptly and as senselessly as they had appeared: ‘Mais, le lendemain, l’agence annonça que le phénomène avait cessé brutalement et que le service de dératisation n’avait collecté qu’une quantité négligeable de rats morts. La ville respira’ (p. 45). My suggestion here is that the rats represent the *residue* to which Felman refers in her chapter on *La Peste*, which might also be conceived as an excess of meaning or the messiness of the real which will not be cleared away. Felman seems to think that the residue in Camus’s novel is quite restricted in extent, and that the rats can be explained in terms of the overall allegorical framework; I would argue that, on the contrary, the residue is much more widespread. If the rats disappear from the novel after its early stages, it is not because the challenge to security and authority has been overcome, but because it is now all-pervasive. The rats’ thematic presence is no longer necessary.

Rieux’s rejection of residue is made explicit in his first encounter with the journalist Rambert. Rambert asks Rieux for information about the living conditions of Arabs, but Rieux is unwilling to help:
Mais il [Rieux] voulait savoir, avant d’aller plus loin, si le journaliste pouvait dire la vérité.
— Certes, dit l’autre.
— Je veux dire: pouvez-vous porter condamnation totale?
— Totale, non, il faut bien le dire. Mais je suppose que cette condamnation serait sans fondement.

Doucement, Rieux dit qu’en effet une pareille condamnation serait sans fondement, mais qu’en posant cette question, il cherchait seulement à savoir si le témoignage de Rambert pouvait ou non être sans réserves.
— Je n’admets que les témoignages sans réserves. Je ne soutiendrai donc pas le vôtre de mes renseignements.
— C’est le langage de Saint-Just, dit le journaliste en souriant.
Rieux dit sans élever le ton qu’il n’en savait rien, mais que c’était le langage d’un homme lassé du monde où il vivait, ayant pourtant le goût de ses semblables et décidé à refuser, pour sa part, l’injustice et les concessions. (p. 41)

Rieux’s language is uncompromising. Telling the truth means being able to make a total condemnation, even if it isn’t justified in the circumstances. Only testimony ‘sans réserves’ is acceptable to him, and concessions are rejected. We might be inclined to see this passage as evidence of Rieux’s stoical honesty, yet Rambert’s comparison of him to Saint-Just is telling. Rieux is as categorical as the concierge when the latter denies that there can be rats in his building. Curiously, for someone who does not appear to believe in absolutes, Rieux insists on the whole truth or nothing at all. He will not help Rambert if the journalist does not have total freedom of expression. Despite the fact that he does not condemn others, for example when Rambert is eager to escape from Oran rather than to join in the struggle against the plague, Rieux implicitly claims for himself a position of moral authority. This is replicated in his role as narrator. From the opening sentence he asserts for his text the objectivity of a chronicle; he subsumes the voices of others when he takes upon himself the right to speak ‘au nom de tous’ (p. 81), and he brings the experiences and words of disparate characters such as Tarrou, Paneloux, Grand and Cottard into a narrative which leaves him with the final word. The novel’s polyphony is in the end contained in the discourse of a single authoritative narrator. Rather than what he calls Tarrou’s ‘écarts de langage ou de pensée’ (p. 51), he insists on clarity, resoluteness and a simple moral principle: ‘L’essentiel était de bien faire son métier’ (p. 62). In his hands, the whole narrative can be read as reproducing the concierge’s denial of the incommodious
rat. Having spoken the truth and done his duty, he presides over a neatly tidied text: there are no rats in Oran.

And yet, Tarrou’s ‘écarts de langage ou de pensée’ are also the stuff of La Peste. To put it another way, the novel is made up as much by mess, approximation, residue and equivocation as it is by the effort to clear them away. The inconsistencies of the concierge’s raisonnement du chaudron (there are no rats in the building/the rat in the building was put there as a joke) are reproduced in its treatment of some of its central themes. These are not so much antinomies in the strict sense as instances of how the text’s clarities appear less clear when placed alongside one another:

(i) It is important to stand up for the truth sometimes no one can be sure what the truth is.9
(ii) Some things are known for certain (two and two are four, for example) the state of our knowledge is uncertain.10
(iii) People should speak clearly and call things by their name human language is ambiguous and inadequate to the task of self-expression.12
(iv) Some responses to the plague are preferable to others no one has a secure basis on which to condemn other people’s decisions and beliefs.13

8 ‘Je n’admet que les témoignages sans réserves’ (p. 41); ‘Rieux répondit qu’il n’avait pas décrit un syndrome, il avait décrit ce qu’il avait vu’ (p. 68); ‘lui, Rieux, croyait être sur le chemin de la vérité, en luttant contre la création telle qu’elle était’ (p. 121).
9 ‘C’était la peste et ce n’était pas elle. Depuis quelque temps d’ailleurs, elle semblait prendre plaisir à dérouter les diagnostics’ (p. 195); ‘Mais en matière de peste, leurs connaissances étaient à peu près nulles’ (p. 106).
10 ‘La question est de savoir si deux et deux, oui ou non, font quatre. Pour ceux de nos concitoyens qui risquaient alors leur vie, ils avaient à décider si, oui ou non, ils étaient dans la peste et si, oui ou non, il fallait lutter contre elle’ (p. 125).
11 ‘Mais il est vrai que nous avons encore tout à apprendre à ce sujet’ (p. 123).
12 ‘[J]’ai compris que tout le malheur des hommes venait de ce qu’ils ne tenaient pas un langage clair’ (p. 210); ‘Il faut appeler les choses par leur nom’ (p. 62).
13 ‘Pendant des semaines, nous fûmes réduits alors à recommencer la même lettre, à recopier les mêmes renseignements et les mêmes appels, si bien qu’au bout d’un certain temps, les mots qui d’abord étaient sortis tout sanguins de notre cœur se vidaient de leur sens’ (p. 80).
14 ‘Plus exactement, la terreur lui [Cottard] paraît alors moins lourde à porter que s’il y était tout seul. C’est en cela qu’il a tort’ (p. 170).
15 ‘Il ne faut pas juger. […] Si vous pouvez vous tirer de cette affaire, j’en serai profondément heureux’ (p. 93).
(v) There are no heroes\(^{16}\)/some people are more heroic than others.\(^{17}\)
(vi) On balance, there is more to admire in people than to despise\(^{18}\)/on balance, people are selfish, ignorant and have short memories.\(^{19}\)
(vii) Everyone should join in the struggle to defeat the plague\(^{20}\)/the plague cannot be defeated.\(^{21}\)

Sometimes these inconsistencies can be seen only when different parts of the text are juxtaposed. Sometimes, though, they emerge through the text’s readiness to display the validity of contrary views, as when the narrator argues that ‘Les hommes sont plutôt bons que mauvais’ (p. 124). He precedes his statement by acknowledging the opinion that ‘la méchanceté et l’indifférence sont des moteurs bien plus fréquents dans les actions de l’homme’. Although this is immediately qualified as ‘une idée que le narrateur ne partage pas’, it is nevertheless expressed and held before the reader as a tenable view, and one which receives a certain amount of support from the text. It is made clear, for example, that the actions of the ‘formations sanitaires’ are by no means typical of the people of Oran, and that the story of the plague should also tell of the black market, violence and rioting. The text becomes a space in which

