Traces of War

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Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are talking to somebody: to somebody they have been waiting for for a long time.

(Laub, ‘Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening’, in Testimony, pp. 70–71; emphasis original)

Testimonial literature crystallizes the problems involved in gathering together the shards of experience in a communicable tale. Shoshana Felman suggests that we now live in an ‘era of testimony’ in which ‘testimony has become a crucial mode of our relation to events of our times – our relation to the traumas of contemporary history: the Second World War, the Holocaust, the nuclear bomb, and other war atrocities’ (‘Education and Crisis’, p. 5). Testimony, though, is not the promise that the sense of experience can easily be restored or conveyed: ‘What a testimony does not offer is, however, a completed statement, a totalizable account of those events. In the testimony, language is in process and in trial, it does not possess itself as a conclusion, as the constatation of a verdict or the self-transparency of knowledge’ (‘Education and Crisis’, p. 5). In short, testimony becomes a central genre precisely when it is perceived as problematic and, at the limit, maybe even impossible.

This chapter deals with the problems of testimony and storytelling in the work of Elie Wiesel. Wiesel has become, along with Primo Levi, perhaps the world’s best-known witness to the atrocities of the Holocaust. Born into a Jewish community in Sighet, Romania, in 1928,
he was deported to Auschwitz in 1944 and later to Buchenwald. He saw his mother for the last time at the gates of Auschwitz, and was present at his father’s death in Buchenwald. After the war, he lived for a while in France before moving to the United States and gaining citizenship there. He wrote about his experiences, first in Yiddish and then in French, which remained his principal literary language until his death in 2016. His first French work, *La Nuit* (1958), is widely read and accepted as one of the most important Holocaust testimonies. Wiesel went on to achieve high visibility as a writer and human rights campaigner, winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986.

Although Wiesel’s status as a pre-eminent witness to the Holocaust is beyond doubt, after *La Nuit*, and until the later, much longer autobiographical work *Tous les fleuves vont à la mer* (1994), he actually wrote relatively little which directly described the Holocaust. He eloquently summarizes a tension at the heart of much Holocaust testimony with his pithy epigram, ‘Impossible d’en parler et impossible de ne pas en parler’ (*Un juif*, p. 193). A psychological and moral imperative to bear witness runs up against a sense that the Holocaust is beyond language and comprehension. What must be said cannot be said. One way for Wiesel to deal with this tension is through controlled reticence: he speaks and writes of his experiences, but with restraint, frequently reiterating the impossibility of communicating atrocity rather than offering detailed memories. Disclosing the Holocaust entails repeatedly disclosing its inherent unspeakability.

Another way for Wiesel to deal with the tension between the need to speak and the impossibility of speaking about the Holocaust is, perhaps surprisingly, through the practice of fiction. Wiesel grew up in a world of stories stemming from the Hassidic tradition into which he was born. But he echoes and endorses Adorno’s dictum according to which poetry after Auschwitz is no longer possible, and he extends it to include literature and cultural values more broadly: ‘Adorno avait peut-être raison. Après Auschwitz, la poésie n’est plus possible. Ni la littérature. Ni l’amitié. Ni l’espérance. Ni rien’ (*Un juif*, p. 202). In particular, Wiesel insists that there can be no such thing as Holocaust literature: ‘Un roman sur Auschwitz n’est pas un roman, ou bien il n’est pas sur Auschwitz. Les deux ne vont pas de pair’ (*Elie Wiesel: Qui êtes-vous?*, p. 49). He is nevertheless the author of a substantial body of fiction which is sometimes – despite his own misgivings – categorized as Holocaust literature. In fact, consistent with his view that the Holocaust lies beyond the scope of the novel, his fiction often describes the prelude
to and aftermath of the Holocaust, but only fleetingly evokes the events of the Holocaust themselves. So although his novels are undoubtedly about the Holocaust in some sense, it is usually present as a kind of absent cause. It is anticipated and recalled, but rarely actually depicted. Like the signs of trauma discussed in the Introduction, it is everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

Bearing witness, for Wiesel, involves a complex constellation of telling and not telling, disclosure and reticence, memory, truth, history and fiction. The current chapter explores these issues first by discussing the case of Moshe the Beadle from La Nuit, and then in relation to two of his novels, Le Serment de Kolvillâg (1973) and Un désir fou de danser (2006). The first of these enunciates – even if it does not finally embrace – a particularly provocative suggestion on the problem of witnessing; and the second explores the links between speech, knowledge and psychoanalysis in the experience of the Holocaust survivor.

Moshe the Beadle’s story

La Nuit is Wiesel’s first book to be published in French, and Moshe (spelt Moché in the French version) is the first character to be named in that book. The opening sentence begins: ‘On l’appelait Moché-le-Bedeau’ (p. 13). It is striking that the book, which has become renowned as a Holocaust testimony, opens with this relatively minor character rather than with, for example, the narrator’s father, mother or sister, all of whom would die in the Holocaust. Moshe is an eccentric figure who works in the local synagogue and agrees to teach the Kabbalah to Eliezer against his father’s wishes. After the annexation of Sighet by Hungary, Moshe is expelled because he is a foreigner, and yet he returns a few months later to tell an incredible tale. He recounts how, once in Poland, the Jewish deportees were taken from the train and murdered by the Gestapo. Moshe escaped because he was thought to be dead. Eliezer observes a marked change in Moshe: ‘Ses yeux ne reflétaient plus la joie. Il ne chantait plus. Il ne me parlait plus de Dieu ou de Kabbale, mais seulement de ce qu’il avait vu’ (p. 16). He has become an exemplary, paradigmatic survivor-witness. His transformation, the moral imperative which governs his return and the potential disbelief of his audience, anticipate what will happen to Eliezer as he becomes the narrator of his own experience of atrocity (see Trezise, Witnessing, p. 200). The insistence that Moshe now speaks only of ‘ce qu’il avait vu’
is echoed later in the text when Eliezer describes the burning of babies’ corpses in Auschwitz: ‘Oui, je l’avais vu, de mes yeux vu …’ (p. 42). The witness’s key claim – the one which underpins the moral authority of his testimony – is that he saw what he describes. Moshe and Eliezer offer a straightforward referential contract: we are asked to accept that what they depict really happened.

