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The Singularity of History

The present narrator has three kinds of data: first, what he saw himself; secondly, the accounts of other eyewitnesses (thanks to the part he played, he was enabled to learn their personal impressions from all those figuring in this chronicle); and lastly, documents that subsequently came into his hands. He proposes to draw on these records whenever this seems desirable, and to employ them as he thinks best. He also proposes.

—ALBERT CAMUS, The Plague

FRAGMENTS OF GENOCIDE

This chapter is inspired by the Wilkomirski affair: the publication of Benjamin Wilkomirski’s Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood which purports to inscribe the author’s childhood memories of survival during the Holocaust and which is now believed to be a confabulation. This chapter is not about the Wilkomirski affair. Rather, it is about the notion of memory fragments itself and about the force that is responsible for memory’s collapse. The reason why Wilkomirski’s book, despite its many inconsistencies with the historical record, was afforded an enthusiastic reception was, precisely, its broken, ruptured discourse, its absence of any adult viewpoint to integrate what the author calls “shards of memory with hard knife-sharp edges,” its seemingly immediate inscription of the unimaginable trauma of a child’s suffering, which artlessly gives up “on the ordering logic of grown-up” to cry out its pain (4). These are the new criteria of authenticity, which have supplanted the outdated notions of accuracy and objectivity. And as if to underline the break between the new discourse of memory (traumatic memory) and the old discourse of history, it turns out that for shards of memory to draw blood they need not have been shattered by any real event.
The New York Times Book Review called Fragments “a struggle for memory,” and indeed, both its writing and reception reflect the struggle for memory in postmodern culture. Emancipated from the confinement of “master narratives,” the memory fragment becomes the cornerstone for a new historiography of trauma. Released from the truth, memory seeks authentication in the intensities of individual pain. But it does not thereby escape the entanglement with politics. The jubilation of Holocaust deniers over the Wilkomirski affair is enough to prove that traumatic memory is as much a subject of ideological cooptation as narrative history. My exploration of the problematic of traumatic memory follows the metaphor of memory collapse. Starting with mere cracks in the edifice of the coherent past, it culminates in what modern physics sees as the ultimate fragmentation of both space and time: the black hole. The black hole has become the master trope at the intersection of history, memory, and trauma. But in adopting the physical concept that describes the destruction of the very fabric of space–time, the discourse of trauma unwittingly reveals its own dangers. The vortex of the violent sublime lying at the heart of the uncritical celebration of traumatic memory threatens to consume history.

PHYSICS OF MEMORY COLLAPSE

A time traveler disappears in Auschwitz. Her colleague comments: “That place is the black hole of history, man. No such thing as getting out” (Dunn 309).

A woman approaches a therapist, perturbed by the memory of a long-ago summer when something terrible happened in her extended family. She says: “I’ve been thinking about my golden, golden childhood and a black hole in the middle of it” (French 69).

A scientist explores the virtual simulation of her comatose sister’s blasted psyche and encounters a mysterious vortex of nothingness: “Beyond the flame is blackness. Not the gallery wall, not an opening to the outside memoryscape. Simply an opening. A void. A black hole” (Wilson and Costello 146).

Psychoanalyst Dori Laub, who coauthored with Shoshana Felman a book on testimony in literature and history, describes the black hole as the locus of memory and forgetting, “both the gaping hole of genocide and the gaping hole of silence” (Felman and Laub 65). The black hole is the ever open wound of traumatic memory that cannot be articulated within the structure of rational discourse. Such memory demands transformation into testimony that, paradoxically, becomes testimony to its own impossibility: “As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or
remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference” (5).

Traumatic memory is the nemesis of narration. If it is articulated at all, it is only through a discourse of rupture and fragmentation that mutely gestures at what cannot be encompassed by the discredited structures of causality, continuity, and closure. The postmodern burial of history, announced so often nobody shows up for the wake anymore, has left individual memory in sole possession of the past. And this memory, traumatized by the battering of the Real, speaks in the glossolalia of pain. Trauma has become the template of our relationship to history.

I would propose that it is here, in the equally widespread and bewildering encounter with trauma—both in its occurrence and in the attempt to understand it—that we can begin to recognize the possibility of a history that is no longer straightforwardly referential (that is, no longer based on simple models of experience and reference). Through the notion of trauma, I will argue, we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at a resituating of it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not. (Caruth 1996, 11)

The writing of “traumatized history” produces a discourse that undercuts its own tendency to generate meaning. The refusal of referentiality becomes not merely a regrettable necessity but a moral imperative in the face of the historical disasters of the twentieth century. Felman inveigles against any “totalized, settled, understood, and closed account” which falsifies the raw experience of horror (158).

But what is history without understanding, referentiality, continuity, history based on the ecstasy of memory dissolution and the intensity of individual suffering? Is this history, in fact, ethical, as Felman and Laub claim, because it gives voice to the victims’ pain, or is it immoral because it denies them the consolation of meaning and justice? How can the discourse of trauma cope with an individual memory in which the issue of accuracy is at stake and how can it underwrite a collective commemoration of an historical catastrophe? In his even-handed appraisal of the issues of memory and narrativity, Michael Roth points out that trauma both precludes forgetting and stalls any kind of cognitive response to the past: “the traumatic event draws one to it even as it demands acknowledgement that one can never comprehend what happened at that time in that place” (107). Thus, trauma is a modality of “piety” in relation to such momentous historical catastrophes as the Holocaust. Narrativity, however, erases the very past it strives to recapture: “Historical representation
is taken as a sign of forgetting” (108). And yet, paradoxically, that very forgetting is inseparable from freedom. While trauma locks one in the timelessness of the “past present,” narrativity situates the past within the temporal chain leading to the future and thus simultaneously erases and preserves it: “Narrative memory ... transforms the past as a condition of retaining it” (Roth 111).

Should we choose piety or freedom, obsessive reliving of the incomprehensible past or its falsification through the discredited master-narratives? I suggest that the very terms of this apparently insoluble dilemma should be reformulated. Trauma does not grant a direct access to the raw reality of pain and suffering at the core of history, piercing the dead accretions of just-so stories. Instead, it generates a discourse of the sublime that is just as vulnerable to political manipulation as any totalizing narrative of history, if not more so. The past only exists as traces scribbled across the field of the present, and whether we employ memory or history in deciphering them, we are engaged in a hermeneutic endeavor. In choosing between trauma and narrativity, we choose not between the persistence of the past and its erasure, but rather between two modalities of the existence of the past in the cultural present. And by elevating memory over history, trauma over narrative, silence over words, we participate in a dangerous war on temporality whose first casualty may be the ethical discriminations of violence. The metaphor of the black hole embodies the ruination of temporality implicit in the discourse of trauma. Stephen Hawking in The Brief History of Time describes the black hole as “a region of space-time, from which it is not possible to escape to reach a distant observer. This region is what we now call a black hole. Its boundary is called the event horizon and it coincides with the paths of light rays that just fail to escape from the black hole” (90). A black hole is created by a collapsing star whose mass, squeezed into smaller and smaller volume, punctures the fabric of space-time, producing a singularity in which physical laws break down. The singularity “wraps” gravity around itself, allowing neither light nor matter to escape. Later in the book Hawking employs a telling metaphor to describe the heart of a black hole: “One could well say of the event horizon what the poet Dante said of the entrance to Hell: ‘All hope abandon ye who enter here.’ Anything or anyone who falls through the event horizon will soon reach the region of infinite density and the end of time” (94).

In the language of mathematics, singularities are no more intrinsically hopeless than any other natural phenomenon. But inserted into common discourse, the black hole amasses a satellite ring of metaphors. Prominent among them are images of hell, careening away from their religious orbit and seeking a new cultural primary. The black hole becomes the ultimate prison, brimming over with contained pain but allowing no escape, in which time is
reduced to an endless “now.” Thus, it designates a traumatic memory, which can be neither integrated into a narrative nor abandoned altogether. Lawrence Langer describes the difference between what he calls “chronological” and “durational” time in Holocaust survivors’ testimony: “the chronological current, which flows until we channel it between the permanent banks of historical narrative, and durational persistence, which cannot overflow the blocked reservoir of its own moment and hence never enters what we call the stream of time” (16).

Kali Tal suggests that trauma “is enacted in a liminal state, outside of the bound of ‘normal’ human experience” (15). Traumatic memory, like a black hole, is both “a special set of events” and “a region of space-time” in which the past is imprisoned in all its horrible vividness. A physical black hole is invisible; its presence is betrayed by gravitational anomalies. Similarly, a traumatic memory manifests itself in psychic disturbances, while remaining “repressed” or “unrecovered.” As Cathy Caruth suggests, “trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (4).

It is precisely the exceptionally painful nature of traumatic memory that serves as guarantee of its authenticity. While narratives of “chronological time” are greeted with postmodern distrust, the stasis of “durational time” is sacred. The Real can only be glimpsed in the blinding ecstasy of trauma. To reach the truth one has to perform the impossible feat of plunging into the black hole and coming out on the other side as “survivor,” so that grasping history is tantamount to the harrowing of hell. This hell of history is created by violence. Memory shapes itself into a simulacrum of the violated body that challenges the consoling fictions of meaning, progress, or manifest destiny. Mutilated, fragmented, scattered, repressed memory bears witness to the Real of violation.

But by representing memory as an analogue of the body in pain, we are already engaged in the metaphorical erasure of the “incontestable reality” of physical suffering. Every representation of violence in language, including the language of the victim himself, is necessarily a falsification of the experience itself. Every memory, no matter how traumatic, is filtered through discourse. The sight of the body in pain may constitute the rupture in the Symbolic through which the Real is momentarily glimpsed. But the relation of remembered pain to the body is much more problematic. This is indicated by what might be called the dissemination of trauma.