\(^{16}\) ‘C’est pourquoi le narrateur ne se fera pas le chantre trop éloquent de la volonté et d’un héroïsme auquel il n’attache qu’une importance raisonnable’ (p. 124).
\(^{17}\) ‘[S]’il faut absolument qu’il y en ait un [héros] dans cette histoire, le narrateur propose justement ce héros insignifiant et effacé [Grand]’ (p. 128); ‘Ce qui m’intéresse, c’est d’être un homme’ (p. 211).
\(^{18}\) ‘[I]l y a dans les hommes plus de choses à admirer que de choses à mépriser’ (p. 248).
\(^{19}\) ‘Car ces couples ravis, étroitement ajustés et avares de paroles, affirmaient au milieu du tumulte, avec tout le triomphe et l’injustice du bonheur, que la peste était finie et que la terreur avait fait son temps. Ils niaient tranquillement, contre toute évidence, que nous ayons jamais connu ce monde insensé où le meurtre d’un homme était aussi quotidien que celui des mouches, cette sauvagerie bien définie, ce délire calculé, cet emprisonnement qui apportait avec lui une affreuse liberté à l’égard de tout ce qui n’était pas le présent, cette odeur de mort qui stupéfiait tous ceux qu’elle ne tuait pas, ils niaient enfin que nous ayons été ce peuple abasourdi dont tous les jours une partie entassée dans la gueule d’un four s’évaporait en fumées grasses, pendant que l’autre, chargée des chaînes de l’impuissance et de la peur, attendait son tour’ (p. 240).
\(^{20}\) ‘[I]l fallait faire ce qu’il fallait pour lutter contre elle [la maladie]’ (p. 124); ‘Il n’y avait pour cela qu’un seul moyen qui était de combattre la peste’ (p. 125).
\(^{21}\) ‘Mais j’imagine alors ce que doit être cette peste pour vous. — Oui, dit Rieux. Une interminable défaite’ (p. 122).
opinion and counter-opinion, evidence and counter-evidence, are held together in strange proximity. One side of the argument may be given greater emphasis, but its contrary persists as an unrefuted alternative.

To observe this coexistence of contraries in the text entails an attentiveness to its frailty and unevenness, an acknowledgement of the weakness of some of the arguments which are deployed within it, and an awareness of its hesitations and unresolved contradictions. These sometimes appear in brief moments which can be all too easily overlooked, as when Rieux and Grand discuss the naming of the plague:

— Allons, dit Rieux, il faut peut-être se décider à appeler cette maladie par son nom. Jusqu’à présent, nous avons piétiné. Mais venez avec moi, je dois aller au laboratoire.

— Oui, oui, disait Grand en descendant l’escalier derrière le docteur. Il faut appeler les choses par leur nom. Mais quel est ce nom?

— Je ne puis vous le dire, et d’ailleurs cela ne vous serait pas utile.

— Vous voyez, sourit l’employé. Ce n’est pas si facile. (p. 62)

This exchange reflects the view shared by Tarrou and Rieux that people should speak clearly and use appropriate language rather than words which distort or mask reality. Here, though, the apparently unquestionable dictum ‘Il faut appeler les choses par leur nom’ comes adrift. Rieux’s reply to Grand’s enquiry about the name of the plague (‘Je ne puis vous le dire, et d’ailleurs cela ne vous serait pas utile’) is opaque. Why can’t he tell Grand the name? Has he been forbidden to do so, or does he not know it? On what authority does he insist that knowing the name would not be useful to Grand, and in any case why would its lack of usefulness constitute a reason for withholding it? Rieux wants to call things by their name, but then refuses to do just that with only cursory explanation. Moreover, this exchange echoes the central interpretive tension of La Peste as a whole: the text makes clear from its epigraph that its account of the plague should not be read (only) literally; but, in that case, quite what is named by the plague remains open to inconclusive speculation. The book’s very title constitutes a call for interpretation. Like Rieux, it promises to give a name to things, but then teases or frustrates us by hinting that the proper name is withheld or unavailable.

The point here is that the drive in the novel for simplicity and clarity never succeeds in overcoming a contrary drive towards ambiguity and uncertainty. Even an aphoristic slogan such as ‘L’essentiel était de bien faire son métier’ (p. 62) delivers less than it might seem. In its context, it may refer only to Rieux’s resolve to do his best as a doctor (‘son métier’ = his job); yet it also has the appearance of a more general
axiom (‘son métier’ = one’s job). But then the injunction that everyone should endeavour to do their job well is both relatively uncontroversial and functionally meaningless. It might urge us to solidarity in the fight against the plague, or it might encourage us to the most fascistic social conformism. So when it seems to be at its most confident in stating simple truths, the text risks saying nothing at all, or nothing that can be readily understood in an unambiguous way. This is particularly the case when the narrator formulates axioms for moral behaviour. Refusing to make heroes out of the members of the ‘formations sanitaires’, the narrator suggests that their function was to show the citizens of Oran how to act in a time of plague: ‘puisque la maladie était là, il fallait faire ce qu’il fallait faire pour lutter contre elle’ (p. 124). It is hard to argue against such a statement because, while apparently offering a moral principle, it actually says next to nothing. The tautological ‘il fallait faire ce qu’il fallait faire’ asserts that there are duties and obligations, but says nothing about what they might be.

La Peste begins with things (events, rats) which are not in their place. From its opening pages, it is driven by the desire to put things back in order, to explain and clear away the enigma of the rats’ emergence into a tidy world. But the mess returns with a vengeance: ‘Sur les trottoirs, il arrivait aussi à plus d’un promeneur nocturne de sentir sous son pied la masse élastique d’un cadavre encore frais’ (p. 44). This reflects the experience of reading the novel. The drive for clarity, for a meaningful space not infested by ambiguous vermin, founders when not even the simplest things can be formulated without some trace of hesitation or uncertainty. So it might be true that ‘il fallait faire ce qu’il fallait faire’, but this does little to help us understand what it is that ‘il fallait faire’.