This implicit assertion of the survivor’s testimonial credentials also places Moshe and Eliezer in the Jewish tradition of the survivor-witness who comes back from near-death to tell the tale of misfortune. This is exemplified by the biblical Book of Job when, each time that a catastrophe befalls Job’s family and property, there is one survivor who returns with the words, ‘And I alone have escaped to tell you’. Although, rather incredibly, this precise formula is repeated four times in the Book of Job, Job unquestioningly believes and accepts the reports of catastrophe which are brought to him. Wiesel has commented that, for him, this proves that Job cannot have been Jewish, because a Jew would question both the verbal coincidence and the series of disasters (see Job ou Dieu dans la tempête, p. 59). The problem for Moshe is that his audience consists in the kind of sceptical Jew Wiesel describes, and as a consequence no one will believe his tale or even listen to it: ‘Les gens refusaient non seulement de croire à ses histoires mais encore de les écouter’ (La Nuit, p. 16). The people of Sighet think that he is seeking pity, or that he has gone mad. Even Eliezer comments that he did not believe him, but that he felt sorry for him. In the end Moshe abandons his vain task of trying to inform and forewarn his fellow Jews: ‘Même Moché-le-Bedeau s’était tu. Il était las de parler. Il errait dans la synagogue ou dans les rues, les yeux baissés, le dos voûté, évitant de regarder les gens’ (p. 18).

Moshe’s problem is that he finds no one who will listen to him, and in consequence his testimony fails. This suggests the conclusion that the success of witnessing depends as much upon the listener as it does on the speaker. The place of the listener in the circuit of testimony has in fact been one of the cornerstones of trauma studies. In his influential chapter ‘Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening’, Dori Laub describes how trauma cannot initially be registered by those who fall victim to it. Paradoxically, they are not yet witnesses to what they have witnessed. It is only through being heard that they can become a witness to their own lives. This has the consequence that listening is a necessary condition if the act of witnessing is to take place. In Laub’s words, ‘the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner.
of the traumatic event’ (p. 59). As I already indicated in Chapter 1, I find the language of ‘ownership’ to be deeply problematic here, and there are important ethical issues raised by the ‘participation’ of one person in another’s trauma. In the current context, though, the important point is the significance of the listener. A key aspect of trauma studies has been its insistence on the necessary role of the listener in the act of witnessing. For it to succeed, it must be what Trezise, discussing Laub, calls a ‘dialogical relation’ (Witnessing Witnessing, p. 16). It cannot be understood simply as the transmission of a story or of knowledge which pre-exists the verbal performance. It is rather an event in the life of both witness and audience. Witnessing requires being witnessed for the witness to come into being.

The opening sequence of La Nuit, which focusses on Moshe’s inability to forewarn the Jews of Sighet, is of the utmost significance in the book and for Wiesel’s own status as witness. This exemplary testimonial work begins with an act of witnessing which signally fails. The anxiety which haunts the rest of the text as well as perhaps the whole of Wiesel’s work and even testimonial writing in general, is that the witness will not be heard or heeded. Every witness fears becoming Moshe: the bearer of an urgent message which cannot be delivered. Wiesel is associated with a conception of the Holocaust as radically unspeakable, as beyond language and comprehension. Nevertheless, even if the Holocaust cannot ultimately be contained in words, a great deal can be said about it. The problem for Moshe is not that his experience is unsayable. It can be recounted, but it meets with disbelief because it exceeds the frame of intelligibility within which his potential audience is enclosed. The issue here, then, is not that the messenger cannot recount his tale, but that there is no one capable of listening to it. Before his experience of atrocity, the addressee of Moshe’s mystical celebrations is God, the big Other who gives sense to everything. The dilemma of the witness comes about when there is no big Other, no final guarantor of meaning and justice. Who will listen? The witness requires a listener; and without a listener, there is no witness. Moshe claims that he has returned to Sighet ‘pour vous raconter ma mort’ (p. 17). This summarizes the impossible position of the failed witness. One’s own death is precisely what one cannot recount. The witness has something to say which cannot be said, and which cannot be heard. Again, Eliezer implicitly identifies with Moshe when, at the very end of La Nuit he looks in a mirror after the liberation of Buchenwald and sees himself as a corpse: ‘Du fond du miroir, un cadavre me contemplait. Son regard dans mes yeux ne me quitte plus’
The witness returns to tell the impossible tale of his own death; and this tale is impossible not because it cannot be told, but because it cannot be heard.

The story of Moshe yields insights into the constitutive role of the listener in the circuit of witnessing, and into the inherent anxiety of the witness who is painfully aware that testimony might fail to find an audience. Wiesel’s endeavour is to avoid becoming Moshe. Yet the ghost of Moshe returns and keeps on returning. Indeed, Moshe reappears in numerous of Wiesel’s works. In an essay entitled ‘Moshe-le-fou’ Wiesel describes how he tried to rid himself of his obsession with Moshe by making him a character in one of his books, only to find that he took over every other character. His fiction, perhaps, is nothing but the story of Moshe: not so much in its overt themes, but in its repeated anxiety concerning testimonial failure. And Wiesel considers that his own life may be no more than a reflection on Moshe’s: ‘L’idée me vient parfois que je ne suis moi-même qu’une erreur, un malentendu: je crois vivre ma vie, alors qu’en vérité je ne fais que traduire la sienne’ (Le Chant des morts, p. 102). Moshe, then, haunts Wiesel’s writing. Indeed, Wiesel describes him as a kind of ghost or living dead man: ‘je le sais mort depuis très longtemps [...]. Mais il se refuse à l’admettre. Il semble abuser de ses privilèges de feu et de mort pour nier les faits’ (Le Chant des morts, p. 99). He comes back again and again, representing the ever-present possibility that the witness will fail in his task.

However, one of the novels in which Moshe appears – Le Serment de Kolvillàg – envisages a radically different view of testimonial obligation: in this case, the survivor assumes the difficult task of remaining silent, in the endeavour to prevent the repetition of atrocity by refusing to recount it.

The discovery of the listener

The opening sentences of Le Serment de Kolvillàg indicate a blunt refusal to speak: ‘Je ne parlerai pas, dit le vieillard. Ce que j’ai à le dire, je ne tiens pas à le dire’ (p. 9). This is echoed shortly afterwards: ‘Je ne raconterai pas, dit le vieillard. Kolvillàg ça ne se raconte pas’ (p. 11). With these words we are introduced to a narrator who does not want to narrate; and the rest of the novel can be read as a disavowal of its first sentences. If the old man kept to his word, there would be no story and no book for us to read. Shortly afterwards, when something resembling a narrative appears
to begin, it is with the words ‘Il était une fois, il y a longtemps, une petite ville’ (p. 9; emphasis original). The formula ‘Il était une fois’ suggests that we are reading an invented tale, perhaps a fairy story, but in any case something other than a historical or testimonial narrative. We are invited to suspend any expectation that what we are reading should be taken as literally, referentially true. It’s just a story.

The rest of Wiesel’s novel explores this opening tension between a refusal to speak and a willing entry into narrative. Le Serment de Kolvillag is at first a confusing work: different – initially unidentified – voices speak; some passages are in italics; and chronology is uncertain. Eventually, though, the situation becomes clearer. An aging vagrant named Azriel meets and befriends a young man who is on the verge of killing himself. Although the young man’s suicidal inclinations are not fully explained, they appear to be linked to his parents’ experience of the Holocaust, during which his mother lost her son and first husband. Azriel decides that the way to save him is by speaking to him: ‘On ne se suicide pas au milieu d’une phrase. On ne se suicide pas en parlant ou en écoutant’ (p. 19). So he engages his interlocutor by recounting real or invented stories. At the same time, he repeatedly alludes to something he is not telling, namely the story of Kolvillag: ‘comment parler de ce qui nie la parole? comment exprimer ce qui doit demeurer inarticulé?’ (p. 41); ‘L’histoire que j’ai à vous raconter, on m’a défendu de la raconter’ (p. 42); ‘je ne suis pas ici pour parler mais pour me taire’ (p. 50).