In describing her pedagogical experience of teaching a literary course on trauma and testimony, Felman reaches an astounding conclusion: rather than learning about witnessing, her students become witnesses themselves.
Confronted with videotaped testimonies of Holocaust survivors, the students, understandably enough, undergo an emotional upheaval, which Felman uses to admonish them to bear “testimony” to their own experience. They do so by turning in a paper, which is “an amazingly articulate, reflective and profound statement of the trauma they have gone through and of the significance of their assuming the position of the witness” (52). But witness to what? Their own discomfort at hearing other people’s stories of genocide? If anybody can be a witness, testimony becomes a species of role-playing game or group therapy. The separation of memory from the discourse of historical truth, contrary to its professed intentions, devalues trauma and cheapens suffering, leading to what Kali Tal calls “the appropriation of survivor experience” (59). But though Tal is highly critical of Felman, her own conceptualization of trauma also rests on the “intensity” of individual pain which is not to be profaned by any tests of accuracy or historical content, thus paradoxically resulting in the very process of “depoliticizing the survivor and then medicalizing her condition” which she deplores (Tal 59). While to be a survivor of a genuine disaster implies a certain kind of chosenness (even bad luck can be seen as elitist), intensities of transference and imaginary identification are available to all. Trauma ushers in a new democracy in which the pursuit of psychic pain makes all world kin. By discounting the nature of the trauma and divorcing its subjective perception from its objective parameters, “trauma studies” undermine their own foundations. If, to take Felman’s examples, the testimonies of Dostoevskii, who faced the firing squad; of Paul Celan, who faced the Holocaust; of Mallarmé, who faced neither; and of Felman’s students, who faced their teacher, are equally evidence of “a radical human condition of exposure and vulnerability” (5), who can escape bearing witness? If “human vulnerability” is enough to inflict a trauma, everybody is traumatized, and the discourse of wounded memory becomes simply a tedious tautology. The black hole seems to be an inadequate metaphor, for only a star of particular mass and density can produce a singularity, while trauma is accessible to all.

But the laws of cultural space are different from the laws of physics. The insistence of “trauma studies” on the ubiquity of trauma may be justified, after all, if the inassimilable kernel at the core of memory’s black hole turns out to be produced not by memory but by desire. An imaginary mass would fail to dent the fabric of space-time, but an imaginary trauma may indeed tear apart the psychic fabric of the subject. Michael Roth insists that the choice between memory and narrativity hinges on the exploration of “the awkward and painful question of what desires (and interests) are served by the need to return repeatedly to the origins of pain” (108). In the following sections I want to investigate the nature of the collective, and therefore political, desire that manufactures black holes of memory.
Here are two stories that demonstrate attractions and perils of remembrance. The first one is Jorge Luis Borges’s “Funes the Memorious.” The eponymous character is a young man who, after a trauma (he falls off a horse and becomes paralyzed), suddenly acquires eidetic memory. His recollections are as sharp and vivid as actual sensations: “Each visual image was linked to muscular sensations, thermal sensations, etc” (64). He relives every moment of his uneventful life, while gradually wasting away on the cot in his shabby room.

Some hail Funes as “a precursor of supermen” (59), but the narrator of the tale considers him hardly human. For him, Funes’s memory has taken away his capacity for analytical thought, making him “almost incapable of ideas of a general, Platonic sort.” Instead of giving him insight into his own condition, memory impoverishes Funes because “to think is to forget differences, generalize, make abstractions” (66).

The second story is Dan Simmons’s science fiction novella “Flashback.” Its premise is the creation of a drug that allows everybody to become like Funes, to “flash back” to the most pleasant, potent, or significant memories of one’s life. As a result, America becomes a ghost land of memory junkies, incapable of any significant effort in the present because of the always beckoning escape into the vividness of the past. If Funes is physically paralyzed, the characters of “Flashback” are psychologically incapacitated by the addiction to memory. Memory is additionally compromised in Simmons by violence and falsification. While Funes simply looks for refuge from the bleakness of the present, Simmons’s characters search for more substantial thrills. The heroine’s fifteen-year-old son, together with his buddies, commits a senseless murder for the sole purpose of reliving it during flashbacks. Her father, on the other hand, obsessively flashes back to the murder of President Kennedy and his own failed attempt to prevent it. The trouble is, he had never been there. The memory, as vivid, detailed, and compelling as any other, is totally false.

Simmons’s story, published in 1993, is obviously a topical response to what has been called “the memory wars” of the early 1990s. The real-life equivalent of “flashback” is the recovered memory movement, with its claim to uncover through therapy horrific memories of incest, satanic abuse, or alien abductions, which, its critics contend, are false. The central premise of the movement is precisely that “the memory can be recovered intact—filled not only with all the visual and sensory detail of the original event but with all the emotional and cognitive material as well” (Ofshe 43). The recovery, moreover, is considered therapeutic; Simmons mocks this claim through the character who wants to flash back his entire life in order to “reintegrate” it, an undertaking that will be completed by the time he is senile. But the similarity
between Simmons’s satire and Borges’s much earlier fable indicates that both sides in the “memory wars” draw upon well-established precedents in the conceptualization of memory and its relation to history. While the defenders of recovered memory appeal to the Romantic notion that recollection of the past constitutes the only solid basis of subjectivity, its opponents see memory as both seductive and dangerous. “To think is to forget” and to be forever locked in the memory of a trauma is to lose the capacity to judge its meaning. And yet both Funes and Simmons’s junkies prefer the delirium of false memory to the humdrum and uncertain reality of the present, even though what awaits them in the past is the trauma of violence endured or inflicted.

The heated debate about the veracity of recovered memories has long ago crossed the boundaries of a scientific controversy and has become a political playing field where the opposing sides clash over the central issue of history and posthistory: the relation between individual memory and historical truth. It is precisely the urgency of this issue that animates the debate. Insofar as it might be seen as a displacement of the general problematic of the truth of history in the age of simulacra, what is central to it is the attempt to ground individual history in the intensity of pain rather than in the “objectivity” of truth.

For the defenders of recovered memory the imperative to believe the survivor overrides any other consideration. And what makes the survivor’s speech so inherently believable, what invests it with unimpeachable authority, is, paradoxically, the underlying layer of silence, the voiceless cry of a trauma.

While not claiming that all recovered memories are false, one cannot escape the accumulated evidence that, as the psychologist Michael Nash suggests, “we . . . cannot tell the difference between believed-in fantasy about the past and viable memory of the past. Indeed there may be no structural difference between the two” (quoted in Loftus 166). But whether fantasy or genuine recollection, the most prominent thing about recovered memories is their catastrophic character. In bringing to light visions of incest, satanic abuse, alien abductions, they seem to reshape the landscape of individual lives in the image of the wasteland of twentieth-century history. And yet this wasteland becomes invested with the urgency of desire, as “believed-in fantasies” follow the lead of collective traumas.

The connection between memory and desire forms the crucial nexus of the “memory wars,” with one side trying to uncouple the two and the other insisting that they are essentially identical. This nexus is articulated through the divergent metaphors that are used to conceptualize memory. The defenders of the authenticity of recovered memories liken memory to an automatic recording system such as videotape: “Our favorite and most familiar metaphors emphasize the accuracy and efficiency of memory. Memories, we
imagine, are . . . recorded on blank videocassettes, properly labeled and filed away for future use” (Loftus 73).

Elizabeth Loftus, a memory researcher, however, insists that memory is more like the Internet, in which the circulation of information is governed by its sensation value rather than its veridicality. Memory is a self-contained virtual world, always vulnerable to false information, slippage, mistakes, or viral infestations: “Nets get tangled, knots develop, frays and holes begin to rip apart the intricately knotted fabric” (Loftus 75).

The automatism implicit in the “videotape” image contrasts sharply with the agency posited as responsible for the selection and processing of information in the memory net. Thus, the memory war is ultimately a war over the status of the subject versus history. Psychoanalyst Jeffrey Prager, for example, criticizes the passivity of the subject assumed by recovered memory and trauma specialists: “T hose with MPD [multiple personality disorder] or PTSD [posttraumatic stress disorder] are ever victims of their memories, haunted by the past. And the past is not of their own making: they are, if you will, victims of history” (130).

Whether history is seen as a vague, all-encompassing menace to “human vulnerability” or a localized and specific act of violence, the “victim of history” is bound to replay its effects like a looped recording. Those, however, who insist on the primacy of unconscious confabulation in the process of remembering, prefer to speak of victims of memory. Memory does not passively register a trauma but actively manufactures it, with or without external stimuli. Both psychoanalysts and neurophysiologists marshal convincing proof of memory’s creative power, and both insist that a simplistic one-way connection between trauma and external events denigrates the autonomous subjectivity of the victim. If we are seen as passive “recordings” of history, we become not so much witnesses as evidence.

But why would anybody crave the subduing of subjectivity? Why do victims of memory seek out the black hole of the past, risking the coherence of one’s psyche in the crushing gravity of its embrace? In her book Hystories Elaine Showalter relates the epidemic of recovered memories to “the hidden fantasies, myths, and anxieties that make up the current hysterical crucible” (207). But what is the fantasy behind the willing abdication of one’s subjectivity to the external and incomprehensible forces of history?

A number of psychologists have argued that recovered memories serve the function of constructing a self-narrative for the victim and thus giving shape and meaning to the victim’s life. However, from the many case studies quoted by Loftus, Ofshe, Prager, and others, it is clear that recovered memories are just as likely to blow the victim’s life to pieces. At best, radical memories of violence can create a parallel life narrative, which refuses to square with the
victim's previous self-representation. At worst, memory can become the fragment-strewn field of trauma. Neither Borges's Funes nor Simmons's characters are engaged in streamlining their biographies; on the contrary, their obsessive flashing back of unrelated episodes ruptures the narrative coherence of their lives beyond repair. Narrative implies the chronological time of past, present, and future, moving toward a closure. The traumatized memory lives in the perpetual "now" of durational time, in the eternal return of nightmare: "Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect" (Felman and Laub 69).

