Traces of War

Colin Davis

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Conclusion

Whose War, Which War?


(Delbo, Mesure de nos jours, p. 160)

This book has not attempted to tell a coherent story about the Second World War and the ways in which it has affected the lives and works of those who experienced it at first hand. No such story is available, possible or perhaps even desirable. It would involve too many elisions, obfuscations and simplifications. What is clear is that we are still in some sense post-war, in that the war remains a problematic, traumatic reference point which will not yet be silenced. The controversy around works such as Jonathan Littell’s Goncourt prize-winning Les Bienveillantes (2006), which gave voice to a fictional Nazi perpetrator, and the film La Rafle (2010), which belatedly reminded French audiences of the complicity of their countrymen in genocide, demonstrates that we are dealing here with a still-unresolved past. The war continues to call for speech, representation, symbolization and interpretation. Moreover, these issues matter more than ever. As the living memory of the Second World War fades, we are left only with its half-forgotten, partly hidden traces, in texts and films which are still, I would suggest, under-interpreted. And in a Europe which is once again unsettled, we have to fear that unconfronted trauma always risks being repeated, in ever more destructive forms.¹

¹ I write this sentence on 30 June 2016, one week after the UK voted to leave the European Union.
I am reminded at this point of one of the great French novels about
the Second World War, Michel Tournier’s *Le Roi des aulnes* (1970), and
in particular the encounter of its protagonist, the Nazi-serving prisoner
of war Abel Tiffauges, with the commander of Kaltenborn. This latter
character is an aristocratic career soldier who becomes the head of a
school for Nazi cannon fodder, even though he is not himself particularly
favourable to the Nazi regime. In a key passage of the novel, he offers
Tiffauges an apocalyptic vision of the war as the explosion of symbols:

> Et tout cela est symbole, tout cela est chiffre, indiscutablement. Mais
> ne cherchez pas à comprendre, c’est-à-dire à trouver pour chaque signe
> la chose à laquelle il renvoie. Car ces symboles sont diaboles: ils ne
> symbolisent plus rien. Et de leur saturation naît la fin du monde. (p. 321)

Tournier’s disturbing novel describes and exemplifies this catastrophic
explosion of symbols: nothing means what it seems, everything is to
be interpreted, but interpretation never reaches a final destination. In
the formulation promulgated by Ricœur, ‘le symbole donne à penser’
(see for example *De l’interprétation*, p. 46). The inherent ambiguity of
the symbol is a provocation to interpretive reflection. But the apparent
generosity in Ricœur’s use of the word *donne* is double-edged. While
opening up possibilities of meaning, it also excludes the possibility of
assured conclusion. The consequences of this are epistemological and
ethical. Free interpretation may turn out to lead dangerously close to
Tournier’s moral apocalypse.

The most influential formulations of trauma studies have often
stressed the unspeakability or unrepresentability of the experience of
historical violence. As Caruth puts it in a much-quoted passage, the
traumatized ‘carry an impossible history within them, or they become
themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess’
(‘Introduction’, p. 5). Astute critics such as Thomas Trezise and Sharon
Marquart have suggested, however, that stressing unspeakability can
have silencing effects on those who want or need to speak (see Trezise,
*Witnessing Witnessing*, pp. 2–3; Marquart, *On the Defensive*, pp. 7–8).
To impose a generalizing theory on the diverse experiences of survivors
is to find another way of not listening to them. From a hermeneutic
perspective, listening is always already interpreting; and if listening is
essential to the testimonial process, then interpretation exactly coincides
with the possibility of witnessing. It is part of it from the very beginning.

What I have called ‘traumatic hermeneutics’ here is not, then, something
which comes *after* the experience of war, or after any other
traumatic disturbance. It belongs to the experience as it belongs to the very possibility of its narration and reception. It is certainly not a guarantee or even a distant promise of definitive understanding. Hermeneutics is not and never was anything of the sort, despite how it has sometimes been portrayed, especially in French and French-inspired theory. Hermeneutics is, rather, an attempt to manage the proliferation of meaning, that is, the attempt not to be overwhelmed by it, to make it liveable against all the odds. This entails, inevitably, constantly skirting the likelihood of error and misunderstanding, perhaps to a catastrophic degree. Inhabiting the conflict of interpretations risks perpetuating a history of violence even while it endeavours to appease it. To illustrate this, I turn again, for the last time, to Charlotte Delbo.