Although Azriel speaks incessantly, he has a secret of which he will not speak. At the end of the first of the three sections of the novel, he nevertheless decides to divulge his secret, despite a binding oath which he has taken. He does this because it seems to be the only way of saving his young interlocutor from suicide; and the secret turns out to be the story of Kolvillag. The remaining two sections of the novel tell that story. In the years before the Second World War, a Christian boy goes missing in the town of Kolvillag, which is situated somewhere in Eastern or Central Europe. The Christian inhabitants quickly blame the Jewish community, and it is increasingly apparent that a pogrom is about to occur. Moshe, the local mystic and/or madman, falsely confesses to killing the boy in the hope that his self-sacrifice with avert the impending slaughter. His actions turn out to be in vain. Allowed to preach in the synagogue, Moshe proposes to the Jews of Kolvillag that, if any of them should survive, instead of recounting the story of the pogrom they should keep silent about it. The community takes an oath not to bear witness. The pogrom occurs, the Jews are murdered and only Azriel escapes. In
the final lines of the book, Azriel passes on the story of Kolvillág to the young man. His secret has now finally been revealed, and the burden of responsibility has been passed on to the next generation. Moreover, by telling the young man the story of Kolvillág, Azriel has both saved and blighted his life: ‘Parce que maintenant, ayant reçu cette histoire, tu n’as plus le droit de mourir’ (p. 255; emphasis original). The young man has become the witness to the witness. The witness is a moral agent who must transmit the story of atrocity; and the witness to the witness is put into an analogous situation, being forced to preserve a memory of which s/he has been made the depository. The suicidal young man can no longer kill himself once he becomes the bearer of a story which it is his duty to transmit.

The frame narrative of Le Serment de Kolvillág appears closely to endorse the emphasis that trauma studies has placed on the role of the listener. In La Nuit, Moshe’s testimony remains blocked because he has no one with whom it can be shared. Le Serment de Kolvillág, by contrast, is all about the invention of a listener who will become witness to the witness and in the process make testimony possible. Prior to his encounter with the suicidal young man, Azriel will not or cannot become the author of his own life story. His story is unblocked by the encounter with a secondary witness who becomes its suitable addressee. The story becomes possible precisely and only through the meeting with someone capable of receiving it; and the addressee becomes the vehicle for its continuation. The discovery of the witness to the witness is exactly coterminous with the viability of primary witnessing. The witness needs, in equal measure, an experience of which to speak and a listener capable of hearing it. As trauma studies predicts, the invention of the witness coincides with the invention of the witness to the witness. And testimony is an event in the life of both the primary witness and the secondary witness. The final page of the novel suggests that, once he has told his story, Azriel has the right to die; and having heard it and become its repository, the young listener now has a duty to live.

Le Serment de Kolvillág can be read, then, as depicting the invention of the witness through the encounter with the listener, the secondary witness, who is capable of receiving his story. In this respect, it reproduces the psychoanalytical conditions of witnessing powerfully and influentially described by Dori Laub, and followed in later versions of trauma studies. And yet, this misses what is most compelling and challenging in Wiesel’s novel. Here, the decision to narrate is both a life-changing, life-saving unblockage and an act of betrayal.
The oath of silence

The oath from which *Le Serment de Kolvillàg* takes its title is sworn by the Jews of Kolvillàg as they await a murderous pogrom some time before the Second World War. The principal narrator, Azriel, is a boy at the time. His father, Shmuel, is the community scribe, and as such he keeps and continues the book in which the history and ongoing discussions of the community are recorded. Shmuel believes in the need to bear witness, to keep a record of what is said and done which can be passed on to future generations. The central, second part of the novel turns around the opposition between him and Moshe, the local madman and mystic. Moshe is an enigmatic, charismatic and disturbing figure. His madness and his mysticism are bound up with one another, as he shuns everyday life and claims – and is believed – to have special powers. He nevertheless takes a wife, out of pity and then perhaps out of love, and settles into a more ordinary existence. When the Jewish community is threatened because a Christian boy goes missing, giving rise to long-standing anti-Semitic accusations of ritual sacrifice practised by the Jews, Moshe believes he can avert the impending disaster by falsely confessing to the boy’s murder and thereby making himself the necessary scapegoat. However, in what is clearly a prefiguration of the Holocaust, the lust for Jewish blood will not be appeased so easily. It looks as if Moshe’s act was in vain.

Although he is in custody, Moshe gains permission to speak in the town synagogue, and this is where he proposes the novel’s titular oath. The passage echoes Paneloux’s second sermon in Camus’s *La Peste*, and it is also a dense reflection on the Jewish tradition of testimony. The role of human beings, Moshe argues, has always been to survive in order to tell the tale of their survival, the ultimate listener here being God. The story is always the same, even though it can be recounted in numerous ways:

Les hommes n’ont qu’une histoire à raconter, quoiqu’ils la rapportent de mille façons: tortures, persécutions, chasses à l’homme, meurtres rituels, terreur collective, cela fait des siècles que ça dure, des siècles que de deux côtés les participants jouent les mêmes rôles – et au lieu de parler, Dieu écoute, au lieu d’intervenir, de trancher, il attend et ne juge qu’après. [...] C’est qu’il y a toujours un conteur, un survivant, un témoin pour raviver le passé et ressusciter le meurtre sinon les morts. (p. 216)

In Moshe’s account, history is the endless repetition of the same: the same hatred, the same accusations, the same murderous outcome. This
echoes passages from elsewhere in the novel, for example when we are told that ‘C’est une bien vieille fable. Et bien bête. […] Rien n’a changé depuis le premier meurtre rituel. C’était le même cadavre qui servait de prétexte; on assassinait chaque fois le même enfant pour provoquer les mêmes abominations’ (p. 92). There is nothing new about the story of Kolvillag: it has been repeated innumerable times throughout history. An important intertext here, once again, is the Book of Job, in which a series of disasters occur. Each repeats the previous one with variations but with the same sense of inevitable catastrophe. And as in the Book of Job, in which each time there is one survivor who escapes to tell the tale, someone comes back to speak of what has happened.