The only appropriate aesthetic modality for such a state is the sublime. In surrendering to the sublime, the subject is rewarded by the ecstasy of dissolution that we have seen in horror's monsters. But another, more mundane, reward is the renunciation of responsibility. Recasting himself as a victim of history involves a certain kind of absolution from the ethical problematic of choice. Falling into the black hole may be seen as preferable to the futility of trying to close it. And as opposed to the heady pleasures of monsterhood, the paralysis of memory is also safe. The advantage of reliving over living is that the former is risk-free, for the very fact of remembering means that the subject has survived the trauma. When the access to the sublime is sought in traumatic memory, the subject both abdicates responsibility for the past and avoids the risks of acting in the present. The sublime filtered through rituals of nostalgia becomes almost cozy. But this renunciation of temporality and narrativity has a strange effect on self-representation. If the self cannot be apprehended through time, it becomes frozen in space. Memory becomes not a temporal chain of events, but a space of trauma. The focus on the external and uncontrollable trauma, Prager argues, leads to "an assault on subjectivity" in which the "interpretative . . . self" is overrun by the traumatizing environment. Contemporary traumatic psychology is "driven exclusively by the external" (132–33). Divorced from the imagination, memory becomes sinister and alienated, a terra incognita surrounding the black hole of the violent sublime. The self-as-story turns into the self-as-setting.

MEMORYSCAPE

This drive for the externalization of memory finds its expression in the image of "memoryscape," the mysterious landscape of the past in which the present self wanders like a fantasy hero armed with some dubious psychoanalytical spells and a phallic-symbol sword, out to slay the monster of a remembered or misremembered trauma. In this section I want to explore the implications of
this spatialization of memory and the relation of memoryscape to the black hole of the sublime, primarily through reference to two detective novels, Nicci French’s *The Memory Game* (1998) and Wilson and Costello’s *Mirage* (1996). Both deal with the subject of false memory and both employ the metaphor of memoryscape.

In *The Memory Game*, which is highly critical of recovered memory therapy, the spatialization of memory is conveyed through a consistent parallel between the literal and the psychic landscape. The novel begins with the heroine, Jane, a professional architect, accidentally digging out the skeleton of her childhood friend Natalie who disappeared twenty-two years ago. Jane, who grew up with Natalie’s extended family and married her brother, eventually goes into therapy and, under the hypnotic prompting of her therapist, “uncovers” a false memory of witnessing her friend’s murder by her father. The therapist’s main tool is the suggestion that Jane should put herself “back into the landscape from where Natalie disappeared” (184) and explore this dark land.

*Mirage* is a science fiction whodunit, in which the memoryscape becomes real. Julie, the heroine of this novel, is a neurophysiologist whose erratic twin sister, Samantha, lapses into a mysterious coma, apparently linked to the death of the girls’ parents in a fire during their childhood. Julie creates a virtual reality simulation of her sister’s memory and explores this dangerous, devastated terrain in search of the buried secret of their joint past. Both novels rest on the trope of subjectivity-as-space, which goes back to Freud’s representation of the psyche.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents* Freud tropes the psyche as the “the eternal city” of Rome:

> There is certainly not a little that is ancient still buried in the soil of the city or beneath its modern buildings. This is the manner in which the past is preserved in historical sites like Rome.

Now let us, by a flight of imagination, suppose that Rome is not a human habitation but a psychical entity with a similarly long and copious past—an entity, that is to say, in which nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one (17).

But no sooner does Freud erect his architectural trope that he demolishes it with a devastating critique: memoryscape cannot be an accurate representation of the psyche because for the past and present to be equally vivid in the psychic space we must assume that two objects can occupy the same space: “If we want to represent historical sequence in spatial terms we can only do it by
juxtaposition in space: the same space cannot have two different contents" (17–18). Thus, either the concept of memory survival or its representation through architecture is wrong. Surprisingly, Freud does not opt for the obvious solution of searching for a better metaphor but qualifies the concept itself: “Perhaps we are going too far with this. Perhaps we ought to content ourselves with asserting that what is past in mental life may be preserved and is not necessarily destroyed” (18). It seems that the architectural metaphor is more important than the notion of the preservation of memory itself. Why? Perhaps because its retention allows Freud to introduce the image of memory ruins and to figure himself as an archeologist of the psyche. Obviously, the only way in which several buildings can occupy the same space is in the form of an archeological dig: layers upon layers of collapsed and ruined structures, with the oldest, most primal ones buried deeply under assorted rubble, necessitating a prolonged and careful work of excavation and reconstruction. If memory were indeed a sort of hologram, instantly accessible to the subject, the work of the psychoanalyst would be menial at best: a tour guide among the splendidly preserved edifices of the psyche. But Freud and his followers, even those abjuring the orthodoxy of psychoanalysis, would rather see themselves as intrepid explorers, hawk-eyed treasure hunters or, best of all, keen detectives piecing together scattered clues.

In Mirage Samantha’s ruined memoryscape is literally in ruins. It is a bleak, scorched terrain dotted with the rubble of “memory nodes,” “the land of the dead” (69). But it also, as Julie soon finds out, a multilayered country, with progressively deeper strata holding more and more devastating secrets. As she journeys down the circles of the memory hell, she approaches the ultimate secret, the deepest-buried memory, the undead past.

The metaphor of “digging for the past” is so widespread as to become virtually nonmetaphoric. As Loftus points out, the very word “repression” nowadays “whispers of dark secrets and buried treasures” (48). The therapist in Memory Game suggests Jane’s decision to enter therapy is tantamount to the determination to “dig up your own past, to disinter your own secret” (88). Moreover, he equates this “digging” with the physical act of the disinterment of Natalie’s body from its hiding place in the family garden.

Both the grave and the body are drained of their physical reality, transferred into the memoryscape. The therapist explains: “Some of us may have bodies in our minds, hidden, waiting to be discovered” (71). The conflation between the physical terrain and the terrain of the mind ensures that the therapist’s work is the discovery of the truth, that his “follow[ing] the clues” of Jane’s supposedly repressed memory will end up producing tangible results in the real world, and that by filling up the “strange dark holes” in Jane’s memory, the yawning hole of the victim’s burial place will also be filled (154).
In Mirage Julie’s quest through the subterranean world of her sister’s memory, which starts as a therapeutic intervention, ends up as a full-fledged criminal investigation. The therapist metamorphoses into an archeologist-cum-detective whose unearthing of ruins, fossils and shards of memory is simultaneously a modality of healing and a search for the truth. By pursuing oblique leads and pasting together seemingly unrelated memory fragments, the therapist relies on what Carlo Ginzburg calls “the evidential paradigm,” the conviction that “infinitesimal traces permit the comprehension of a deeper, otherwise inaccessible reality” (101). To emphasize how central the idea of the “clue” is to psychoanalysis, Ginzburg quotes Freud’s essay “The Moses of Michelangelo” with its famous line about psychoanalytical method being “accustomed to divine secret and concealed things from unconsidered or unnoticed details, from the rubbish heap, as it were, of our observations” (Ginzburg 99).

This “rubbish heap” is precisely the rubble of memory Julie is sorting through in search of the solution to the crime that devastated her childhood. But “rubbish” has a double meaning; it is simultaneously a remnant of something and a health hazard. And “the evidential paradigm” combines the two. The truth shall make you healthy. When Jane undergoes a crisis after “recovering” her memory of the murder, Alex reassures her: “Think of it as your body trying to expel a quarter of a century of poisons and impurities that have been trapped inside you” (French 256).

The rubble of memory is a toxic dump, and the therapist is an archeologist, gravedigger, and sanitation worker rolled into one. A triple metaphorical structure is born, whereby memory becomes first a space and then a thing: “why do we expose ourselves to the risks of digging up the buried material? Because the shards and fragments of the past will continue to penetrate our present-day lives, causing piercing pain and grief. Not until we unearth the memory, file down its jagged edges, and carefully slide the smoothed-out pieces into our expanded sense of the self will we experience relief and release from the past” (Loftus 145). If the psyche is a city, therapy is urban restoration.

However, in the end both The Memory Game and Mirage deliver an unexpected blow to the very metaphor that underpins their plots. Sensitive to the memory wars, both texts side with the widespread skepticism about the validity of recovered memories and both retreat from their initial valorization of trauma. In Mirage the unearthing of the secret memory does indeed bring “release from the past” and the restoration of selfhood. The hidden pathological memory turns out to be that of a crime committed by Julie and Samantha’s father, and at some point Julie becomes convinced the crime is something as “mundane and tawdry” as sexual abuse. Though most “so-called repressed memories are fiction,” she is “dealing with the real thing this time” (271–72).
However, the notion of recovered memory is broached only to be rejected. The father is a monster, to be sure, but of a sci-fi kind: not a pedophile but a mad scientist who conducts neurochemical experiments on his daughters. The Gothic architecture of the twins' memoryscapes turns out to be the result of his deliberate intervention and not a spontaneous product of repression. Memory is fragile, malleable, subject to chemical falsification, and the memoryscape is revealed not as the “eternal city” but as a disposable backdrop in a virtual reality game.

The Memory Game is even blunter in attacking the identification between memory and history. Jane's well-explored memoryscape is an imaginative construct, the land beyond the looking glass (she remembers everything as a mirror image, making her recollection of the murder a physical impossibility). In order to find out the truth, she has to get out of her head and start digging in the real ground. In an ironic twist on the metaphor of “digging up the past,” she has to excavate the hole where Natalie's body is found in order to discover material clues to the unexpected identity of the killer. Memory is useless for the solution of the crime whose perpetrator, Natalie's brother and Jane's former husband, relied on old-fashioned misdirection rather than repression to avoid being caught. The supposed trauma, the hidden collapsed star at the core of the black hole of Jane's memory, turns out to be nonexistent.