Messy ethics

The ethical problem posed by La Peste concerns the tension between the drive for order (settled principles, secure knowledge) and the residual messiness that won’t quite go away. This can be elucidated by what, in ethics, is sometimes called the theory of prima facie duties, developed in the 1920s and 1930s by W.D. Ross.22 This theory attempts to cope with
the fact that, as Jonathan Dancy summarizes the situation, ‘in ethics everything is pretty messy’ (‘An Ethic of Prima Facie Duties’, p. 219). The theory of prima facie duties denies that there is any single overriding ethical principle which commands all others or from which they can be derived. Kant’s categorical imperative is an explicit target here, as it endeavours to establish a law able to resolve any moral conundrum. Instead, according to the theory of prima facie duties, there are a number of possibly conflicting duties that we should try to follow: to help others, to keep our promises, not to lie, to repay acts of kindness, to avoid harm and to promote wellbeing, and so on.23 None of these duties is inherently more or less important than any of the others, as Dancy explains:

There is no general ranking of the different types of prima facie duties, and since different moral principles express different prima facie duties, there is no general ranking of moral principles. There is just a shapeless list of them, which is no more than a list of the things that make a moral difference, a difference to what we should do. (‘An Ethic of Prima Facie Duties’, p. 221)

In Kantian ethics, if something is wrong it is always wrong; it can never be right to tell a lie, for example. In the theory of prima facie duties, it will usually be wrong to lie, but sometimes it will be right.24 In actual situations, different duties may be in conflict with one another, and the theory of prima facie duties offers no principle for resolving decisively which course of action should be taken in such cases. Rather than being offered a device for cleaning up the mess, we are left to confront it anew each time.

In La Peste, Rieux and Tarrou are barely confronted with the necessity of making difficult ethical choices because their duty seems immediately apparent to them. Rieux knows exactly what to do from the beginning: ‘Là était la certitude, dans le travail de tous les jours’ (p. 62). Similarly, Tarrou, who claims to ‘tout connaître de la vie’ (p. 123), shows no sign of doubt or hesitancy when he risks his life by setting up the ‘formations sanitaires’. Because they have no real decisions to make, or at least because they do not give much indication that decision-making is difficult, Rieux and Tarrou are ethically the least interesting characters

23 For Ross’s division of the prima facie duties, for which he does not claim completeness or finality, see The Right and the Good, pp. 21–22.
24 See for example Ross, Foundations of Ethics: ‘our answer will sometimes be “yes” and sometimes be “no”, so that we cannot maintain with Kant that it is always wrong to tell a lie or break a promise’ (p. 134; emphasis original).
in the novel. They encounter little of the moral risk which is inherent in Ross’s theory of prima facie duties. Rambert and Paneloux are more interesting because they are forced to decide between conflicting values: Rambert’s desire to be with someone he loves is at odds with the duty to combat (and to not risk spreading) the plague; Paneloux’s horror at the suffering caused by the plague sits uneasily with his belief that it is the will of God. They both ultimately decide to work with the ‘formations sanitaires’, but their commitment to the struggle does not derive from the secure, unwavering resolution represented by Rieux and Tarrou. Moreover, the presence of Cottard in the novel ensures the survival of a minor yet important counter-voice to its more dominant certainties. Rather than joining in a perhaps futile attempt to eradicate the plague, he revels in the new disorder it creates and finds in it a kind of freedom. He may be wrong in the eyes of the sanctimonious duo Rieux and Tarrou but, if nothing else, his choices show the persistence of judgements other than theirs.

The circumstances surrounding the death of Judge Othon’s son give perhaps the best example from La Peste of the conflicting duties which have to be negotiated in the process of decision-making. In consideration of whether or not to treat the boy with an experimental serum, the duty of beneficence (to do good to others, to foster their well-being) is in conflict with the duty of non-maleficence (to do no harm to others): the serum may do harm in order to do good (to save the boy’s life); but if it does not work it will have done harm with no compensatory positive result. In the event the boy’s death is delayed and his agony prolonged. When Othon expresses the hope that his son did not suffer too much, a further element is brought into play: should one tell the truth, or save the judge’s pain by lying? Tarrou chooses compassion over honesty: ‘Non, dit Tarrou, non, il n’a vraiment pas souffert’ (p. 201). The episode shows that the difficulty of ethical decision-making may not come from a lack of principles so much as from a surfeit of them. What is missing is a ready-made means of ranking them in order of importance, so that there is no shortcut or easy solution to taking a decision. This effectively evacuates knowledge from ethics, as Dancy explains Ross’s argument:

Ross wants to say that we often know for certain what our prima facie duties are, but we can never know what our duty proper is. Put another way, this means that we have certain knowledge of moral principles, but no knowledge of what we ought overall to do in any actual situation. (p. 223)
Rieux endeavours to clear up the messiness of ethics, producing a unified discourse governed by knowledge and certainty (or at least by a high degree of self-confidence) with a fixed hierarchy of moral responses. *La Peste* as a whole is complicit with this aspiration for tidiness, yet it never entirely frees itself of its uncertainties, as it strains for a clarity and simplicity it cannot achieve; and through its hesitations, inconsistencies and equivocations it poses before its reader the possibility of a more fraught, ambiguous and risky ethics, a messy ethics to contend with a conflicted text and a messy world.

Camus’s notion of art as the correction of reality fails to appreciate that something of value may be lost when the world is unified and rendered coherent. *La Peste* seems both to know and not to know that order is not the only thing we want. The novel struggles against itself, wanting to clarify and to disambiguate, to call things by their proper name, but also stumbling at every stage, finding strangeness and ambiguity seeping into its fabric. Earlier, we saw that Camus criticizes Hegel for endorsing the negation of otherness, even while the elimination of the world’s intractability remains the aspiration of his own aesthetics. Yet Camus’s achievement in *La Peste* turns out to be more Hegelian than his theory insofar as, however reluctantly, it lingers over the traces of that which resists recuperation to a tidy, totalizing perspective. Contrary to what Camus seems to think, Hegel’s dialectic needs otherness to maintain its vigour; Camus himself may not want otherness, but his novel shows that it will not and should not readily be dispensed with. And this has important implications for the ethical significance of the work. Through its tensions and ambiguities, it allows one to suspect that ethics might do best to make accommodations with mess rather than to seek ways of clearing it away. The clutter of our lives, our relationships and our world may after all be what is most precious in them.

**Witnessing trauma in *La Chute***

The ‘messy ethics’ of *La Peste* are, I would suggest, one of the most powerful, deceptively placid ethical statements to emerge from the Second World War, and certainly a rival for the never-completed ethics announced by Sartre at the end of *L’Etre et le néant* and the two philosophical volumes published by Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* and *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté*. And Camus is more interesting when immersed in the self-contesting, self-undermining domain of ethical
mess than in the role of the dour moralist of moderation in which he is sometimes cast. After *L’Etranger* and *La Peste*, *La Chute* is the third great fictional publication of Camus’s lifetime, and unapologetically inhabits a semantic and moral world where nothing can be taken for what it seems. Its interest in the context of the Second World War, and in particular in relation to trauma studies, has been demonstrated in important texts by Shoshana Felman and Dominick LaCapra.  

*La Chute* refers explicitly to the killing of Jews during the Second World War and it revolves around questions of memory, narratorial reliability and the entanglement of personal and collective histories. The rest of this chapter examines the issues of trauma and witnessing in *La Chute* principally by analysing Felman’s essay ‘Camus’ *The Fall*, or the Betrayal of the Witness’, which appears as a chapter in her and Dori Laub’s *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. Felman’s discussion of *La Chute* is exemplary both as a committed reading and as an instance of how Camus’s novel entices its readers into the pitfalls of misreading. What interests me here is the ways in which the novel both encourages and resists Felman’s reading, implicating her – as it has perhaps implicated all its best readers – in a complex interplay of blindness and insight through which the text itself remains stubbornly opaque. Felman’s interpretation of *La Chute* tells about the nature of reading in general and about the specific difficulties of producing a persuasive, comprehensive reading of Camus’s most wilfully disorientating novel.