And to whom does the survivor-narrator speak? Moshe suggests that the ultimate addressee is God; but the bitterness here is palpable. If the survivor’s role is to report to God on the awfulness of the human situation, God turns out to be an appalling, indifferent addressee because he never responds with decisive action: ‘il attend’. So what is the point of bearing witness if nothing changes? The purpose of transmitting the memory of atrocity may be to avert its reoccurrence. Yet history shows that testimony has always been futile. God does nothing, and human beings pursue their murderous path. The pogrom which takes place in Kolvillag repeats previous pogroms and in turn anticipates the ultimate pogrom that is the Holocaust; and that in turn anticipates other genocides, for example in Cambodia, Bosnia and Rwanda. Nothing changes; history is an endless repetition of the same; and the different narratives of atrocity do not alter its underlying sameness.

To this already bleak account of the moral purpose of witnessing, Moshe adds a further radical point: what if recalling and recounting atrocity actually contribute to the likelihood of its reoccurrence? Moshe describes the tradition in which there is always a survivor-witness who miraculously escapes to tell the tale and prevent atrocity from being forgotten. But this victory is a hollow one:

Eh! oui, des siècles que ça dure: on nous tue et nous racontons comment; on nous pille et nous écrivons comment; on nous humiliie, on nous opprime, on nous expulse de la société et de l’histoire et nous disons comment. […] L’ennemi peut tout faire de nous, mais jamais il ne nous fera taire: c’était là notre devise. Le verbe était notre arme, notre bouclier, le conte notre radeau de sauvetage. Le verbe, nous le voulions fort, plus fort que l’ennemi, plus puissant que la mort. Puisqu’il restera quelqu’un pour raconter l’épreuve, c’est que nous l’avons gagné d’avance. Puisque, à la fin, il restera quelqu’un pour décrire notre mort, c’est que la mort sera
Moshe’s ‘Pourtant …’ marks the point where he will strike a blow against this conviction. Telling the story saves no one; indeed, it might even make matters worse. The key to Moshe’s argument is the contention that ‘La souffrance et l’histoire de la souffrance [sont] liées de manière intrinsèque’ (p. 218). Moshe’s disturbing suggestion is that the story prolongs what it describes, both as a memory of past suffering and a kind of blueprint for the future. It encapsulates and makes explicit an aspect of human potential which is then available to be re-enacted by later generations. Moshe’s solution, finally accepted by the Jews of Sighet, is a simple, definitive attempt to break the circle of atrocity through a binding oath: ‘Prenons l’unique décision qui s’impose: nous ne témoignerons plus’ (p. 218).

The implication that bearing witness to one’s own story actually causes and prolongs suffering runs up against deep-rooted beliefs about the value of storytelling in particular and speech in general. The much-repeated insistence on the moral duty to bear witness or the psychoanalytical ‘talking cure’ both stress the benefits, individually and culturally, of trying to formulate the story of pain. Recent theoretical interest in the ‘narrative turn’ has also drawn attention to the role of storytelling in the necessary and therapeutic process of creating a meaning for one’s life.¹ As Karen Blixen is quoted as saying, ‘All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them’ (Cavarero, Relating Narratives, p. 2). But reticence bordering on a blunt refusal to speak is also part of the survivor-witness’s experience. In one of the opening sequences of Claude Lanzmann’s film Shoah, Lanzmann asks one of the survivors of the Chelmno death camp if it is good to speak of his experiences, only to be told through an interpreter that no, for him it is not good; the survivor does not speak of his experiences, or read books about the Eichmann trial even though he was a witness at it; and a strange smile hovers on his lips because, he says, it is better to smile than to cry (see Lanzmann, Shoah, p. 27). The endeavour of Lanzmann’s monumental film is to elicit the stories of survivors, perpetrators and bystanders in the face of their reluctance to bear witness. The stakes of Wiesel’s Le Serment de Kolvillag are, if anything, even more stark. Should one bear witness at all, if the duty to testify competes with an

¹ For discussion, see Meretoja, The Narrative Turn in Fiction and Theory.
equally compelling duty to keep silent, and if in any case telling the story of suffering is part of the problem rather than part of the solution?

In Wiesel’s novel, Azriel decides to tell the story of Kolvillàg. On balance, his desire to save his listener by making him the repository of the story outweighs his determination to keep to his oath of silence. Where Moshe in *La Nuit* failed to find an audience which would allow testimony to take place, Azriel succeeds in inventing himself as witness by inventing his listener as the witness to the witness. One could say, then, that the novel finally sides with Azriel’s father, the scribe committed to the primacy of memory, rather than Moshe, who argues for silence. And yet one should bear in mind that *Le Serment de Kolvillàg* is a novel, not a directly testimonial work; moreover, it is a novel which is deeply aware of the difficulties and dilemmas of narration, and in particular of the problematic distinction between storytelling as part of experience and storytelling as the construction of fictions. Azriel is a storyteller, and storytelling is part of life; but some of Azriel’s stories are purely imagined. Moreover, telling invented stories is precisely a way of not telling one’s own: ‘Pour ne pas violer mon serment, je racontais toutes sortes d’histoire sauf la mienne: en les inventant, je donnais libre cours à mon imagination’ (p. 51). Thus forewarned, we might wonder if the story of Kolvillàg is actually told, or merely fitted in to a pre-existing pattern of meaning in which each atrocity repeats every other one. At the end of his narrative, despite all that he has disclosed, Azriel nevertheless says that ‘[l’histoire de Kolvillàg] demeurera secrète’ (p. 254). Telling and not telling turn out to be bound up with one another in ways that perhaps cannot be disentangled.

At the very least, it is significant that Wiesel’s novel entertains the possibility of putting an end to witnessing, even if ultimately the work sides with the duty of testimony. The novel, like all of Wiesel’s writing, is inhabited by a foreboding of its own futility or impossibility, combined with a moral and psychological need to carry on. The genre of the novel provides a means of negotiating this difficult position. The fictional story of Kolvillàg echoes, but does not quite equate to, the true story of Sighet; and it foreshadows without fully entering into the even more terrible story of the Holocaust. Something is disclosed, and something remains secret.
Psychoanalysis, trauma and the ‘little secret’

The question of secrecy, of telling and not telling what cannot be told, of bearing witness to the truth while insisting that something remains unsaid, lies as the core of Wiesel’s aesthetics (for fuller discussion, see Davis, *Elie Wiesel’s Secretive Texts*). In the rest of this chapter I want to examine the link between secrecy and knowledge, speaking and remaining silent, in relation to Wiesel’s *Un désir fou de danser*. In this late-period novel, a troubled man undertakes a course of psychoanalysis, both rejecting his analyst’s search to uncover hidden secrets and yet reluctantly conceding the pertinence of her insights, until the course is terminated by the analyst herself. I discuss this alongside *Le Savoir-déporté: camps, histoire, psychanalyse* (2004), a collection of texts by the Auschwitz survivor and Lacanian psychoanalyst Anne-Lise Stern. What is at stake here is the issue of what it means to know and to speak after Auschwitz. Angered by the failure of psychoanalysts to heed the effects of the camps on post-war generations, Stern attempts to sketch what she calls *le savoir-déporté*, a mode of knowledge formed by the camps rather than a dispassionate interpretation of deportees’ experience. I suggest that in Wiesel’s writing there is a fascinated but determined resistance to psychoanalysis, whereas Stern’s work enacts a resistance within psychoanalysis to the appropriation of the survivor’s experience. Coming from very different positions, both Wiesel’s novel and Stern’s essays nevertheless converge as they point towards a mode of post-traumatic knowing.