Once memory is seen as unreliable, memoryscape mutates into dreamscape. When Jane wakes up to the impossibility of her recollection of the murder, she goes to another psychiatrist who explains to her that memories are not like solid ruins. Rather, they are like “a sandcastle on a beach”—capable of being washed away by tides of forgetting and reconstructed in new forms by the hands of the imagination (362). Samantha's memoryscape in Mirage becomes increasingly surreal, filled with vivid hallucinatory images: living pictures, a lion on fire, a boy biting into a severed hand. Eventually Julie realizes that everything she sees is subjective, and what she really explores is her sister's unconscious fantasy (83).

The trauma at the heart of memory's black hole becomes the wound of the imagination. Both the longing for, and the fear of, the violent sublime collide in that “toxic spot” which Julie sees as a poisoned circle on the grounds of her own memoryscape. It is no longer the burial place of memory's rotting body but the hatchery of the imagination's murderous fantasies. This is the spot in which the correspondence between imagination and truth, memory and history, breaks down and where the memoryscape, predicated on such a correspondence, begins to unravel. The space-time singularity cancels the physical laws that enable its existence; the singularity of trauma explodes the memoryscape constructed to enable its exploration. But this is where the limits of
the metaphor become glaringly obvious, for as opposed to a physical black hole the black hole of memory may have wrapped itself around total emptiness. As Julie suggests: “It could be there’s no single incident that sent [Samantha] into her own black hole” (268). The most traumatic revelation is that there has been no trauma at all.

WITNESS FOR THE ABSOLUTION

The cultural imagery of trauma feeds upon the vocabulary of the sublime in crediting the “survivorship” of violence with special powers whose essence is incommunicable to the nontraumatized. “Trauma is a transformative experience,” says Kali Tal (119). Those who have not experienced the purifying touch of the sublime are barred from criticizing or doubting survivors’ narratives: “We must carefully distinguish between texts written by the survivors of a particular trauma, and texts by writers who describe or detail traumatic situations they have not experienced” (132). The insight granted by trauma is the result of the “shattering” of “personal and national myths” (ibid.). The wound of the Symbolic speaks with the voice of the Real. Survivors are not witnesses to the specific crime of their victimization but prophets, testifying to the ineffable—and thus universal—truth: “What happens when a traumatic event forces someone to re-cognize a disturbing reality? There is a transformation, a change in the terms of representation—even a revision of what constitutes an ‘event,’ both in perception and in storytelling” (134).

The three groups Tal discusses are the Holocaust survivors, Vietnam veterans, and victims of sexual abuse. Such a choice disregards not only the specific historical situation of each group but even the content of the trauma itself. It is only the fragmentation of memory and the transformation of perception that they are supposed to have in common. But even assuming that all three groups equally suffer from PTSD, the exclusive focus on the psychological aftermath of trauma overlooks the specific way in which the subject makes sense of its pain. The politics of the Holocaust, the soldier’s moral dilemmas, the structure of family power, all are sacrificed to the epiphany of the unrepresentable. With the historical circumstances of the trauma edited out, what is left is the sense of rupture, discontinuity, of entering “the catastrophic environment of trauma through the ‘membrane’ that separates sense from nonsense” (Tal 15). The trauma memory is hypostatized purely as the experience of narrative and symbolic lapse, as a psychic singularity.

It is clear from Tal’s own account, however, that many survivors are not happy with the role of a mute testimonial to the unrepresentable. Rather, they actively attempt to represent their experience, to bear witness not to the universality of trauma but to the particularity of a crime or injustice. The
aesthetics of the sublime seems to hold a greater attraction for the scholars of victimization than for the victims themselves. Paradoxically, Tal, while insisting on the privileged status of trauma-speak, faults those survivors who speak too much, such as those Vietnam veterans who “have rejected, repressed, and revised most of their war experiences until the parts that they can recall seem to be consonant with the greater body of national myth” (130). But a trauma, obviously, does not guarantee enlightened politics. The trench generation of World War I, traumatized beyond imagination, was instrumental in the rise of fascism, and Hitler himself, having suffered from hysterical blindness after a gas attack, could be classified as a trauma survivor. Thus, Tal’s objections seem to be not so much to a particular narrative of a traumatic memory but to narrativity itself: those survivors are “inauthentic” who, not satisfied with fragments, incoherence, the ruins of the sublime, attempt to “revise” their experience and to tell a story.

But the need to tell a story, to reintroduce causality into a world voided of meaning by a catastrophe, to tame the sublime, is precisely the need that sustained the survivors of camps, massacres, and genocide. Primo Levi’s famous dream in Survival in Auschwitz shows how people caught in the muteness of the black hole hunger for speech. In the dream he is back home with his family and attempts to tell the story of the camp, only to realize to his horror that people are not listening. The dream is repetitive and insistent, “the pain of every day translated so constantly into our dreams, in the ever-repeated scene of the unlistened-to story” (54). Cold, starvation, backbreaking work, dirt, disease, selections for the gas chambers, all these constitute the duration of Levi’s ordeal which is cut off from the chronological time of ordinary human existence: “For us, history has stopped” (107). Without history, without reason or explanation, without shared language to describe what he is going through, Levi’s only hope is to rejoin humanity through the bridge of storytelling. The dream is not—as some have seen it—an emblem of the incommunicability of trauma, a call for reverend silence, and uncritical attention to the testimony of pain. What Levi craves is not sympathy but understanding; what sustains him is not silence but words. At one point he recites The Divine Comedy to a fellow inmate, quickly, before both of them are killed, for it “is vitally necessary and urgent that he listen, that he understand” (104).

In commenting on this scene Tzvetan Todorov emphasizes the moral value of shared beauty amid the ugliness of the camp, but perhaps just as important is the intelligibility of Dante’s hell as opposed to the senseless hell of Auschwitz. Levi’s own book, written in tight, controlled, crystal-clear prose, is another guide to the Inferno, and like Dante, he searches for answers. Perhaps there are no answers; perhaps, like fellow Auschwitz prisoner Jean Amery, Levi ultimately comes to the conclusion that in the death camps the
mind smashes against its limits. But both continued to write, after all; both clung to language, if only to struggle with its impotence, and to the intellect, if only to decry its bankruptcy.

A number of ordinary prisoners, both of Auschwitz and the Soviet Gulag, fought to pass their stories on, writing diaries, hiding manuscripts, helping one person to escape, so he will reveal the truth about the death of a multitude. What they hoped to preserve was not only memory but meaning, “a possibility for narrative” (Todorov 97). At some point Levi discusses the question whether Auschwitz would be better forgotten altogether and decides against it: not out of regard for the victims’ suffering but for the sake of the abstract truth. With stunning detachment, he writes: “To this question [whether the memory of the Holocaust should be preserved] we have to reply in the affirmative. We are in fact convinced that no human experience is without meaning or unworthy of analysis, and that fundamental values, even if they are not positive, can be deduced from this particular world which we are describing. We would also like to consider that the Lager was pre-eminently a gigantic biological and social experiment” (79).

But precisely this detachment points to the black core of incommunicable suffering that smolders under the polished surface of his prose. It is possible to argue that, despite its cohesion, the writing of Levi and other survivors is the discourse of trauma, after all, that Survival in Auschwitz represents that very moment of deceptive stability before the final memory collapse. George Klein, a scientist and Holocaust survivor, describes the dilemma of the “traveller returning from hell” in one of his essays, structured around his meeting with Rudolf Vrba, the man who escaped from Auschwitz to alert the indifferent world. Klein is in awe of Vrba, the “authentic hero,” the man who dedicated his life to bearing witness, writing books, testifying at trials of Nazis, appearing in Lanzmann’s Shoah. The hero’s only fear, according to Klein, is that he would not be believed, that his stories of hell would fall on deaf ears. But Klein is also aware that Vrba “knows” something, which cannot be put into any human language: “Only the dead could have more to tell” (128). Speaking for the dead is incomprehensible to the living. Vrba himself says later: “No one who has not experienced it can understand. None of the many books ever written about it, not even my book, could convey the sense of what it was really like” (in Klein 133).

Perhaps it is in this lapse of meaning, in the acknowledgement of the impossibility of speech, in submission to the trauma, that Levi’s, Klein’s, and Vrba’s own stories achieve their power of testimonial. Perhaps Levi’s faith in reason is misplaced and we should see through it to the internal fragmentation of his narrative; perhaps indeed, as Langer insists, the only legacy of the Holocaust “when truly faced” is “an internal disordering” of “images from
the past” (40). However, the problem is that precisely the same dialectic of detachment and hurt, of causality and disorder, of the need for speech and the curse of silence can be found in stories written not by victims but by perpetrators. Murderers can also “bear witness” to a trauma. Rudolf Hoess, the commandant of Auschwitz, also considered the Lager “a gigantic biological and social experiment.” His narrative is also marked by a flat affect, vacillating between objectivity and horror, smooth narrative flow and the stuttering of the incommunicable. What he calls “the story of my innermost being . . . reconstructed from memory” becomes a story of memory destroyed, shattered to pieces by the unbearable weight of violence (1).