Felman makes an irresistible case for relating *La Chute* to the problems of witnessing and representation raised, in particular but not uniquely, by the Holocaust. The invitation to read the novel in the dark light of the Holocaust is issued in its opening pages when Clamence tells his interlocutor that he lives in the former Jewish quarter of Amsterdam.

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25 LaCapra’s chapter on *La Chute* in his *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, entitled ‘Rereading Camus’s *The Fall* after Auschwitz and with Algeria’, is in part an engagement with Felman’s reading of the novel in her ‘Camus’ *The Fall*, or the Betrayal of the Witness’. LaCapra makes a number of criticisms of Felman, some of which are more persuasive than others. I do not think it is correct, for example, that Felman identifies Clamence with Camus, as LaCapra claims (pp. 74–76). On some points, though, LaCapra’s criticisms are well made. Later notes comment on some aspects of LaCapra’s reading of Felman and *La Chute*.

26 I use the title of Felman’s chapter as it appears on the contents page of her and Laub’s *Testimony*. A slightly different title is used at the head of the chapter itself: ‘The Betrayal of the Witness: Camus’ *The Fall*’. 
This establishes Amsterdam, and Europe more generally, and the text of La Chute, as spaces which are marked by an indelible crime:

Moi, j’habite le quartier juif, ou ce qui s’appelait ainsi jusqu’au moment où les frères hitlériens y ont fait de la place. Quel lessivage! Soixantequinze mille juifs déportés ou assassinés, c’est le nettoyage par le vide. J’admire cette application, cette méthodique patience! Quand on n’a pas de caractère, il faut bien se donner une méthode. Ici, elle a fait merveille, sans contredit, et j’habite sur les lieux d’un des plus grands crimes de l’histoire. (La Chute, in Œuvres complètes III, p. 701)

Although there is no reason to believe that Clamence is directly or indirectly a victim of the Holocaust, he can readily be seen as suffering the effects of some kind of trauma, acting out an experience which is not fully recalled and assimilated. This could explain, for example, his sense of doubleness and falseness, his dissociation from his own acts, his sense that he is playing a game or performing a role, and the oscillations between forgetting and partial remembering which recur throughout his narrative. It might also help to explain the self-consciously unreliable nature of his narrative. As Cathy Caruth explains, trauma narratives almost invariably raise the question of their own truth: ‘The problem [of truth] arises not only in regard to those who listen to the traumatized, not knowing how to establish the reality of their hallucinations and dreams; it occurs rather and most disturbingly often within the very knowledge and experience of the traumatized themselves’ (‘Introduction’, p. 5). Clamence anticipates Caruth’s analysis when he describes his time in a German prison camp: ‘Je sais ce que vous pensez: il est bien difficile de démêler le vrai du faux dans ce que je raconte. Je confesse que vous avez raison. Moi-même …’ (p. 752).

So Clamence looks like or can be made to look like a victim of trauma. One of the many questions that remain unresolved in the text concerns the origin of this trauma: is it actually his own, buried and irretrievable in the flood of words that pour from him, or does he arrogate for himself the status of victim which little in his prehistory might justify? He may be an example of what LaCapra calls ‘the posttraumatic cynicism of the implicated bystander’, unsettled by events but evading them though ‘a false, ironic façade and a discourse of suspect indirection’ (History and Memory after Auschwitz, p. 76). La Chute is undoubtedly about trauma, but whose trauma does it (fail to) register?

It is not difficult, then, to make a case for the relevance of La Chute to trauma studies; but is this enough to support the importance accorded
to the Holocaust in Felman’s reading of the novel? In a sentence from his ‘Prière d’insérer’ to which I shall return, Camus warns that Clamence holds up a mirror to his listener and his readers: ‘Le miroir dans lequel il se regarde, il finit par le tendre aux autres’ (p. 771). Clamence’s endeavour is to give an image of his interlocutor rather than to engage in an act of pure confession or self-revelation. What is crucial here is the operation of transference through which the narrator’s story becomes implicated in the story of the listener, and vice versa, to the point that it becomes impossible to say what comes from one and what from the other. The mirror reflects back the eye of the beholder. My suggestion here is that this transferential relation between narrator and interlocutor is reproduced in Felman’s relation, and perhaps the relation of any attentive reader, to La Chute.27 The novel gives its readers an occasion for self-formulation, but something of the work’s elusive core is missed in the process.

The woman on the bridge

At what is almost exactly the mid-point of La Chute, Clamence offers us what appears to be a key to his ambiguous and confusing narrative when he tells of an incident on a bridge over the Seine. According to Clamence, this incident lies ‘au centre de [sa] mémoire’ and it is, he says, his ‘découverte essentielle’ (p. 728). Felman’s chapter on La Chute begins with this episode and returns to it repeatedly. In her summary, Felman describes how ‘the narrator was the chance witness

27 LaCapra raises the question of the transferential relation between critic and object of study by underlining the link between Felman’s reading of La Chute and her discussion of Paul de Man in the preceding chapter of Testimony. The chapter on La Chute is, he suggests, heavily inflected by Felman’s transferential investment in de Man, with whom, he claims, ‘Felman herself remains bound or even identified in a process of arrested mourning’ (History and Memory after Auschwitz, p. 75). I do not intend to discuss the links between the chapters on de Man and La Chute or to speculate on psychological issues which do not concern me. My focus is on Felman’s reading of La Chute in all its brilliance and, as I suggest, its blind spots. It is nevertheless of interest that LaCapra suggests how one of the key issues of La Chute – the transferential imbrication of self and other – spills over into the critic’s relation to the novel and her use of it in her broader intellectual project. The same is no doubt true of LaCapra’s reading of the novel and my own, in ways that I am not able to elucidate.
of a suicide: a woman he had just passed by suddenly jumped off the bridge into the Seine’ (‘Camus’ *The Fall*, p. 165). Clamence continues on his way, informs no one of what he has witnessed and does not read the following days’ newspapers. The event becomes what Felman calls ‘a missed encounter with reality, an encounter whose elusiveness cannot be owned and yet whose impact can no longer be erased’ (‘Camus’ *The Fall*, p. 167). This scene prompts Felman to draw a contrast between *La Chute* and Camus’s previous novel *La Peste*, which she had analysed in an earlier chapter of *Testimony*. In *La Peste* a narrator records the events he had witnessed for himself, adopting a secure, relatively reliable and conventional testimonial stance; in *La Chute*, on the other hand, ‘the event is witnessed insofar as it is not experienced, insofar as it is literally missed’ (‘Camus’ *The Fall*, p. 168; emphasis original). In the later novel, the witness and his narrative disintegrate. The incident on the bridge becomes the novel’s ‘primal scene’ (‘Camus’ *The Fall*, pp. 187, 193–94), in which something unrepresentable is recalled and avoided. Evoking the Holocaust, it entails a failure of witnessing; more fundamentally, it suggests the impossibility of giving a historical narrative of ‘an event without a witness, an event eliminating its own witness’ (‘Camus’ *The Fall*, p. 200).