The question of what one knows and does not know, says and cannot say, is central to recent trauma studies. Yet with some exasperation Shoshana Felman has observed a censorious tendency at work in some writing on trauma and trauma studies. As she puts it, ‘Why this policing of the territory of knowledge?’ (*The Juridical Unconscious*, p. 181). Perhaps she should not be so surprised. As Felman explains, referring to the work of Cathy Caruth, ‘the event of trauma destabilizes the security of knowledge and strikes at the foundation of the institutional prerogatives of what is known’ (p. 181). To respond to trauma is to experience as ethically urgent the questions of who knows and what is known, of who can speak with authority and what can be communicated in intelligible form. In particular, the nature and status of psychoanalytic knowledge is at stake here, given the pivotal role that psychoanalysis has played in the development of trauma studies. Psychoanalysis has sometimes been characterized and caricatured as the pursuit of sexual
secrets underlying obsessive behaviour. But trauma, understood as the 
disruption of knowledge, upsets the masterful position of the analyst, 
who was famously described by Lacan as the subject supposed (but only 

supposed) to know.

It would be hard to overrate the importance of Cathy Caruth’s work 
on the development of psychoanalytically informed trauma studies in 
the humanities. Describing her as the ‘most authoritative, most original 
interdisciplinary theorist’ of the field, Felman usefully summarizes the 
main aspects of her thought in a long footnote to her own book The 

Juridical Unconscious (2002):

(1) Trauma is an essential dimension of historical experience, and its 
analysis provides a new understanding of historical causality; 
(2) The aftermath of catastrophic experience is riddled by an enigma 
of survival; the legacy of traumatic experience imposes a reflection 
on, and provides a new type of insight into, the relation between 
destruction and survival; 
(3) Because the experience of trauma addresses the Other and demands 
the listening of another, it implies a human and an ethical dimension 
in which the Other receives priority over the self. This ethical 
dimension is tightly related to the question of justice. (pp. 173–74)

Felman concedes, though, that Caruth’s theorization of trauma, which 
is ‘largely recognized and widely cited as canonical’ (p. 175), has been 
severely criticized in some quarters. She goes on to discuss Ruth Leys’s 

Trauma: A Genealogy, describing it as ‘emblematic (symptomatic)’ of 
territorial struggles in academia (Juridical Unconscious, p. 175). In 
h her book, Leys takes what she describes as a Foucauldian genealogical 
approach to the study of trauma, tracing the development of the notion 
through the work of Freud and Janet into recent debates around 
post-traumatic stress disorder. The final chapter of Leys’s book is 
devoted to Caruth’s work. There are certainly some questionable moves 
in this chapter. Its opening sentence, for example, describes Caruth’s 
approach as ‘postmodernist’ and ‘poststructuralist’, conflating two terms 
in a way which is at best problematic; and the repeated association of 
Caruth’s views with those of Paul de Man simplifies the complex relation 
between their positions. Even so, much of the chapter is intelligent and 
thoughtful, and it leads to the challenging conclusion that Caruth tends 
to erase the distinction between victims and perpetrators so that even 
Nazis, for example, are turned into victims in a way that we should 
find ethically unacceptable. When she summarizes her findings in her 
Conclusion, Leys’s dislike for Caruth’s work becomes explicit. Leys
admits to ‘impatience with the sloppiness of her theoretical arguments; in the name of close reading she produces interpretations that are so arbitrary, wilful, and tendentious as to forfeit all claim to believability’ (Trauma, p. 305).

In The Juridical Unconscious, Felman mounts a staunch defence against Leys’s attack on Caruth. Rather than following the detail of her argument, I want to point out here that the language she uses is every bit as forthright as Leys’s. Felman dislikes the ‘pure verbal violence’ of Leys’s book (p. 176), but she herself is not entirely free from denunciatory hyperbole. Felman accuses Leys of reducing ‘the momentous stakes of trauma to the triviality of academic conflict’ (p. 175); Leys’s book is ‘entirely derivative of the insights of those she attacks’ (p. 176); she ‘almost obsessively’ attributes Caruth’s theories to notions derived from Paul de Man (p. 176); and her falsification of Freud is ‘substantive’ and ‘blatant’ (pp. 177–78). In short, Trauma: A Genealogy is not a very good book: ‘What is wrong with this artificial theory? To begin with, its barrenness of insight, its lack of human depth, and by its own admission, its utter clinical irrelevance’ (The Juridical Unconscious, p. 177). In fact, precisely in the passage that Felman goes on to quote, Leys does not concede the clinical irrelevance of her work. On the contrary, Leys suggests that her dismantling of trauma theory does have clinical consequences, insofar as therapists should learn from it not to follow theory in their treatments, but to adopt instead ‘an intelligent, humane and resourceful pragmatism’ (Trauma, p. 307) towards their patients.

The point here is not to settle the rights and wrongs of this argument; rather it is to observe the excessive terms in which it is conducted. These go beyond what is customary in academic debate and illustrate how the discourse on trauma is infused with a heavy emotional investment on the part of its practitioners. The medical overtones of Felman’s references to Leys’s book as symptomatic and to almost obsessive aspects of her writing cast Leys as a patient to be treated, as if she were as much the bearer of trauma as she is its analyst. One feature of this implication which is strikingly odd is the extent to which Felman’s stance, like Leys’s and indeed Caruth’s, preserves the critic’s position of authority over the object of her criticism, implicitly likening it to the role of the doctor who diagnoses the ills of her patient with the aim of curing them. Trauma appears consistently in trauma studies as unrepresentable and as intractable to mastery and conventional knowledge. Even Leys concedes on the final page of her book that her argument does not yield ‘a meta-position from which to assess the messy and intrinsically painful
conundrums of the field’ (307). And yet this failure of knowledge – a failure at the core of our (in)ability to know the unfathomable strangeness of the other – does not, apparently, affect the critic’s knowledge of the texts she is reading. The critic knows the text better than it knows itself, speaking on its behalf because her insight has priority over its own self-understanding. This retention of critical authority in the face of a traumatic encounter which might put it in danger is already apparent in Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Therein Caruth suggests, for example, that the resonance of a passage from Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* ‘exceeds, perhaps, the limits of Freud’s conceptual or conscious theory of trauma’ (p. 2), and she goes on to demonstrate what Freud’s writing ‘unwittingly’ tells us about trauma (p. 4). The critic knows more about the text than it knows about itself. Trauma may unsettle knowledge, but the critic nevertheless reinstates a position of knowledge in her assumption of authority over the textual traces, effects or discourse of trauma.