Narratives of perpetrators, as both Todorov and Gilbert, the Nuremberg psychologist, point out are marked by psychological fragmentation. Members of Einsatzgruppen, engaged in hands-on killing of Jews, often suffered from PTSD, as Himmler acknowledged in several speeches and memoranda. If the content of the trauma is of no particular importance in determining the fragmentation of memory and if, as Cathy Caruth writes in the Introduction to the anthology Trauma, “the pathology [lies] solely in the structure of its experience or reception” (4), then there is no way to discriminate among morally opposite varieties of traumatic discourse. Both Hoess’s and Levi’s narratives struggle to encompass the black hole of the unspeakable and both fail in similar ways. The absolute and irreducible difference between them is that one is a murderer and the other is an innocent victim. But this is the difference, which the experiential framework of trauma can neither encompass nor express.

In discussing the “crisis of truth” brought about by the mutual imbrication of trauma and history, Felman dismisses the juridical model of such a crisis being resolved by a verdict as “contained” and “institutionalized,” incapable of encompassing “a horror . . . whose effects explode any capacity for explanation or rationalization” (4–6). But here, it seems, an epistemological problematic is substituted for a moral and political one. Perhaps nobody can truly bear witness to the event of the Holocaust, but the crime of the Holocaust is a different matter.

In a remarkable exchange with the members of the Western New England Institute for Psychoanalysis in 1990, Claude Lanzmann excoriated what he called “the obscenity of the very project of understanding” (in Caruth 1996, 205). Commenting on a Dutch film about the chief medical officer of Auschwitz, Eduard Wirths, Lanzmann vehemently rejected all such projects to “understand” the Nazi soul as somehow implying forgiveness of the Nazi crimes. Any attempt to understand the Holocaust is a sacrilege; the only way to honor the victims is by acknowledging the unbridgeable gap, “an abyss,” between intelligibility and massacre. It is not difficult to see why cheap
absolutions of Nazi criminals, along the lines of “but he was a good family
man,” would provoke revulsion. But is it true that to understand is to forgive?
The opposite case might just as easily be made: that by refusing understand-
ing, we grant unwarranted absolution to the murderers. Shadowed by their
alien motives, they become demons and evil demigods, far above the paltry
reach of human justice. Nazi ideology, too, turns into a mystique, preserving
and even increasing its dangerous allure. But as Todorov puts it, “the crimes
are inhuman but the criminals are not” (138). To think otherwise is to accept
the self-deification of the “master race.”

One such would-be Superman, an Auschwitz guard described by Primo
Levi, has become an unexpected cultural hero of trauma studies, endlessly
quoted by scholars and writers. “Warum?” asks Levi and the guard replies,
“Hier ist kein warum” (there is no why here). What is generally omitted is the
pettily sadistic context of this pearl of Lager wisdom: the guard brutally
snatches away the icicle with which Levi tried to slake his thirst, hardly an
incomprehensible act for anybody familiar with schoolyard bullying. That the
prisoners’ experience in the camps soon accelerates beyond any measure of
ordinary cruelty does not mean that the perpetrators’ reasons are beyond
understanding. Levi’s guard is lying, or rather, speaking only half of the truth.
“W h y s” are quite real in Auschwitz, but they are reserved for members of the
master race; it is part of the Jews’ exclusion from the commonality of the
human species that they are denied the epistemological privilege of meaning.
The SS-man knows very well why Jews have to die; he has scientists to
explain to him that their killing is of no more moral consequence than the
extermination of lice. The death of meaning in the camps is the obverse side
of the insane hypertrophy of meaning in Nazi ideology, which managed to
obviate the basic instinct of human solidarity. By glorifying the black hole of
nonsignification, we tacitly condone the crime of its making.

As junkies of the sublime, the concentration camp killers willingly
plunged into the black hole of violence, craving the ecstatic dissolution of the
self. But in the cold aftermath of defeat, intoxication became trauma. Suffer-
ing from the hangover of “radical transgression,” the perpetrators may seek
refuge in the silence of the unspeakable. What they achieve, if such a refuge
is granted, is parity with the victims. Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, see-
ing the past as “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon
wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet” (1969, 257), is an angel of trauma.
One can easily imagine its wings trembling over the head of Rudolf Hoess as he
contemplates the scorched earth of his memoriescape where millions are
buried. The task of the historian, however, is not to submit to the angel of his-
tory but to wrestle with it: “Only that historian will have the gift of fanning
the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will
not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious” (Benjamin 1969, 255).

**THE CHILDREN’S CRUSADE**

In a court of law the verdict is rendered through a competition of the stories offered by the defense and prosecution to account for the facts of the case. The relation of these stories to the truth has been a concern of legal studies, with many critics pointing out that judicial storytelling is subject to the laws of genre. It seems that the best chance of winning the case belongs to a strong narrative that follows an instantly recognizable structural paradigm. But, of course, this does not mean that such a narrative will be any closer to what actually happened than a weak, fragmented, contingent tale of accidents.

There is a traditional comparison between history and jurisprudence: the historian must act as judge, belatedly rendering justice to the victims of historical crimes. Edith Wyschogrod, however, criticizes the model of narrative discrimination underlying both historiography and jurisprudence: “It may be concluded that depriving historical groups of speech is a juridical wrong but that it lies beyond the strategies of rectification within most Western juridical systems” (22). Narrative, both historical and juridical, cannot recognize the irreducible singularity of genocide: “If the cataclysm is beyond magnitude, events are singular. How are we to imagine the cataclysm as ‘expressing’ a singularity... The other’s death is by virtue of the other’s alterity always already more than what can be given in my representation, more than what my imagination could present” (46).

Narrative can bear witness to the black hole of “the cataclysm” only by being wormholed with ellipsis. But such a narrative has, by definition, given up on the very possibility of competing in a court of law. It has conceded its incapacity to rectify the victims’ wrong even before the trial has begun. While clinging to “the truth of the other’s alterity,” it has virtuously abjured the instrumental truth of political efficacy. What about the opposite: the narrative that flaunts its own falsity yet claims to represent the victims’ rights?

In Begnini’s film *Life Is Beautiful*, the father in the death camp hides the horror of reality from his small son by telling him fairy tales. The boy does not see the selections, the crematoria, the brutality of the guards but only the enchanting world of games, competitions, and small miracles his father spins out for him. The film has been severely criticized for falsifying the experience of the Holocaust, but this falsification is precisely its theme. The camp shown in *Life Is Beautiful* is just as much a fairy tale as the stories told to the boy. The documented reality—even leaving aside the issue of “representability”—was a thousand times worse. But showing it “as it really was” would, of course,
make it impossible for the film to be what it is: an exceedingly popular combination of comedy and the fairy tale. There are films and books trying to depict the atrocity in all its horror, but none of them achieved even a fraction of the popularity of Life Is Beautiful. Schindler’s List, another Holocaust blockbuster, goes a little further in the direction of historical accuracy, but obviously owes its popularity not to the harrowing scenes of the mass execution in the ghetto, but to Schindler’s melodramatic heroism. The film’s black-and-white color scheme corresponds to its black-and-white morality, which is the uncompromising—and as many would argue, simplistic—morality of the fairy tale: there are heroes and villains, with little in between.

The fairy tale is one of the oldest—and strongest—narrative genres. So rigid is its narrative scheme that it was the favorite target of formalist and structuralist criticism, from Propp on. So clear-cut is its moral scheme that it was the genre of choice for stern Victorian preachers, such as George MacDonald. Imposing this genre on the Holocaust seems like the ultimate betrayal of the cataclysm’s “singularity.” But this is the narrative that stands the best chance of winning in a court of law or in the court of public opinion. The viewers of Life Is Beautiful and Schindler’s List have no difficulty in identifying the good and the bad, the victims and the perpetrators. In terms of historical justice—not to mention the dangers of neo-Nazism—this is a clear gain. But this gain is bought at the price of the inevitable falsification of the horror of genocide.

The increasing popularity of Holocaust fairy tales testifies to the cultural need for judgment. As opposed to horror, such texts do not flaunt the violent sublime through disturbances and rifts in the narrative fabric. On the contrary, they use a rigid narrative formula to combat the disintegrating pull of the cataclysm. The black hole is covered up by the black-and-white moral scheme. No therapy to the survivors here; instead, the court is in session, dispensing punishment in the never-never land of historical justice. And yet, most such texts are aware—though to different degrees—of their own inevitable failure to convey the truth of what happened. Some of these Holocaust Märchen, such as Jane Yolen’s The Devil’s Arithmetic, are meant for children. Most are not. But as in Life Is Beautiful, the child is often the central figure: a personification of tough and stubborn innocence, untainted by the prevarication of the corrupt adult world. While the discourse of trauma and recovered memory views the child’s psyche as fragile, easily splintered by adult violence, these fairy tales revert to the older, almost Dickensian, notion of the child as the angel of judgment. She stands outside the adult world, pitilessly exposing its sins of omission and commission. Instead of being a victim of history, the child becomes its judge.

Cherry Wilder’s “The House on Cemetery Street” (1988) is a gruesome
Christmas carol, in which the children of a famous German writer, who spent the years of World War II in “inner emigration,” discover the bodies of three Jewish babies immured in the attic of their family home. The children, Lucy and Jo, stayed in the United States during the war and so come back to Germany “cleansed” of their Aryan taint, a couple of all-American teenagers who are forced to confront the lies, evasions, and complicity of their elders. Their final verdict is that the family house “is no better than one of those concentration camps” (26), even though their father and aunt killed the children not out of active malice but out of cowardice, literally “forgetting” about their existence because it was convenient to do so. Here traumatic forgetting is seen as an act of ultimate betrayal, while the recovery of memory is an act of justice.

Taking place on Christmas Eve, the story equates the babies’ corpses with the corpus Christi. But there is no redemption. Innocence and forgiveness are as soiled as his childhood toys Jo recovers from the noisome hole where the babies died. Unlike Tiny Tim or other Victorian Christ-children, dispensing goodwill under the Christmas tree, Jo acts as both prosecutor and judge in forcing his family to confront their crime.