Paying careful attention to textual detail, Felman draws out the importance of the Holocaust and the problem of historical testimony to *La Chute*. There are nevertheless signs that Camus’s text is being enlisted to support a reading which it does not fully endorse. The woman’s suicide on the bridge is central to Felman’s interpretation, but one might question whether the event should actually be understood as a suicide. In Clamence’s account, he sees a woman on the bridge, walks past her and then, when he is about a hundred metres away, he hears the sound of ‘un corps qui s’abat sur l’eau’ followed by ‘un cri, plusieurs fois répété, qui descendait lui aussi le fleuve, puis s’éteignit brusquement’ (p. 728). He does not turn around, so he sees neither the fall itself nor whatever or whoever is the source of the ‘cri’. Most readers, like Felman, simply assume that the woman has taken her own life, but we should be aware that this is, precisely, an assumption which the text allows but does not confirm. LaCapra observes quite rightly that there is no textual evidence to support the claim that the woman jumped from the bridge and committed suicide (*History and Memory after Auschwitz*, p. 78). She might have fallen by accident or someone might have pushed her; or, since Clamence has walked some distance away from her, it may have been someone else entirely who jumped into the water.
La Chute teases its addressee and its reader by its partial revelations, which allow us to make assumptions without realizing we are doing so.\textsuperscript{28} The strength of Felman’s reading lies not in her avoidance of assumptions but in her willingness to take the gains of her assumptions as far as she can. It might be argued that Felman’s reading does not actually depend on the interpretation of the incident on the bridge as a suicide. Since she relates the unwitnessed event on the bridge to the Holocaust and to what she calls ‘the space of the annihilation of the Other’ (‘Camus’ The Fall’, p. 189), it might actually strengthen her argument to keep open the possibility that the woman was pushed rather than taking it for granted that she jumped. The primal scene would then become the scene of a murder, which would resonate better with genocidal echoes in the novel. However, even if the insistence on suicide does not serve the overall reading of La Chute particularly well, it is symptomatic of a tendency in Felman’s chapter to pin down Camus’s novel more confidently than the text itself allows. She tells us what La Chute is ‘profoundly all about’ (p. 184) and what is ‘the real subject of the novel’ (p. 189) even though the work slyly resists any such hermeneutic dominance. Just as Clamence fails to witness the fall from the bridge, any reader who claims to have penetrated the novel’s inner core risks failing to witness La Chute in all its unsettling ambiguity.

Camus versus Sartre

In the central sections of her chapter ‘Camus’ The Fall, or the Betrayal of the Witness’, Felman revisits the quarrel between Sartre and Camus which began with the controversy over Camus’s L’Homme révolté and

\textsuperscript{28} LaCapra attempts to avoid an assumption routinely made by readers when he questions the gender of Clamence’s interlocutor: ‘One tends to assume that Clamence’s interlocutor is a man. It would be interesting to speculate how The Fall and one’s reading of it would be transformed if one imagined the interlocutor to be a woman’ (History and Memory after Auschwitz, p. 90; emphasis added). The proposed thought experiment is indeed an interesting one, but it is certainly not an assumption to identify the interlocutor as male. In only the third word of the text, Clamence addresses him as monsieur (‘Puis-je, monsieur, vous proposer mes services, sans risquer d’être importun?’, p. 697). Since there is no indication that the interlocutor is either surprised or offended by this address, it is reasonable for readers to take for granted that he is a man. Where Felman may assume too much, LaCapra may be trying to find ambiguity where there is none.
caused a definitive split between the two great post-war intellectuals.Felman’s account of the quarrel revolves around the witnessing/failure to witness dichotomy which motors her reading of La Chute, and which she regards as the central concern of Camus’s novel. In Felman’s version of events, Camus spoke out against the Stalinist concentration camps, but Sartre kept silent about them and can therefore be portrayed as having ‘betrayed the testimonial task [...] since he chose not to acknowledge Russian concentration camps and not to look at history from hell’ (‘Camus’ The Fall’, p. 186). Sartre, then, is guilty of the failure of testimony which Camus diagnoses in La Chute: he colludes in silencing both the victim and the witness of atrocity.

Felman’s account of the differences between Camus and Sartre is rather thin on historical context, lacking in detail about the moral and political issues involved, and surprisingly unproblematised in its condemnation of Sartre as witness-traitor. Narratives of the Camus-Sartre controversy tend, even today, to be written from strongly partisan perspectives, so it is not easy to get an impartial account of what actually happened. It is nevertheless hard to justify the claim that Sartre ‘chose not to acknowledge Russian concentration camps’. Towards the end of 1949, Sartre’s journal Les Temps modernes was preparing to publish and analyse Soviet documents which showed the abuse of human rights in the Soviet Union. However, in November their publication was pre-empted in Le Figaro littéraire by the Buchenwald survivor and former communist David Rousset, who denounced the Soviet labour camps and compared them to Nazi concentration camps.29 Rousset’s article immediately gave rise to what Sartre regarded as a concerted right-wing condemnation of the Soviet Union which focused only on its shortcomings and simultaneously distracted from repressive acts perpetrated elsewhere in the world. The January 1950 edition of Les Temps modernes published an article entitled ‘Les Jours de notre vie’ which had been written by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and which Sartre co-signed in a show of political and editorial solidarity.30 The article

30 For discussion of the circumstances surrounding this article, see Birchall, Sartre against Stalinism, pp. 109–19. Birchall writes: ‘It is clear that Sartre’s position was open to some criticism, and that it lacked clarity. But it is also clear that he openly and unambiguously condemned the Russian labour camps, and that nothing he said was likely to bring comfort or assistance to the defenders of Stalinism’ (p. 112).
denounces the Soviet concentrationary system whilst also condemning the hypocrisy of those who attack human rights abuses in a communist country but say nothing about no less flagrant abuses in Greece, Spain and colonized countries, or about the unjust condition of black citizens in the US. Sartre might be accused of failing to make a full-blooded attack on the Soviet Union, but by co-signing Merleau-Ponty’s article he certainly clears himself of the charge that he refused to acknowledge the existence of Soviet concentration camps. Quite the opposite, he was one of the first to bring them to the attention of the French public, however difficult that was for his political allegiances at the time.31

Felman does not refer to these circumstances. They make it difficult to sustain her distinction between Sartre’s betrayal of the duty to bear witness and Camus’s valiant resistance to prevailing political pressures. She seems to need Sartre’s failure as a contrast to the accomplishments of Camus’s novel. The distortion of Sartre that this involves becomes most significant when she goes on to claim that his failure to acknowledge the existence of the Soviet camps is matched by his failure to acknowledge the Holocaust in his Réflexions sur la question juive (1946). Like the Western allies who refused to register the magnitude of the destruction of the European Jews during and after the Second World War, Sartre allegedly draws a shroud of silence over the issue in his book:

It is doubtless no coincidence if, even in his militant dismantling of the ideology of anti-Semitism in the magnanimous, momentous book he publishes immediately after the war, Sartre still unwittingly continues to maintain the Allies’ silence and to look away from hell: Réflexions sur la question juive, published in 1946, launches a war on anti-Semites and defends the Jews against their venom, but neglects to mention, even in one word, the Holocaust. (‘Camus’ The Fall’, p. 191)

As if taking his cue from Felman, LaCapra makes the same allegation in his comparison of Camus and Sartre:

Albert Camus’s 1956 novel The Fall (La Chute) seems especially remarkable as a case in which a major postwar intellectual and writer attempted to address the Holocaust. Even Sartre, Camus’s principal contender for the role of intellectual guide in France and elsewhere in the West, said virtually nothing about the specific nature of the Holocaust and its bearing on the Jews. In his well-known postwar study, Antisemite

31 See Beauvoir’s account of this incident in La Force des choses, I, pp. 277–82. On the split between Sartre and Camus, see also Aronson, Camus and Sartre, and Forsdick, ‘Camus and Sartre: The Great Quarrel’.
and Jew [the English-language title of Œreflexions sur la question juive],
Sartre did not even mention the Holocaust. (History and Memory after
Auschwitz, p. 4)

Both Felman and LaCapra contrast Sartre’s failure to mention the
Holocaust with Camus’s attempt to register its impact. This distinction
underlies and justifies their praise for Camus’s endeavour in La Chute.
It is, however, simply untrue to say that Sartre fails to mention the
Holocaust in Œreflexions sur la question juive, except in the most trivial
sense that he does not use the word itself.32 Sartre’s book is a virulent,
uncompromising attack on French anti-Semitism, and in particular on
French complicity in the deportation of Jews during the Second World
War. The very first sentence of the book condemns those who are in
favour of solving the problem of Jewish elements in society ‘en les
exterminant tous’ (p. 7), a phrase which undoubtedly and unmistakably
alludes to the German extermination camps. Later Sartre refers to
Majdanek, the camp on the outskirts of Lublin where 59,000 Jews died;
and he describes the plight of the Jews who escaped murder during the
war:

Aujourd’hui33 ceux d’entre eux [les Juifs] que les Allemands n’ont pas
déportés ou assassinés parviennent à rentrer chez eux. Beaucoup furent
parmi les résistants de la première heure; d’autres ont un fils, un cousin
dans l’Armée Leclerc. La France entière se réjouit ou fraternise dans les
rues, les luttes sociales semblent provisoirement oubliées; les journaux
consacrent des colonnes entières aux prisonniers de guerre, aux déportés.
Va-t-on parler des Juifs? Va-t-on saluer le retour parmi nous des rescapés;
va-t-on donner une pensée à ceux qui sont morts dans les chambres à gaz
de Lublin? Pas un mot. Pas une ligne dans les quotidiens. C’est qu’il ne
faut pas irriter les antisémites. Plus que jamais la France a besoin d’union.
Les journalistes bien intentionnés vous disent: ‘dans l’intérêt même des
Juifs, il ne faut pas trop parler d’eux en ce moment’. Pendant quatre ans,
la Société française a vécu sans eux, il convient de ne pas trop signaler
leur réapparition. (p. 86)

32 Indeed, it would have been surprising if Sartre had used the word ‘Holocaust’,
since it was not yet commonly used to refer to the murder of the European Jews
at the time he was writing Œreflexions sur la question juive. On the same basis,
seminal testimonial works such as David Rousset’s L’Univers concentrationnaire
(1946) and Robert Antelme’s L’Espèce humaine (1947) could also be accused of not
mentioning the Holocaust, even though they discuss the concentration camps in
great detail.
33 A footnote specifies that Sartre wrote this in October 1944.
It is tempting to conclude, simply, that Felman and LaCapra had not (re)read Réflexions sur la question juive to check the accuracy of their claim that Sartre fails to mention the Holocaust. What is striking in Felman’s case, though, is that the point Sartre makes here precisely anticipates Felman’s criticism of ‘the protracted postwar silence on the Holocaust of both the European and the American intellectuals’ (‘Camus’ The Fall’, p. 191). Felman ranks Sartre among those who engaged in a ‘conspiracy of silence’ (p. 192), though the above quotation shows that on the contrary he denounced the conspiracy from its earliest days. Felman’s failure to recognize Sartre as a precursor of her own argument looks, then, more like a necessary blind spot than a simple error of reading. She does not acknowledge the evidence which contradicts her construction of a robust opposition between Sartre and Camus. Later in this chapter we shall see further instances of her failure to register material which might call her interpretation into question.

**Failures and radical failures**

Felman’s discussion of *La Chute* is built around oppositions: between the confidence in the witness of *La Peste* and the disruption of witnessing in *La Chute*, and between Sartre’s betrayal of the duty of the witness and Camus’s refusal to abdicate that duty. While she roundly criticizes those who fail to bear witness, one of Felman’s aims is also to problematize the very opposition between witnessing and not witnessing. The importance of *La Chute* in this context lies in the fact that it does not merely recount a failure of witnessing; it recounts a radical failure of witnessing. *Radical* is an important word in Felman’s vocabulary: *La Chute* shows how the Holocaust consisted in ‘a radical failure of witnessing’ (p. 194); the novel ‘enacts the Holocaust as a radical failure of representation’ (p. 197; emphasis original); modern narrative and art as exemplified by *La Chute* bear testimony ‘to the radical historical crisis in witnessing the Holocaust has opened up’ (p. 201; emphasis original).

What is the difference between a failure of witnessing and a radical failure of witnessing? To say that witnessing has merely failed implies that it might have succeeded. Events could have been experienced and represented in a fully adequate manner. A radical failure of witnessing, on the other hand, undercuts the very possibility of being present to and making present the experience of trauma. Although Sartre is accused of betraying his testimonial responsibility, it turns out that he had little
prospect of actually fulfilling it either, at least according to what Felman discovers in her account of *La Chute*. The novel revolves around a radical failure which is also an impossibility: *La Chute* ‘inscribes the Holocaust as the impossible historical narrative of an event without a witness, an event eliminating its own witness’ (‘Camus’ *The Fall*, p. 200); and it becomes ‘the very writing of the impossibility of writing history’ (p. 200), partaking of the ‘historical impossibility of writing a historical narration of the Holocaust’ (p. 201).