In Chapter 2, I discussed Loulou, one of the figures in Delbo’s *Mesure de nos jours*, who is a different man when he returns from deportation. We are told that he was one of seven survivors from the convoy which took him to the concentration camps, another being a man named Jacques. Later in *Mesure de nos jours*, Jacques narrates the story of his return. He comes back later than the other survivors, does not wish to recount his experiences to curious fellow passengers on the train to his home in Charente, arrives to find no one to greet him and soon discovers that his parents are dead and his home destroyed. The passage is haunted by a sense of return to something which no longer exists, a return which is not a return. Jacques, like other figures in Delbo’s texts and in trauma texts more generally, comes back and does not come back, returns to encounter the impossibility of return. When he tries to find former Communist Party resisters and fellow survivors, he is met with hostility and suspicion which he finds incomprehensible. He visits his comrade Vincent:

‘Vincent! C’est moi, Jacques. J’ai changé, mais c’est moi, Jacques’. Il restait planté devant sa porte, muet, et je suis resté devant lui sans comprendre. Je ne saurais dire aujourd’hui s’il était ennuyé, gêné ou mauvais, j’étais trop secoué pour remarquer quoi que ce fût. Des suppositions me passaient par la tête, trop rapides pour que je puisse les formuler maintenant. Vincent avait été arrêté et il n’avait pas tenu. Ou bien Vincent n’était pas des nôtres et il avait passé de l’autre côté. Ou bien Vincent était devenu fou. Ou bien moi. Aucune de ces suppositions n’était vraisemblable et je restais là à regarder Vincent qui ne me regardait pas. (p. 158)

This passage gives a powerful account of what is at stake in traumatic hermeneutics. It is both impossible and imperative to make sense of signs which signify anything or nothing. Vincent’s response to Jacques’s
return is incomprehensible: did he betray us, or is he mad or is it I who am mad? Any interpretation is possible, but none adds up. And what dominates this is the sense that everything has changed and nothing has changed: ‘J’ai changé, mais c’est moi’. Jacques emerges from this encounter profoundly bewildered: ‘Tout m’échappait. Quelque chose qui aurait dû me fournir une clé m’échappait. Quoi? Tout était embrouillé, inextricable, bouclé’ (p. 158).

We subsequently discover that the way Jacques is treated on his return is explained by the suspicion among his former comrades that he had turned traitor. Here again, interpretation runs rampant. His very survival proves his guilt, when all his fellow resisters were shot or died in the camps: ‘D’être le seul survivant ne plaidait pas en ma faveur. C’était même la principale preuve contre moi’ (p. 164). In the urgent and insane rush to make sense of what happened in the war, conclusions are drawn which are false, unjust, violent and almost irresistible. It is only years later that the suspicions towards Jacques are allayed, when an alternative account of events explains the discovery of the resistance network in terms of bad luck rather than betrayal. The truth is restored, but it is now too late: ‘On m’a réhabilité. J’ai beau savoir qu’à leur place j’en aurais fait autant – parce que moi aussi, j’étais intransigeant –, je ne peux pas regarder les camarades comme avant’ (p. 166). Things have been put back in place; at the same time, though, they can never be the same again. Jacques returns and does not return; he is the same, but totally changed; the truth is known, but the trace of error cannot be fully erased.

The story of Jacques illustrates the urgency and violence of interpretation and all the concomitant risks of mis- and over-interpretation. We simply must understand these matters, while everything we need to say about them may be facile, premature or disastrously wrong. But there is another twist to Delbo’s astonishingly intelligent text. Jacques is supported through the difficult years following his non-return by another survivor, Denise, who returns from Ravensbrück, keeps faith with Jacques and becomes his wife. In Jacques’s testimony, Denise is a strong but enigmatic figure, devoting herself to helping her husband and clearing his name. The passage following the story of Jacques is much shorter, and entitled ‘Denise’. Jacques’s sequential narrative contrasts with Denise’s more fragmentary text. She begins by describing how dedicating her energies to supporting Jacques left her no time for herself:

J’ai eu tant de peine à ramener Jacques sur la rive
je me suis donné tant de peine pour ramener Jacques et pour qu’il vive
que je n’ai pas eu le temps de penser à moi. (p. 167)
The final lines of the fragment echo this opening:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{J’ai eu tant de peine à lui rendre la volonté de vivre} \\
\text{que penser à moi} \\
\text{toutes ces années-là … (p. 169)}
\end{align*}
\]

One story hides another. Jacques recounts a tale of heartbreaking misunderstanding, of heroism and suffering interpreted as betrayal. To help him tell this story, Denise suppresses or neglects her own. What is said covers over what remains unsaid. Behind the war that is recounted, understood and misunderstood, remains another war, other wars, which are still untold.