“The House on Cemetery Street” judges the traumas of the perpetrators. Lisa Goldstein’s “Breadcrumbs and Stones” (1993) does the same to the traumas of survivors. The story uses the “Hansel and Gretel” plot to pit a survivor’s daughter against her mother. Here the trauma itself is the crime, for what is being condemned is the inability of the survivor to tell the right story. In hiding the horror of her past and her unwilling complicity in her brother’s death, the mother has abandoned her daughter in the dark forest of history, with only the perishable breadcrumbs of fantasy to mark the way instead of the durable stones of the truth. The mother’s rich repertoire of fairy tales excluded the one tale she had to tell, the tale of the brother and sister brought to the place of the ovens. In not telling it, she is guilty of a failure of courage. Even more cruelly, the story suggests that the same failure contributed to her brother’s arrest by the Gestapo. The story goes very far in the direction of blaming the victim: the opposite syndrome to the exculpation of the perpetrator, implicit in the pieties of silence. Which one is better?

In Jane Yolen’s short novel Briar Rose (1992), the answer is clear: salvation lies in storytelling, and the only way out of the black hole of genocide is through finding the right tale and clinging steadfastly to it. The heroine’s grandmother, the only woman survivor of the extermination camp of Chelmno, has her memory wiped clean by the horror of her experience. The only thing she remembers— and ceaselessly tells her granddaughters—is the story of the Sleeping Beauty or the Briar Rose, the romantic tale of a pretty girl woken from deathlike sleep by a prince’s kiss. Investigating her grandmother’s past, the youngest granddaughter discovers that the tale is true in every
particular but also horribly, grotesquely false. The fairy-tale castle is the processing center of extermination (there was really a castle on the grounds of this Nazi slaughterhouse); the spell of sleeping is the exhaust pumped into the sealed vans; the blush on the faces of the sleepers is caused by carbon monoxide; and the prince who saves the Sleeping Beauty is a minor Polish aristocrat, a persecuted homosexual who becomes a Righteous Gentile by default.

The romance of the most nauseatingly saccharine of all Disney-marketed fairy tales mocks itself, juxtaposed with the reality of Chelmno. And yet it is precisely in this constantly emphasized disparity between the unrepresentability of horror and the representational strategies of the fairy tale, worn smooth by centuries of repetition, that the novel seeks a means to convey the Holocaust. Even though we can never tell what it was “really like,” we have to try. The process of storytelling itself, regardless of the truth of each particular story, constitutes a defense against the black hole of violence. The Prince of Briar Rose tells the granddaughter how, during the war, people “had cared more about making a powerful story than about life itself” (182). Perhaps in extremis it is better to be a fairy-tale hero, no matter how inauthentic, than a traumatized victim, no matter how genuine.

In all three texts moral judgment is linked to narrativity. Those who tell the right stories are acquitted; those who keep silent are condemned. Whether perpetrators or victims, those who use trauma to run away from historical responsibility are guilty; those who hold fast to their tales are heroes. However, the relation between this tale and the truth of what happened is equivocal at best; the Prince in Briar Rose raises the possibility that his tale might be an elaborate mystification. And in any case, as the author’s note prefacing the novel flatly states, the truth of the matter is that no woman ever escaped from Chelmno alive. And yet, while acknowledging the inability of stories to contain history, Holocaust fairy tales insist that history can only be apprehended through story.

This apprehension is not only—or even primarily—intellectual but moral. We need the black-and-white morality of the fairy tale, with shining heroes and darkest villains, to bring justice into the realm of genocide. Schindler’s List, with its unabashed melodrama, follows the moral scheme and partially even the narrative structure of the fairy tale to create the most successful Holocaust narrative of the last decade. And this is precisely why in the eyes of so many critics all these texts, from Briar Rose to Spielberg’s film, are inauthentic, exploitative, insulting. It is not only that the plots offered are time worn and unseemly, but a stronger argument is often made that any plot for the Holocaust is a blasphemy. Rejection of narrativity goes hand in hand with the rejection of formal justice. Failure of storytelling automatically implies failure of judgment based on competing stories. This, according
to Langer, is precisely the “lesson” of the Holocaust: those who are “offended” by the numerous miscarriages of justice in the Nuremberg trials should finally accept that “the logic of law can never make sense of the illogic of extermination” (171). This is because words and stories and verdicts are helpless before the violated body: “What system of justice can render homage to the mounds of corpses being shoved into a mass grave by a giant British bulldozer?” (172).

The question, however, is whether silence can render homage to these corpses any better than words. If stories are rejected as a means of taming the black hole, will pious quietude resurrect the bodies that have been swallowed by it? Or will it just bury them all the more securely?

THE SHROUD OF SILENCE

The memory of violence is always linked to the body. As the therapist in The Memory Game says, there are “buried bodies” in the black hole of trauma. Words, by necessity, obscure the reality of the body mangled by violence. But what is the relationship of the body and silence?

In her defense of the silence of traumatic memory—more particularly, of the silence of Paul Man regarding his collaborationist past—Shoshana Felman sets up the crucial distinction between the speaking narrative of history and the muted testimony of trauma. This distinction, which is central to the discourse of the Holocaust, hinges on the relation to the body. For Felman, the narrative of history is inauthentic: it is “a totalized, settled, understood, and closed account” which, in attempting to provide “a semblance of the historical reading of the Holocaust,” turns into “a speech act of disposing of the scandal of the bodies” (158). Silence, though, such as that of Man, is a true testimony that “invokes the Holocaust as the very figure of silence, of a historical forgetting, which our very efforts at remembering—through the unwitting use of ready-made cultural discourses—only reenact and keep repeating” (164). It is through silence that the martyred bodies can be made present, while speech—any speech—simply reenacts their extermination. But examination of the figure of silent memory in Felman and other critics suggests precisely the opposite: traumatic silence reinscribes the action of the violent sublime, which denies the independent existence and the ethical stature of the Other. Narrative history, however, by opening itself to revision, correction, rewriting, and the test of veridicality, enters the dialogical realm of ethics in which the corporeality of the victim may be acknowledged, though never manifested. A dorno’s famous statement about the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz has been interpreted to mean the impossibility of poetry (or any kind of descriptive language) about Auschwitz.
In Probing the Limits of Representation, a volume edited by Saul Friedlander, a number of literary critics, historians, and philosophers claim that any kind of representation cheapens the Holocaust. Dominick LaCapra, for example, suggests that “[Auschwitz] may reduce one to silence. Silence that is not a sign of utter defeat, however, is itself a potentially ritual attitude; but in this sense it is a silence survenu intricately bound up with certain uses of language” (126). If for LaCapra “certain uses of language,” framing the silence, give to it its validity as a sign of mourning, for Eric Santner, another contributor to the same volume, it is silence that validates the language in which it is embedded. Santner argues that “Nazism and the ‘Final Solution’ need to be theorized under the sign of massive trauma, meaning that these events must be confronted and analyzed in their capacity to endanger and overwhelm the composition of individual and collective identities that enter into their deadly field of force” (151). The implicit metaphor of the black hole is unmistakable here. Any narrative that resists the fragmenting pull of the sublime in an attempt to retain its coherence is therefore suspect. Santner warns against what he calls “narrative fetishism”: “By narrative fetishism I mean the construction and deployment of a narrative consciously or unconsciously designed to expunge the traces of the trauma or loss that called that narrative into being in the first place” (144).

Even though Santner actually criticizes only certain kinds of narratives, his attack on “narrative fetishism” makes it possible to view any kind of Holocaust speech as illegitimate. The victims cannot speak because they have been struck dumb by the horror; the bystanders should not speak because their speech is unsanctified by the searing touch of the sublime. Any kind of narrative knowledge becomes the accomplice of the perpetrators’ supposed “instrumental rationality.” As Maurice Blanchot puts it in The Writings of the Disaster: “But the danger (here) of words in their theoretical insignificance is perhaps that they claim to evoke the annihilation where all sinks always, without hearing ‘to be silent’ addressed to those who have known only partially, or from a distance, the interruption of history” (84).

Knowledge of horror becomes, for Blanchot, the horror of knowledge, the collaboration of voice with violence, which can only be dispelled by silence. “Knowledge which goes so far as to accept horror in order to know it, reveals the horror of knowledge, its squalor, the discrete complicity which maintains it in a relation with the most insupportable aspects of power” (82).

This scathing denunciation of storytelling, however, is illustrated by a story. The story is of a young Auschwitz prisoner who was asked how he could bear having been forced to hold the victims’ heads during SS executions. He is supposed to have replied that he “observed the comportment of men before death.” Blanchot’s response is the flat “I will not believe it” (82).
The prisoner's tale seems to him far too rational, his refuge in detachment of knowledge somehow false, perhaps even unworthy of the sublimity of his experience which can—must?—be honored only by the delirium and dissociation of PTSD. Trauma here functions as an ideological touchstone used to invalidate the response of a bona fide survivor. Instead of muting all speech, the discourse of trauma becomes a measuring rod, wielded to distinguish between “authentic” (fragmented or delirious) and “inauthentic” (rational and coherent) narratives.

In *Facing the Extreme*, Tzvetan Todorov also has a story to tell. The story is about Maurice Blanchot. Todorov rebukes the intellectual he once admired for not having ever acknowledged in print his own involvement in the anti-Semitic Action française in the late 1930s. Later, after an ideological change of heart, Blanchot excoriates others, such as Valéry and Heidegger, for their complicity with anti-Semitism and fascism. But for Todorov, Blanchot’s speech is morally invalidated by that single instance of silence.