Felman observes what appears to be a contingent failure of witnessing and then raises the stakes of this incident by arguing that it marks the radical impossibility of narration and representation. The process of generalization is precisely anticipated in *La Chute*. Clamence’s role as judge-penitent consists in turning his sense of his own shortcomings into a declaration of universal guilt. Clamence knows this to be a rhetorical device which eases his sense of personal failure and serves to entrap the unwitting other. Felman reproduces Clamence’s generalizing impulse while divesting it of its knowingly deceptive irony. In her reading, the missed encounter between Clamence and the woman signals what now becomes an insurmountable situation: ‘Rather, with the chance of rescue missed through a missed historical encounter with the real, the event seems to consist in the *missing* of salvation and, henceforth, in its radical historical and philosophical impossibility’ (‘Camus’ *The Fall*, p. 177; emphasis original).

So Clamence’s failure escalates into a universal condition. This reading nevertheless omits the clear indication in Camus’s text that Clamence’s failure to witness the event entails deliberate choice rather than historical or philosophical compulsion. In his initial response he loses control of his movements: ‘Je voulus courir et je ne bougeai pas. Je tremblais, je crois de froid et de saisissement. Je me disais qu’il fallait faire vite et je sentais une faiblesse irrésistible envahir mon corps’ (*La Chute*, in *Œuvres complètes III*, p. 728). His subsequent actions, though, are entirely under his control: ‘Puis, à petits pas, sous la pluie, je m’éloignai. Je ne prévins personne. […] Ni le lendemain, ni les jours qui suivirent, je n’ai lu les journaux’ (p. 729). He could have turned around; at the very least, he could have informed the police or read the newspapers. This suggests that although the fall from the bridge is unwitnessed, it is not theoretically unwitnessable. Clamence does not rescue the woman or achieve his own salvation; and his final words in the novel indicate that he would not wish to be tested again. But this does not inevitably turn his failure into Felman’s ‘radical historical and philosophical impossibility’. Indeed,
such a reading risks absolving him of any responsibility for his failure: if salvation is impossible, he cannot be blamed for giving up on it.

Felman, then, makes Camus’s text bear a burden of meaning which it only partly supports. The minimal distortion of the text has significant interpretive consequences, as can be seen in Felman’s discussion of another passage from the novel. Towards the end of his first meeting with his interlocutor, Clamence compares the concentric canals of Amsterdam to the circles of hell in Dante’s *Inferno*:

> Quand on arrive de l’extérieur, à mesure qu’on passe ces cercles, la vie, et donc ses crimes, devient plus épaisse, plus obscure. Ici, nous sommes dans le dernier cercle. Les cercle des … Ah! Vous savez cela? Diable, vous devenez plus difficile à classer. Mais vous comprenez alors pourquoi je puis dire que le centre des choses est ici, bien que nous nous trouvions à l’extrémité du continent. (pp. 702–03)

Noting that Clamence is interrupted or interrupts himself as he speaks, Felman observes that ‘The last circle of hell remains unnamed’ (*Camus’ The Fall*, p. 186). Felman then goes on speculatively to link the concentric canals with the concentrationary universe, and to suggest that the German concentration camps, ‘like the innermost circle of hell, are implicitly at the center of the novel: a center that remains, as such, unspeakable’ (pp. 188–89; emphasis added).

In Felman’s account, the final circle of hell is at first ‘unnamed’; it then becomes ‘unspeakable’. This transition replicates the move of turning Clamence’s failure of witnessing into a radical failure marking the impossibility of historical narration. However, once again this slightly but significantly distorts Camus’s text. Clamence does not name the final circle, not because he cannot but because he does not need to. In fact, the final circle of Dante’s hell is the circle of traitors. The interlocutor already knows this, and perhaps the reader is presumed to know it as well (even if in practice some of us must consult the notes to compensate for our ignorance). By identifying the final circle with the concentration camps, Felman puts the Jewish victims of crime at the centre of hell; Camus’s novel in fact follows Dante in putting traitors at the centre of hell. They are not named here, but they are entirely nameable. The traitors evoked here could be the bystanders, such as Clamence, who look on, or look away, while others are suffering, and thereby share some of the guilt of the perpetrators of crime. LaCapra astutely suggests that:

the idea that *The Fall* attests to a collapse of witnessing obscures the possibility that the text may be read more pointedly as a critique of the
position of the bystander, a position that Clamence occupies when he fails to come to the assistance of the woman who falls into the Seine. (*History and Memory after Auschwitz*, p. 76)

This suggests that the novel may not be solely or primarily about the radical failure of witnessing; rather, it is concerned with the betrayal of the responsibility to others by those who knew what was happening but took no action.

**The primal scene**

When Clamence does not name the final circle of hell, there is a gap in the text that Felman fills in. In doing so, she attempts to disambiguate a work that continues to frustrate any demand for clarity. This occurs again in the designation of the episode on the bridge as the novel’s ‘primal scene’: ‘In some ways, it is the suicide scene which could be thought of as the center of the narrative, a sort of primal scene around which the narrative’s concentric movement keeps precisely turning and returning’ (‘Camus’ *The Fall*, p. 187). Later, Clamence’s ‘radical failure of witnessing’ when the woman jumps or falls off the bridge evokes a parallel with the Holocaust: ‘The Holocaust in Western history functions, thus, in much the same way as a *primal scene* functions in psychoanalysis. It is a witnessing that cannot be made present to itself, present to consciousness’ (‘Camus’ *The Fall*, p. 194; emphasis original). Clamence’s failure to witness the woman’s death is thus his, the novel’s and everyone’s failure to witness the Holocaust, an event which both must, and cannot, be witnessed. In Felman’s argument, the attempt in *La Chute* to deal with the problems of post-Holocaust narrative, historiography and testimony is established in large part through this link between the Holocaust and the scene on the bridge.

Felman’s references to the psychoanalytical primal scene give pause for thought, since analysts and critics from Freud onwards have accepted that the role and status of the primal scene are problematic. As Peter Brooks has demonstrated, Freud’s case study of the Wolf Man (‘From the History of an Infantile Neurosis’) is fascinatingly equivocal on this issue. Freud considers a number of problems regarding the primal scene. Is its effect delayed, or retrospectively constructed? Is it a genuinely witnessed event or the phantasy of the patient, or even of the analyst? In the first draft of the case study, written in 1914, Freud argues for the historical reality of the primal scene. However, in a passage added
in 1918 he reverses this view and suggests instead that the child’s ‘memory’ of seeing its parents engaged in intercourse may be a displaced recollection of seeing copulating animals (‘From the History of an Infantile Neurosis’, p. 292). The primal scene may in fact be a primal phantasy, or even part of our phylogenetic inheritance. Freud concludes, provisionally, that there are no clear answers to the questions he asks (p. 295). In analysing this passage, Brooks contrasts the neat solutions discovered by Sherlock Holmes with Freud’s layered, self-questioning text which offers ‘a proliferation of narratives with no ultimate points of fixity’ (Reading for the Plot, p. 278). The narrative of the primal scene raises as many questions as it answers. To some extent, Felman acknowledges this by insisting that the Holocaust as primal scene ‘cannot be made present to itself, present to consciousness’ (‘Camus’ The Fall’, p. 194). But even to identify the primal scene as the Holocaust pins it down to a historical reality, however ungraspable and unrepresentable that reality might be. I take it for granted that while Freud considers that the primal scene may never have occurred, Felman would have no truck with the arguments of the Holocaust deniers.