This controversy within trauma studies illustrates how the whole field of study is suffused by problems of knowledge and authority both in arguments between critics and, more importantly, in relation to the texts of survivor-victims. Under what conditions, and with what necessary precautions, can anyone speak in the place of, on behalf of, the other? Such questions become particularly acute when the other in question is the survivor or the non-survivor of trauma. In Chapter 1, we saw how Giorgio Agamben places this issue at the centre of the ethical dilemma raised by talking about the Holocaust. Following Primo Levi, he designates the *Muselmann* (the prisoner who has given up on life) as the only true witness, yet he is the witness who, by definition, cannot bear witness because he did not survive (*Remnants of Auschwitz*, pp. 33–34, quoting Levi, *The Saved and the Drowned*, pp. 63–64). How can the survivor or the critic speak for the witness who cannot speak for himself? Agamben, like Levi and Caruth, attempts to occupy an impossible position defined by an intense double bind: we cannot and should not speak in the place of others, supplanting their voice with ours; but not to speak for them would be reduce them to silence once again, to be complicit in their second murder. The work of Wiesel and Stern bears directly on these issues. Both speak as survivors who are concerned about the status of the survivor’s speech, and about what it means to speak for and about those who did not survive. And they both investigate the kind of knowledge that an analyst, and pre-eminently a psychoanalyst, might have of the traumatized survivor.
The sane and the mad

Madness is a core theme in Wiesel’s work, as the survivor encounters a world drained of sense. The opening pages of La Nuit describe an exemplary descent into what some consider to be madness. When Moshe the Beadle returns to Sighet to warn the Jews of Nazi atrocities, he encounters only disbelief and he is held to be mad (‘Le pauvre, il est devenu fou’, p. 17). Those whom we describe as mad, it is suggested, may be those who have seen things which exceed what we can understand; or, alternatively, Wiesel’s subsequent novels will imply, madness may be the only sane response to an unhinged world. The mad are everywhere in Wiesel’s fiction, perhaps most insistently in Le Crépuscule, au loin (1987), which is set in a lunatic asylum and culminates in an encounter with a madman who thinks he is God – unless it is God who thinks he is a madman. The novel I want to concentrate on now, Un désir fou de danser, alludes to madness in its title, and its opening pages reflect on what it means to be mad. Is a madman who knows he is mad really mad? In a mad world, isn’t a madman who knows he is mad the only person who is sane? The language of madness can be understood only by those who bear madness within them, but then everyone is said to have a share of madness. So madness is incomprehensible and incommunicable, and yet potentially something which may be close to all of us.

From its opening paragraphs, the novel asks how to speak of madness, and on what terms it can be known and understood. It also suggests that the madman, rather than being someone to whom a pre-existing body of clinical knowledge should be applied with the aim of achieving a cure, may bear witness to his own kind of knowledge. He may be someone who knows something we do not know. The novel recounts scenes from a course of psychoanalysis undertaken by a troubled Jewish man named Doriel and a Freudian psychoanalyst called Thérèse Goldschmidt. From the beginning, there is some mystery over why Doriel has gone to a psychoanalyst at all since he is resolutely hostile to psychoanalytic methods and insights. He refuses to lie on the couch and resists the practice of free association. Moreover, he repeats a well-known set of objections to psychoanalytic reductionism: it brings everything back to sexuality, looking for dirty little secrets which provide a key to unlock the whole psyche; in particular, analysts attempt to find the answer to all problems in the child’s relation to its mother. To some extent, Thérèse justifies Doriel’s hostility, regarding her patient as a puzzle to be solved and constantly probing him about his parents. Doriel insists that his
parents and his relationship with them cannot be known by the analyst: ‘il y a des choses que vous ne comprendrez jamais. Vous n’avez pas vécu leur vie, mais moi, je la porte en moi comme une trace de sang. Et leur mort comme une brûlure’ (*Un désir fou de danser*, p. 128). The dead inhabit the surviving child not as objects of knowledge but as a wound at the core of his life. And yet, Doriel persists with the course of analysis until it is ended by the analyst. Indeed, he also concedes that Thérèse’s suspicious probing may even lead him to discover the truth about his own experience: ‘La thérapeute a vu plus clair en moi que moi-même. Au bout de quelques semaines, me guidant par un mot ou un silence, elle réussit à me faire redécouvrir la vérité: rien ne s’est passé entre Ruth et moi’ (p. 194). The analyst cannot know the truth, but nevertheless guides the analysand towards it.

In a brilliant reading of Moshe’s role in *La Nuit*, Ora Avni has described Wiesel’s work as ‘beyond psychoanalysis’: it invalidates any therapeutic practice, especially psychoanalysis, which restricts its attempted cures to a suffering individual because the wounds Wiesel describes are historical and cultural (see ‘Beyond Psychoanalysis’). *Un désir fou de danser* does not entirely repudiate psychoanalysis, however, even though the novel is constructed around a fundamental ambivalence towards psychoanalytic knowledge. Doriel resists psychoanalysis but is also drawn to it, rejecting its shafts of insight while exposing himself to them. Moreover, psychoanalysis appears to be most pertinent to Doriel on precisely the issue over whose single-minded obsession he objects most vehemently: the question of the mother. During the Second World War, Doriel’s mother had been a heroine of the Polish Resistance. While Doriel and his father were in hiding, his mother was able to move around more freely because of her Aryan appearance. The image Doriel gives of her is highly idealized: ‘Blonde, belle et robuste, l’œil gris perçant, munie de sa carte d’identité aryenne, elle suscitait l’admiration de ses camarades par son audace. Volontaire pour les missions les plus dangereuses, elle avait fini par être en quelque sorte la garante de leur succès’ (pp. 143–44). Yet this idealization is also double-edged: in order to be the much-lauded heroine of the Resistance, the mother also had to abandon her child, seeing him only on rare, furtive visits. Moreover, as the analysis progresses, Doriel begins to remember forgotten or repressed episodes from his past that suggest his mother may have had an affair with a fellow member of the Resistance. So she is both idealized heroine and a sordid adulteress who is guilty of abandoning her child and endangering the happy family unit. It seems that for all his hostility towards it, psychoanalysis has
nevertheless led Doriel to the true explanation for the shipwreck of his life: ‘Mais la véritable explication, découvre Doriel avec stupéfaction, ce serait ce soupçon inavoué, jamais formulé, qui lentement, implacablement, l’aurait enfermé dans l’ascèse du célibat, le condamnant à la solitude et aux désordres de la pensée’ (p. 267).

