

TOWARDS A POSTMODERN ETHICS:

Representation, Memory, Responsibility

*With particular reference to literature of the Holocaust,
Communist Czechoslovakia and Apartheid South Africa*

Jeremy David Rumney Hall

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Glasgow

Faculty of Arts

April 1999

ABSTRACT

This thesis draws analogies between three twentieth-century ideologies – the Holocaust, Communist Czechoslovakia and South African Apartheid -, examining ways in which particular literary texts deconstruct the political and ethical consequences of philosophical closure and open up the possibility of a recovery of theological language.

The Introduction places my argument within the context of contemporary ethical thinking and discusses the work of philosophers from both the 'analytic' and 'continental' traditions who are reacting against the philosophical search for a non-aporetic ethical code. I argue for the inadequacy of some contemporary 'narrative ethics' and the importance of an 'ethics of reading', drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida and J. Hillis Miller. I argue that J-F Lyotard's concern that we 'wage war on totality' and be 'witnesses to the unrepresentable' is fundamentally an ethical concern and that here the novelist and creative writer have a crucial role to play.

Chapter 1 is a methodological chapter, which considers the consequences of ideological and evolutionary thinking in terms of memory and forgetting. The chapter draws in particular on Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* and Jacques Derrida's reading of Emmanuel Levinas, 'Violence and Metaphysics'. I argue that Derrida's understanding of 'writing' is significant if we are to avoid the negative consequences of ideology and, in the name of justice, pursue a genuine anamnesis.

Chapter 2 begins with an analysis of the ideology of the 'Final Solution' and examines the ethical issues raised by Holocaust testimony. These issues are explored in terms of film and, in particular, the writing of Elie Wiesel. I argue that the incomprehensibility of the Holocaust is not rendered in mimetic terms but through the textures and devices of texts which seek to be responsible witnesses to the unrepresentable. It is for this reason that much Holocaust testimony has drawn on the Jewish tradition of midrash, where meaning is produced in the relationship between texts.

In **Chapter 3** I reflect on the relationship between law and justice, taking as my starting-points Václav Havel's essay 'The Power of the Powerless' and Ivan Klíma's novel *Judge on Trial*. I argue that these works, written under the pressure of Soviet Communism, call for an *aporetic* or paradoxical relationship between law and justice such as that envisaged in Derrida's recent writing.

Chapter 4 explores the ideology of Apartheid and, in particular, its use of scripture. As in the preceding chapters, I explore the ethical possibilities of literature in destabilising the artificial boundaries set in place by Apartheid, and offer readings of Derrida's essay on Nelson Mandela, Nadine Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me* and André Brink's *A Dry White Season*.

The Conclusion revisits the central themes of the thesis and explores in a preliminary way possible implications for democracy, national identity, philosophy and the university, as well as the theological resonances in postmodern discourse.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am extremely grateful to the Keswick Hall Trustees (University of East Anglia) for the award of a bursary which enabled me to undertake this research, and for their support and encouragement. For much of the period of this study, I have been employed as a teacher at Hutchesons' Grammar School, Glasgow, and I would like to record my appreciation of the Rector's support and flexibility in allowing me to attend conferences and study for a period abroad.

I was fortunate in having the opportunity in 1995 to study for a month at Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia and I am most grateful to Professor Robert Detweiler for making this possible. The conversations I had during that time were important in the development of my thesis and I am grateful to all those who listened and offered advice, particularly Deborah Lipstadt, Walter Lowe and Jean-François Lyotard.

I have valued opportunities to present aspects of this work at conferences and seminars – 'Film and Religious Persecution' (Glasgow Film Theatre, March 1996); 'Charting Literary Anthropology' (the University of Tel-Aviv, April 1996); 'Literature and Ethics' (the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, July 1996); the Conference of Literature and Theology (Oxford, September 1996). The responses to these papers and my ongoing involvement in the Centre for the Study of Literature, Theology and the Arts at Glasgow, have been enormously helpful.

Finally, I would like to thank Professor David Jasper for so many stimulating conversations, his constant support, patience and encouragement.