Brooks describes how Freud’s case study entails ‘suspicion and conjecture, a structure of indeterminacy which can offer only a framework of narrative possibilities rather than a clearly specifiable plot’ (p. 275). My suggestion here is that this description is equally appropriate for Camus’s La Chute. The novel holds open the prospect of solutions to its raging ambiguities, such as the one suggested by Felman, in which there is a significant equivalence between the scene on the bridge and the Holocaust; but La Chute is too fluid and self-questioning to allow any final resolution of its pervading secretiveness. Regarding the scene on the bridge, for example, we might ask how much its status as primal scene actually explains. Clamence certainly describes it as his essential discovery, but it may be a screen memory or an invention. It certainly may be associated with the Holocaust: the novel refers to the deportation and murder of the Jews of Amsterdam, and to Buchenwald (p. 733). But it also alludes to other atrocities or global problems such as the murder of the innocents at the birth of Christ, the detonation of the first hydrogen bomb in 1952 or France’s difficult colonial situation. Other incidents in Clamence’s personal biography may also have as much or as little explanatory power as the incident on the bridge, for example when he is publicly humiliated in the incident at the traffic lights, when he is unsettled by the sound of laughter, when he believes he sees a body floating in the sea or when he is in an internment camp in
Africa. Each of these may be connected to the others, or they may have no link; one may be the central event in his life, or each may be a screen for something unnamed. Clamence himself pours scorn on the reduction of human actions to single motives: ‘Ils [les hommes] croient toujours qu’on se suicide pour une raison. Mais on peut très bien se suicider pour deux raisons’ (p. 731). In Clamence’s view and in his narrative, everything is or may be at least double, and in any case nothing is what it seems. Any attempt to disambiguate the novel is a search for solutions that the text doggedly refuses to provide.34

The missing mirror

Felman brilliantly demonstrates the relevance of La Chute to modern trauma studies. However, the price to be paid for this is a neglect of those aspects of the novel that do not readily fit in with her interpretation. To draw attention to Felman’s blind spots is not to discredit her argument, but to show how the text’s resistance to exhaustive interpretive dominance may help us to understand the nature of this particular work’s commitment to ambiguity. There are some things that Felman misses. In terms of the interdependence of blindness and insight, an

34 LaCapra differs from Felman in his account of the role of the Holocaust in La Chute, but his explanation serves equally to pin down the novel’s elusiveness. Camus’s turn to the Holocaust may be read, according to LaCapra, ‘as functioning to displace or even obscure the problem of the Algerian war and his response to it’ (History and Memory after Auschwitz, p. 89). So the Holocaust is a kind of screen in the novel, deflecting attention from a more pressing reality: the Algerian war and Camus’s inability to work through his ambivalence towards the demand for Algerian independence. It is not certain, though, that reference to the Holocaust in La Chute actually obscures the Algerian war, as LaCapra twice suggests (pp. 73, 89). To any reader of Camus’s previous works, the absence of Algeria in the novel is glaringly obvious, so that the War of Independence is ever-present even if it is not mentioned. The year of La Chute’s publication, 1956, also saw the release of Alain Resnais’s documentary on the German concentration camps, Nuit et brouillard. It is perfectly clear – though never made explicit in the film – that for Resnais to depict the Holocaust was also to refer to the Algerian war, however problematic the link might be. I would suggest that the same is true in La Chute, which refers to Algeria only once (p. 754). The novel does not obscure the Algerian situation; rather, that situation is constantly evoked by its literal absence, as a source of pain and perplexity. For trenchant discussion, see Sanyal, Memory and Complicity, especially pp. 83–98.
especially intriguing instance when she quotes Camus’s ‘Prière d’insérer’ to the novel. Rather than referring directly to the original text, Felman quotes from its translation in Herbert Lottmann’s biography of Camus. Here is the passage as it appears in Felman’s chapter:

The man who speaks in *The Fall* delivers himself of a calculated confession. Exiled in Amsterdam in a city of canals and cold light, where he plays the hermit and the prophet, this former attorney waits for willing listeners … Thus he hastens to try himself but he does so so as to better judge others.

Where does the confession begin, where is the accusation? Is the man who speaks in this book putting himself on trial, or his era? Is he a particular case, or the man of the day? A sole truth, in any case, in this studied play of mirrors: pain, and what it promises. (‘Camus’ *The Fall*, p. 173, quoting Lottmann, *Albert Camus*, p. 593)

It is already surprising that Felman chooses to quote Lottmann’s text rather than the original. In fact, though, Felman does not even accurately reproduce Lottmann’s text. Lottmann quotes the ‘Prière d’insérer’ in its entirety, whereas Felman omits two sentences. The first omission is signalled by the ellipsis in the above passage, which at least shows the reader that something is missing. The omission of the second sentence is not marked in any way, so that readers unfamiliar with the original text might reasonably assume that nothing had been left out. This second omission occurs at the end of the second paragraph, where Camus draws attention to the deceptive nature of Clamence’s self-portrait: ‘Le miroir dans lequel il se regarde, il finit par le tendre aux autres’ (‘Prière d’insérer’, in *Œuvres complètes III*, p. 771).

What Felman fails to see here, as if she literally could not see it, is the text’s designation of itself as a mirror pointed outwards to its reader. Clamence’s confession is calculated so that it tells us more about his interlocutor than it does about himself. The text warns us that it offers little that we can rely on. Instead, it gives us chaotic material which we partially ignore in order to find in it what we can recognize as our own. If the reader fails to see the mirror, it is because she is looking straight into it and seeing herself reflected back. Felman omits the text’s knowing indication that what we will find in it is our own image.

Felman is entirely persuasive in showing how *La Chute* resonates with themes that can be traced to the Holocaust. And yet in her desire to make this its profound subject, she underplays its reluctance to yield its final secrets. As Sanyal argues, *La Chute* is now ‘canonically read and taught as a meditation on the Shoah’, and yet it ‘resists any singular
historicization of its eddying figures’ (Memory and Complicity, pp. 83, 85). The novel refuses to be quite the work Felman wanted it to be. Perhaps, though, there is no alternative to such acts of partial misreading if we are to find anything useable in a work such as this, which revels in its proficiency to confuse. La Chute certainly bears what look to be unmistakable signs of trauma; but the real or fantasized source of that trauma is never reliably revealed. Instead of confronting his singular failures, Clamence finds too easy comfort in an unwarranted generalization of his own situation. In a nice formulation, Caruth says that literary language ‘defies, even as it claims, our understanding’ (Unclaimed Experience, p. 5). La Chute exemplifies this to an extreme degree. It may be that its secrets are inscrutable; or it may be that in fact it has nothing to hide, except the unnerving confidence that it knows more about its readers than they know about themselves.