At this point, though, something surprising happens. It remains unclear whether Doriel has expressed these thoughts out loud. Even so, Thérèse responds as if she has heard them; and rather than seeing in them the confirmation of her psychoanalytic premises, she is non-committal in her appraisal: ‘C’est possible, dit la doctoresse alors que le silence s’est installé’ (p. 267). When the analyst hears what her analysand thought she wanted to hear, it turns out that she is less pleased than he expected to find that the mother is at the source of his woes. It is not after all definitively true, only possible. Roles seem now to have switched. Doriel expresses what elsewhere in the novel are depicted as parodically reductive psychoanalytic views while the analyst distances herself from them. Thérèse, it appears, did not wish merely to confirm what she was deemed already to know, but positively to discover something new. For all the ambivalent hostility shown towards psychoanalysis in Un désir fou de danser, the novel also stages a less reductive account of psychoanalytic reductionism. Perhaps Thérèse has something to learn from her insane or traumatized analysand. On this issue, Stern’s Le Savoir-déporté provides a context for understanding how the victim’s knowledge realigns the relationship between analyst and analysand.

Stern and deported knowledge

In a curious example of the power of the letter, Anne-Lise Stern’s very name seemed to predestine her to become a psychoanalyst: she is, after all, psych-Anne-Lise. She was born in 1921 in Berlin. In 1933, on Hitler’s rise to power in Germany, her socialist parents escaped with their daughter to France, where they became citizens in 1938. Stern began to study medicine, and, equipped with false papers, in 1944 she moved to Paris where she was denounced as a Jew and arrested on 1 April. She

2 The information on Stern’s life and career is taken from Fresco and Leibovici, ‘Une vie à l’œuvre’. For discussion of Stern’s essays and her relation to contemporary French psychoanalysis, see Dorland, ‘Psychoanalysis After Auschwitz? The “Deported Knowledge” of Anne-Lise Stern’. 
was deported to Auschwitz, and subsequently to Bergen-Belsen and Theresienstadt, before returning to France in June 1945. In the 1950s, she took a course of psychoanalysis with Jacques Lacan and subsequently became, on her own account, the only Lacanian analyst who was also a deportee (Le Savoir-déporté, p. 113). Her relation to psychoanalytic practice in France is a complex one. If Wiesel’s novel dramatizes the analysand’s resistance to psychoanalysis, Stern diagnoses a resistance within psychoanalysis to the trauma of deportation. As she describes it, in the years following the war analysts had simply not understood how Auschwitz imposed a fundamental change in the relation between themselves and their analysands. They continued to treat deportees as objects or documents to be understood dispassionately, sheltering behind the familiar comfort of the ‘vilains petits secrets’ (p. 190) originating in Oedipal family dramas. Analysts had failed to grasp the fact that the new primal scene for modern humanity is the gas chamber (Le Savoir-déporté, p. 152); and the patient now is psychoanalysis itself, because its position of knowing neutrality is no longer viable. The reaction to Bruno Bettelheim is symptomatic of the failure within psychoanalytic circles to understand the complexity of the new situation. As a survivor, he was himself a traumatized subject; in consequence, his views were considered to be untrustworthy; his knowledge was impugned by his own position as victim. It was still inconceivable that the traumatized subject could have something valid to say outside the established structures of psychoanalytic theory.

This resistance within psychoanalysis to the significance of Auschwitz for its own practices does not, however, mean that for Stern it is a lost cause. It is both impossible and necessary: ‘Je propose donc à la réflexion cette formule logique: peut-on être psychanalyste en ayant été déporté(e) à Auschwitz? La réponse est non. Peut-on, aujourd’hui, être psychanalyste sans cela? La réponse est encore non’ (p. 192). The deportee cannot be an analyst, yet only the deportee can become an analyst. The point here is not that no one other than deportees should now be able to practise psychoanalysis. Rather, it is that the whole psychoanalytic process is affected, including the relationship between analyst and analysand, as well as the kind of knowledge that the former can have of the latter. At this point, Stern’s allegiance specifically to Lacanian analysis becomes explicable. In her account, it is Lacanian analysis which most boldly carries the scar of the Holocaust into the core of the analytic relation. The Lacanian analyst does not look for the dirty little secrets which would confirm a pre-established body of doctrine. Countering Primo
Levi’s suggestion that psychoanalytic knowledge is irrelevant to the experience of deportees, Stern defends Lacan: ‘Je pense: l’enseignement de Lacan tient, devant cette critique. Il tient car par tout cela il s’est laissé enseigner (“Ce sont mes analysants qui m’enseignent”)’ (p. 223; emphasis original). Here, the question for the analyst is not ‘What do I know about the deportee?’, but rather ‘What does the deportee know?’

The deportee’s knowledge is what Stern calls le savoir-deporté, which is both the knowledge of the deportee and knowledge which is deported, carried away, returning as something other than itself. It describes the survivor’s speaking position as an act of witnessing before it is an analysable utterance:

Que sommes-nous? que suis-je? demande-t-il. Chaque sujet-déporté, réellement, témoigne de ça, de cette loque qu’il a été, qu’ont été les autres autour de lui, qu’il était destiné à devenir. Le savoir-déporté, c’est ça, savoir sur le déchet, la loque. Mais quand il en parle, en témoigne, il ne l’est plus. (108)

It is not surprising that Stern says next to nothing about the content of this knowledge, since it is not primarily something to be paraphrased or summarized. She distances herself from thinkers such as Agamben and Felman, and from psychoanalysts who impose a ready-made conceptual framework onto survivors’ experience, not because they are necessarily wrong, but because in her view they risk missing the essential point, which is that for the survivor to speak of being a rag (‘la loque’) or a wreck is to be less of one. The unsurpassed achievement here is Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah* (1985), which listens attentively to survivors rather than seeking to explain or to understand them. What the survivor knows is inscribed more in her senses than in any theoretical framework: ‘Nous autres, à Birkenau, nous en avons tout de même un peu vu, beaucoup entendu et encore plus senti. Avec le nez. Nous, femmes de Birkenau, nous avions, réellement, le nez dessus, tout le temps, sur cette

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3 Stern quotes (selectively) from the French translation of Levi’s *The Drowned and the Saved*: ‘I do not believe that psychoanalysts (who have pounced upon our tangles with professional avidity) are competent to explain this impulse [to speak]. Their knowledge was built up and tested “outside”, in the world that, for the sake of simplicity, we call civilian: it traces its phenomenology and tries to explain it; it studies its deviations and tries to heal them. Their interpretations, even those of someone like Bruno Bettelheim who went through the trials of the Lager, seem to me approximate and simplified, as if someone wished to apply the theorems of plain geometry to the solution of spheric triangles’ (pp. 64–65).
odeur de grillé mélangé à notre propre puanteur’ (Le Savoir-déporté, p. 261).