In Shoshana Felman’s essay on Paul Man, on the contrary, silence becomes the only proper response to the trauma of history. But paradoxically, in taking the discourse of silence to the extreme, she deconstructs it, to reveal at its core not merely abdication of responsibility, but denial of history itself as the realm of difference and subjectivity. Reverend silence becomes a mirror of the empty voracity of the violent sublime that grinds individual bodies and minds into the uniformity of the unrepresentable. As opposed to Todorov who, in the similar case of Blanchot, sees the silence as far graver than the original offense, for Felman it is paradoxically what redeems Man and even makes him into an exemplary and tragic figure. In attempting to judge Man in the reductive terms of good and evil, we deny our personal stake in his dilemma: “[T]he judgment] thus fails to grasp what is essentially at stake: how Man articulates our silence; how today we are all implicated in Man’s ordeal and his incapacity to tell us more about it; how, having faced what he faced, Man chose an inevitable syntax and an inevitable understated (silent) language” (124).

But why should “we” (whoever we are) find ourselves implicated in Man’s suppression of his unsightly personal past of writing for a collaborationist newspaper in Nazi-occupied Belgium? Because his “ordeal,” according to Felman, is not a particular action but the trauma of history itself which is equally shared among all. The choice of words in describing Man’s past is revealing: “ordeal,” “having faced what he faced,” “radical loss—or death—of self” (135). Blown to such cosmic proportions, the initial trauma requires an equally cosmic response, and so Man’s silence, “our” silence, becomes not avoidance or escape but a heroic gesture of resistance directed at the ultimate enemy: truth, meaning knowledge.
In the testimony of a work that performs actively an exercise of silence not as simple silence but as the absolute refusal of any trivializing or legitimizing discourse (of apology, of narrative, or of psychologizing explanation of recent history), Man articulates... the incapacity of apologetic discourse to account for history as Holocaust, the ethical impossibility of a confession that, historically and philosophically, cannot take place. (152)

A cynic might say that such a philosophy is custom-made for tax evaders. But more is at stake in Felman's argument than Man's personal morality. Under the blanket of silence, subjective differences are suffocated; political distinctions eroded; and history, rather than being saved from "abstractions," is swallowed up by the empty signifier of "trauma." The black hole finally devours the very substance of memory, leaving nothing behind but the verbal wreckage of the sublime. Felman's discourse of trauma, instead of articulating our responsibility for history in terms of specific subject positions, denies that such positions even exist. Felman's repudiation of "judgment" (123) is more than a refusal to consider legalities—irrelevant in any case, since Man was exonerated by a Belgian court. Rather, it is the denial of the ethics and epistemology of historically specific difference.

The generalized "trauma" of history makes it possible to equate Man's wartime collaboration with the survival in Auschwitz. Man's silent "testimony" of his own "catastrophic experience" is glossed by Primo Levi's words, which Man could "borrow," about the suspect nature of memory (140). Quite apart from the moral repulsiveness of such equivalence, Levi's statement is taken from a body of works which, stubbornly and against the perceived impossibility of telling "how it really was," attempt to bear witness. The core of silence in Levi's work is encased in words, which create a fragile but necessary defense against the rapacity of the Holocaust's annihilation of meaning. Levi's acknowledgment that memory is unreliable leads him to conclude that it has to be shored up by what he calls "considerations" which, for Felman, would be precisely those "trivializing or legitimizing discourses" that Man abhors. Levi is a traveler returning from hell, whose speech is a testimony to the unspeakable; Man's silence hides the fact that he, at best, averted his eyes from the hell-in-making, at worst, contributed his spark to its fires. To suggest that the two are the same is to sacrifice the very possibility of meaningful action on the altar of bloated and unspecified "trauma." Not only is the dynamics of "traumatization" opposed to the discourse of objective truth, as in the recovered memory movement, but the rememberer is conveniently absolved even from demonstrating his or her suffering. Felman infers the existence of Man's trauma from the special "quality" of his silence, but if words are ambiguous, their absence is no less
so. Who is to say that Man regarded his past as painful rather than, say, merely embarrassing?

The discourse of trauma becomes abhorrent when it conflates Man's experience with that of the survivors; it becomes ridiculous when it aligns him with the worst of the perpetrators. Felman's apology might be read as an indictment. With its inflated rhetoric of the "apocalypse," it emphasizes Man's supposed "realization that there can be no way back from what has happened, no possible recuperation" (135). This is the realization more appropriate for a Mengele or a Rudolf Hoess, one would think. Writing an anti-Semitic article is hardly the same as throwing children into flames. But it is precisely the connection between trauma and the discourse of the sublime that invests an ordinary moral failure with the grandeur of radical evil, while at the same time denying the ethical dimension of their suffering to the survivors.

The black hole of silence accomplishes what Felman accuses historical narratives of doing: it erases the body. It is most glaringly obvious in Felman's comparison between Man and Walter Benjamin, whose lives, she admits, seem total opposites: "Man collaborates while Benjamin is persecuted as a Jew" (157). Nevertheless, there is a profound similarity, for both "experience the events of the Second World War essentially as a mistake, as a historical misreading that leads both men to a misguided action" (ibid.). The "misguided action" is Man's collaboration and Benjamin's suicide.

What falls through the cracks of this comparison is precisely what Felman calls "the scandal of the bodies" (158). Benjamin's Jewish body is marked for death, while Man's is exempt from destruction. Of course, Nazi racial theory is a "mistake" to the extent to which a Jew's body is not intrinsically different from anybody else's. But once inscribed with the sign of ideological alienation, this body, in its irreducible suffering, becomes testimony to "the material . . . way in which linguistic utterances have real effects (make history), without any relation to their meaning, their intention, or their content" (Felman 148). Insofar as Man's anti-Semitic article participates in Nazi "linguistic utterances," its effect is to produce a radical difference between the two men, which is manifested in the wartime fate of their bodies, one dead and one living.

The erasure of all moral, political, and ideological distinctions in the discourse of trauma leads to a vitiation of subjectivity. The closer one approaches the black hole of the sublime, the more is one's unique subject position distorted by its all-consuming pull. Hayden White criticizes the notion of the objective historical truth, external to the narrative emplotment of history writing. He suggests that the appropriate modality of Holocaust narration is what he calls, following Barthes, the "middle-voice" of literary modernism or a "distance-denying discourse," which subverts the realistic conventions of
referentiality by collapsing the distinction between the writing subject and the object of narration (48).

Like Felman’s vicarious “witnessing,” the distance-denying discourse is available to everybody, regardless of the historical, cultural, and ideological positioning of the subject. It projects a kind of free floating, sovereign subjectivity that, cut loose from history, can pick and choose its own modality of trauma. Both the glorification of silence and the pseudo-therapeutic flood of “trauma talk” are underwritten by the refusal of “Why,” the renunciation of the intellect. But this renunciation does not lead to the confrontation with the naked pain of the suffering body. Instead it produces the hypertrophy of the psychological, which erases what Scarry calls the “incontestable reality” of a specific, concrete human body in pain. The mass-accessible ecstasy of trauma becomes a way to avoid coming to terms with the history of atrocity.

In the course of his conversation with Rudolf Vrba, who escaped from Auschwitz, George Klein, also a Holocaust survivor, asks him whether his Canadian colleagues—for Vrba is a professor of neuropharmacology in Vancouver—know what he has gone through. Vrba tells him a story: having seen Lanzmann’s Shoah, one of his colleagues got very upset and asked Vrba, who appeared in the film, whether the “horrible things” he said are really true. “I don’t know,” replied Vrba. “I was only an actor reciting the lines.” “How strange,” said the colleague. “I did not know you were an actor. Why did they say the film was made without any actors?” (Klein 133).

What is the point of this story? For Klein it is that the “children of paradise” cannot understand the “children of hell.” Insofar as “understand” means “share the experience of,” he is undoubtedly correct. But if “understanding” also means, as the dictionary has it, “perceive the significance or explanation or cause of,” then Vrba’s devastating irony is directed not at the colleague’s inevitable failure of empathy but at his refusal of knowledge. It is more comforting to think Shoah is a fictional film. For the thrill of a vicarious trauma, it is, perhaps, of no significance whether Vrba mouths a script or not. The “middle-voice” of fake personal involvement is unaffected by the subject’s real position in relation to the events described. But it is clear that for Vrba’s colleague the question “Was it real?” is a defense against the devastating implications of the fact that it did happen. The Holocaust deniers are unwilling witnesses to the profound moral significance of facts, for they understand very well that the power of the “horrible things” to affect us hinges on their being true. As Terence Des Pres puts it:

For the victims of the Holocaust I cannot speak. Their agony, which to this day is visible in the millions of scratches made by fingernails on the ceilings of the gas chambers, is theirs with a finality none of the living could know. But
TRAVELER IN HELL

How can a narrative, especially a self-declared fantastic narrative, recover the bodies buried in the black hole of the violent sublime? J. R. Dunn's Days of Cain (1998) takes place precisely in the "world of fantasy or science fiction" Des Pres singles out as the opposite of history. And yet, while hardly an artistic masterpiece, Days of Cain is interesting precisely in the way in which it utilizes the generic tools of science fiction to come to terms with the violent physicality of twentieth-century history.

Literature of the fantastic in general, and science fiction in particular, literalizes the master tropes of the collective imagination. In Mirage the memoryscape is a physical terrain. In Days of Cain the black hole of atrocity becomes an actual place to visit, to explore, and to redeem. Or rather, to attempt to do so, for the redemption fails, defeated by the scale of the genocide. By taking to the extreme the trope of the black hole, Days of Cain serves as a compendium of paradoxes that the Holocaust has bred in postmodern culture. The plot of the novel follows the convention established by Isaac Asimov's End of Eternity: a vast intertemporal organization called the Extension, with operatives recruited from different historical eras, is charged with preventing deviations of history from its appointed course. It is done in the name of the "Moiety," which is "the ultimate union of consciousness in the late epochs of the universe"(Dunn 12). The Moiety is literally the "master narrative," the self-aware pattern of development that polices history to ensure its own emergence.