Stern’s work is a bold and heartfelt investigation of the psychoanalyst’s inescapable implication in the material she analyses, and the consequences of such an implication for the theory and practice of psychoanalysis. For her, the trauma of the camps is part of the post-war human condition; ‘vous êtes – vous aussi – tous, toutes tatoués, psychiquement’, she suggests (p. 210). This invalidates psychoanalysis as a position of knowledge seeking to unlock the analysand’s ‘little secrets’. At the same time, a reinvigorated psychoanalysis, which for Stern would be a psychoanalysis guided by Lacan, is also urgently called for, since it alone can trace and attend to psychic scars unavailable to conscious, conceptual reflection. As analyst and survivor, she describes herself as faced with a double bind, requiring her both to bear witness and to psychoanalyse even when the two activities are in conflict with one another, and when Auschwitz is for ever intractable to the psychoanalyst’s gaze. It is not a question of resolving this double bind so much as learning to inhabit it without betraying either the survivor’s pain or the analyst’s clinical duty. This entails rethinking the relation between analysand and analyst, who is incited to learn from the survivor’s non-conceptual savoir-déporté rather than to seek to confirm what was already known. The roles of analyst and analysand have to some extent switched over. The section of Stern’s book devoted to le savoir-déporté closes by suggesting that the survivor may now become a clinician, because what she knows about pain can alleviate the suffering of others. Stern recounts a story about a rabbi with curative powers who decides to abandon his patients. When they ask him what will become of them, he reassures them: ‘Ne vous en faites pas, leur dit-il, allez à la synagogue et le premier à qui vous verrez, s’il retrousse sa manche, un petit numéro écrit sur le bras, allez vers lui, racontez-lui vos douleurs, et vous verrez, ça marchera très bien’ (p. 262).

**The knowledge of stories**

The fact that Stern concludes her discussion of le savoir-déporté with a story, and moreover a story which encourages us to tell our own sorrowful stories (‘racontez-lui vos douleurs’), brings us back to Wiesel’s Un désir fou de danser. Throughout Wiesel’s writing, if the survivor has any knowledge to transmit, it will take the form of a story, rooted in experience (real or imaginary) and almost always opaque
and ambiguous. Doriel’s course of psychoanalysis consists largely in his recounting of stories to his analyst, not so that she can interpret them, but to signal their resistance to her urge to interpret. The non-committal ‘C’est possible’ with which Thérèse greets Doriel’s explanation of his suffering marks a moment of wavering on her part. Having apparently won Doriel over to her Freudian perspective, she is no longer sure that this is what she should be seeking from him. She appears to understand that she has not fully understood. This brings with it a modification of the relation between analysand and analyst which has repercussions for other encounters described in the novel. Even before this point it is clear that Doriel represents a danger for Thérèse. His case unsettles her knowledge and experience, and it begins to disrupt her marriage. In her sessions with him she behaves unprofessionally: she admits that she tries to provoke the transference by which he might fall in love with her. She tells him personal details about her private life, and when she breaks the analysis she gives him the notes she has kept on him. Who is analysing whom here? It is as if Doriel were as much the analyst as the analysand.

This is confirmed by Doriel’s relations with others in the novel, as he reproduces something resembling a psychoanalytic situation in his encounters. His version of this situation consists in a willingness to listen to the stories of others: Laurent is traumatized because he inadvertently caused the death of a fellow member of the Resistance during the war; a young woman Doriel meets on a plane tells him of her problems in love; his benefactor Samek Ternover tells him of his experiences as a deportee. Doriel insists that he does not understand: ‘Je n’avais rien compris à ce qu’elle venait de dire’ (p. 278); ‘Je n’étais pas qualifié pour ce rôle. Mais alors? Alors je me contentai de lui prêter l’oreille’ (p. 298). What is being depicted here is the survivor as analyst, willing to hear stories without comprehension, qualification or judgement. The survivor-analyst’s position is not one of knowledge; rather, it is an attentiveness to the pain and the density of experience of others as partially conveyed in the tales they have to tell. His subjects do not attribute to him a spurious, unfounded authority: ‘Laurent me regarda sans ciller, comme si je venais de m’évader d’un asile d’aliénés’ (p. 241). The survivor-analyst may be madder than those to whom he attends; yet his madness may also be his receptiveness to their pain, his ability to learn the distraught knowledge of the suffering other.

Wiesel’s novel develops the complex meditation on madness which he pursued throughout his writing career. Madness is depicted here as an experience of being locked up, of being cut off from the outside world,
but also as a desire to speak, to encounter and to communicate with other selves. It is a dangerous contagion, but also a susceptibility to otherness, and a form of knowledge in its own right, a theological matter more than a clinical one. It turns out to have a curious link to love: ‘il faut être fou pour aimer’ (Un désir fou de danser, p. 26), we are told, suggesting that in our cynical world love is madness, but also that only the madman can love truly. Love is what madness aspires to, as a desperate opening onto the world; but love is also the impossible outcome of madness because the madman is terribly isolated. It is in this light that the ending of Un désir fou de danser can be read. After the curtailment of his analysis, and after a lifetime of unconsummated relations, Doriel does indeed find love, apparently, when he meets and rapidly sets up home with a waitress who is much younger than he is. The final page of the novel sees the couple expecting a child. The madman’s vocation for love seems to have been fulfilled. What has been generously forgotten here is that this is also the barred conclusion of madness, the goal to which it aspires but which is unachievable. The happy ending is morally heart-warming but existentially false. By concluding in this way, the novel denies its own bitter insight that, if madness is a desire to communicate and to love, it is also the impossibility of succeeding in either.

Stern writes from the position of an analyst who resists analysis when caring, attentive listening is the better stance. Wiesel’s novel depicts an analysand who resists being analysed, though he replicates something of the analytic situation in his encounters with others. Both Stern and Wiesel investigate the questions of who knows what, and who can speak on behalf of the other. Both suggest that what survivors know may amount to more than their analysts can know about them. To speak prematurely, or with unwarranted authority, in the place of the other may be to silence her again, to finish off the work of the victimizers. Together, Stern and Wiesel elucidate a tension inherent within trauma studies. While questioning very radically what it means to represent, to know or to be the subject of one’s own experience, trauma studies also cannot rid itself of the impulse to speak for the other, to want to know more about others than they know of themselves. It runs the risk of usurping the other’s voice even as it speaks from a position of urgent care. There may of course be no alternative, except silence.

Popular psychology repeatedly tells us that talking about things is good for us. Le Serment de Kolvillàg envisages the contrary possibility even if it does not finally embrace it. Wiesel’s writing explores the painful, ambivalent position of victims who become witnesses in
search of secondary witnesses which make possible the uncovering, understanding and transmission of their distress. The view of silence as salutary is outweighed by the sense that it may also be an act of self-destructive self-censorship. As we saw in the previous chapter, Semprun’s writing sometimes suggests that not telling the story of atrocity is both necessary for survival and a kind of time bomb which will be all the more destructive the longer it ticks away in the dark corners of the mind. Semprun’s characters sometimes die after telling their stories. The next chapter looks at the case of someone who really did die, at her own hands, within weeks of the publication of a memoir of her wartime experiences.