A number of operatives, led by a woman named Alma Lewin, have gone renegade, attempting to change the pattern by preventing the Holocaust from happening, first by assassinating Hitler and then by sabotaging Auschwitz, where Lewin voluntarily goes as an inmate. The plot follows the intervention of the protagonist, Gaspar James, who manages to foil the renegades' plans and to preserve the integrity of history by allowing the Holocaust to take place. The "continuum" in which the Extension's operators work is the collective memoryscape. It is the totality of the past, bounded by its determinate beginning and ending. The relation between the agents of the Extension, who freely roam across space–time, and ordinary human beings, frozen within particular temporal "cells," is the relation of people to their memories. Like images of the past, ordinary humans are unknowingly bound to reenact the script of that which has already happened: "the primary metaphysical quality of the Extension was that it effectively deprived all entities within
the continuum of free will. Space–time had been transformed into a deterministic system, the only intelligences possessing agency those of the Extension itself” (314). Yet what grants them agency is precisely the existence of the history script, which is to culminate in the unimaginable but surely benevolent entity of the universal intelligence. However, this narrative is undermined by the unstoppable tide of violence. Shocked by the immensity of suffering, the novel’s characters come to realize that history is simply a channel roll call, an “eternal string of deaths, one after another. That’s what history is” (202).

Gaspar’s metaphor for this infinite slaughter is the Great Wheel, mindlessly rolling across millennia, “a vast wheel churning out death and horror and blood” (217). The teleological, linear narrative of history is bent into a circle, in which even the Moiety that is supposed to redeem all the suffering is reimagined as simply “the casing of the Wheel, its last inert outer layer” (202). And the axle of the Wheel is a black hole. The Channel that the Extension uses to travel across time is “itself a singularity—the source singularity, the cradle of everything—created at the moment of primal inflation, a flaw in superspace similar to the cosmic walls and strings of normal space, but along a temporal rather than spatial axis” (67). Time is pierced by a black hole, the emptiness at the core of history. This literal black hole which appears first as a doorway of darkness, observed by young Hitler on the battlefield of World War I, gradually becomes conflated with the figurative black hole of “the original sin of history,” the Holocaust.

Against the background of cosmic millennia, the characters of the novel debate essentially the same question as the German historians of the local “historians’ debate”: whether, to use LaCapra’s formulation, the Holocaust is “unique,” or “comparable” to other events of the same nature (1992, 111). Rather unexpectedly, the Extension’s consensus is that it is unique. One of the monitors explains: “The Holocaust differs from other historical events, both in degree and in nature” (33). Gaspar meets a creature from an epoch so far ahead in time that it no longer looks even remotely human. And yet this is an advanced “upliner” of “the sin of Auschwitz” (73). It is as if the traumatic memory of the Holocaust grew, rather than diminished, with time, devouring more and more of Western culture’s collective memoryscape. Whether this will be true for the future eons is debatable, but it is certainly true for the last twenty years, which is all the eternity a popular novel can envisage.

But in positing the historical uniqueness of the Holocaust, the novel undermines its own premise of the consistent, intelligible, and total narrative of history. Gaspar originally views the Holocaust as just another event, which is to be processed in accordance with his primary commitment to the “continuum.” The novel charts the breakdown of his professional detachment until he
ends up as a self-exiled “ghost,” voluntarily resigned from the Extension. Shaken by his tour of Auschwitz in the guise of an SS officer, horrified by the “ungodly hole the Germans have created,” by “the foulness, the viciousness, the pointlessness of it . . .” (243), Gaspar rejects his more “advanced” superior’s explanation that the Holocaust is, in fact, a historically beneficent phenomenon because it created “a benchmark of human behavior, an abyss that must not be approached” (254) and thus prevented humanity’s suicide. And when at the end Gaspar, shattered by Alma’s death in the oven, and by his own success in preserving the existence of Auschwitz, is approached by “the author of Moiety,” the godlike universal intelligence, and offered what amounts to a technological version of the Judgment Day, he reacts with revulsion and violence. He will not accept a consolation of meaning, because any such consolation is a betrayal of Alma’s ashes. “He’d cling to his own damnation. At least it was his” (314).

The consistency of master-narrative is rejected in favor of the fragmentation of grieving. As the master-plot disintegrates, the black hole comes to the fore as the only appropriate figure for the Holocaust. Alma’s metaphor, irreducible to any general scheme of reasonableness, is the one that remains: “She saw it as a great shadow, falling across history from its point of origin, distorting everything it touched. . . . The shadow grows as time passes, tainting and debasing all it contacts, even the Moiety itself” (32).

And later Alma, already a prisoner in the camp, explains it to an uncomprehending Jewish girl: “That’s what history is, you know—a vast wheel churning out death and horror and blood. . . . The way it was, is, will be. Right until the final state. . . . Oh yes: this is the center. Right here. This camp. It does not get worse than here, ever. This is the end point, the final exit, the axle of the Wheel” (217–18).

At this point the novel, which strives to reconcile the piety of silence and the judgment of storytelling, lapses into incoherence. Falling back on the irreducible paradox of the physical black hole, it seems to be content to display its own narrative mutilation as the unavoidable badge of violence.

However, as a popular fiction, the novel still has one option left. Its characters, living in a fictional world where trauma and memory become physical objects, can act upon them with a physical force. And act they do. If neither words nor silence can cope with trauma, perhaps actions can. The time travel solidifies history into the “continuum,” but at the same time opens it up to revision. This paradox is incarnated in the convention of the time loop or chronoclasm: actions in the past may affect the present and thus cancel themselves out. Like memory, the past in time-travel science fiction is simultaneously solid, inescapable, immutable, and pliant, vulnerable, open to revision. Alma sets out to rewrite the narrative of history by closing the black hole of
genocide: “They’ll track us, sure enough. Run us down eventually. But they’ll have to take us upline then... To the final state? The real power? What a scary thought that is. But at least then I’ll find out what they’re actually up to. What it all means, what they aren’t telling us.”

Her actions are on an epic scale, the undertaking of a hero who is trying to force the hand of God. She is perceived as a larger-than-life figure, able to inspire a dedicated band of followers to accompany her in her harrowing of hell. She is a saint, says another monitor, “a saint without a deity, without a church,” responsible only to the prompting of her own conscience. It almost looks, in fact, as if she is about to manufacture her own brand of the sublime, to oppose transcendent atrocity with transcendent self-sacrifice.

However, once in Auschwitz, Alma becomes merely another prisoner, an ordinary human being whose strength is broken by the machinery of death. All her superior powers are useless against the Lager. Ironically, her most potent weapon is not some supergadget but mundane greenbacks with which she manages to bribe wardresses and minor officials, thus participating in the sordid economy of the camp, which Primo Levi calls “the complex network of thefts and counter-thefts.” But the money soon runs out, and Alma, the product of an unimaginably advanced civilization, is subjected to the routine process of abuse and dehumanization. She is beaten, starved, and finally burnt—like everybody else.

Before her death, however, Alma’s goals have shifted. She still dreams of the grand melodrama of the camp liberation, fire from the sky falling upon the murderers, the prisoners led to freedom through the benevolent black hole of a temporal portal which will cancel out the black hole of death. But what she actually does, in the weeks before her murder, is to take care of the inmates of her block. Against all rational considerations, and jeopardizing her own master plan, she decides to preserve one girl’s pregnancy and allow a healthy baby to be born in the camp. The baby is born and thrown into the oven, while the mother is killed with a phenol injection.

In his book on the morality in the concentration camp universe, Todorov wrestles with the dilemma of whether what he calls the heroic virtues of hopeless rebellion and self-sacrifice, or the ordinary virtues of individual caring and preservation of dignity, are of more value in counteracting atrocity. He comes to the conclusion that caring for an individual human being is morally superior to a sacrifice in the name of an abstract cause. Alma’s story seems to confirm this conclusion. But it also starkly outlines the limits of ordinary virtues, the same limits that are pointed out by Primo Levi and Jean Améry. Alma does not succeed in saving anybody, including herself; even Rebeka, her protégé, survives only because of a spontaneous and unexpected act of kindness on the part of the SS man Reber. Neither the heroic rebellion...
against the master narrative of history nor the microethics of caring and compassion are of much use when facing Auschwitz. Even the third venue of resistance, justice, while seemingly endorsed by Reber’s death vision of the “Moiety of the righteous,” is undercut, as Gaspar contemptuously slams the phone on the Universe’s would-be supreme judge.

Days of Cain transposes into narrative aporia the postmodern paradoxes of the violent sublime, successively undermining all possible epistemological, discursive, and moral frameworks for dealing with genocide. But it does tell a story. Moreover, within the text itself, storytelling is presented as the only activity that resists the destructive pull of the black hole. Before the final abdication, Gaspar writes a tale for his granddaughter. It is about the Great Wheel of cruelty and violence:

rolling across history through all the periods and epochs, never seen or described, known only by the desolation it left behind. Only two could stand against it: the saint and the monitor, a young woman and a man of first age, bound by oath never to rest until the wheel was broken at last. They possessed powers, these two; they moved behind the curtains of space and time, always a step ahead of the wheel, always turning it aside, leading the victims from Judaea, and the steppes, and Ireland, and the camps, to the one safe place, the sanctuary guarded by their friends the flickering clouds. And though the battle was never finished and victory far away, they were very happy. . . . (313)

Novels, films, comic strips, fairy tales are the “event horizon” of the black hole of genocide. They cannot close it, but they can mark its boundaries and act as beacons of warning: here be monsters. By disregarding their warning and plunging straight into the voracious maw of the violent sublime, traumatic memory courts the infinity of second-hand suffering. Perhaps it risks an even worse fate: the infinity of boredom.