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INTRODUCTION

A decision which didn't go through the ordeal of the undecidable would not be a free decision, it would only be the programmable application or unfolding of a calculable process. It might be legal; it would not be just.¹

We are speaking here with names (event, decision, responsibility, ethics, politics...) of 'things' that can only exceed (and *must* exceed) the order of theoretical determination, of knowledge, certainty, judgment, and of statements in the form of 'this is that', in other words, more generally and essentially, the order of the *present* or of *presentation*. Each time they are reduced to what they must exceed, error, recklessness, the unthought, and irresponsibility are given the so very presentable face of good conscience.²

Jean-François Lyotard's influential study *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) concludes with a now famous characterisation of 'the postmodern' which is crucial to my own understanding of postmodernism, its ethical concerns and possibilities:

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.³

¹ Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"', in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (eds.), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p.24.

² Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), p.81.

³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), tr. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), p.81.

Although the key term of *The Postmodern Condition* was 'legitimation', Lyotard's concern that we 'wage war on totality' and be 'witnesses to the unrepresentable'⁴ is fundamentally an *ethical* concern. The dominant traditions in normative ethical theory, at least since the Enlightenment, have presupposed that moral phenomena exhibit a *unity* or totality that can be adequately represented by hierarchical arrangements of moral principles. Traditionally, ethics, as the investigation of the *nomos* of conduct, has been seen as a branch of philosophy. It has had to offer a theory which would provide a basis for the principles guiding our moral behaviour. The theory was to start from a particular perspective (humankind, nature, God, reason) transcending the inconsistency of individual practices. It would thus be able to generate universal normative principles to correct the many imperfections of individual existence. Frans De Wachter distinguishes two types of such theory, characterising them as an '*ethic of discovery*' and an '*ethic of design or arrangement*'.⁵ An ethic of discovery involves a search for an already existing foundation, an aspect of reality which can serve to ground an ethical relation. Particular empirical criteria are sought, such as Bentham's famous 'hedonistic utilitarianism' -

Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we should do.⁶

- or particular *ontological* criteria - a Thomist sense of the rationality of the created order, an *ordo rerum*. According to an ethic of design or arrangement, we do not seek the rationality in things *as they are*, but *as we arrange them*. In this view, we must seek a world which *everyone* would seek, were they not contaminated by particular prejudices or parochial interests. Frans De Wachter writes,

In these two versions, it makes little difference whether reason is situated in the subject or the object, or whether we discover or design.

⁴ Ibid., p.82.

⁵ Frans De Wachter, 'Post-Modern Challenges to Ethics', in *Ethical Perspectives* 1 (1994), 78.

⁶ Jeremy Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789), ed. J.H. Burns and H.L.A. Hart (London: Methuen, 1982), I.1

Searching for what a person is, the laws of being human, searching for the way of living that is acceptable to every way of living, searching for a bond that surpasses all individual interests, a humanity that surpasses social roles, wanting a world that everyone would want, or, even, being addressed by the language of suffering, a language surpassing every local usage: whoever can do all this - the Christian personalist or Kantian humanist, the existentialist, the utilitarian humanist - thinks that the moral person must be oriented toward super-personal principles and that ethics has the duty to justify these principles. Today, we call all these forms 'modernist' or 'rationalist' ethics. Ethical insights are then the insights with which all rational people, under ideal circumstances, would agree.⁷

According to such theories, actions are seen to be right or wrong in terms of a prior stipulation as to what is to count as 'the good'. *Deontologists* follow the Platonic tradition of assuming some things to be good in their own right whereas *consequentialists* assume that some things are good because of what happens later because of them. Even many so-called 'narrative ethicists' believe some stories are more worth heeding than others and they offer criteria for distinguishing good from bad stories.

In all such theories, the concern is for conflict-resolution, and about admitting of no contradictions, except conflicts amenable to, and awaiting, resolution.⁸ The Enlightenment search for firm rules and solid foundations drew its impetus from a faith in the feasibility and ultimate triumph of the humanist project. The hope was that a society free from irremovable contradictions, a society pointing the way to correct solutions, could be built eventually, given enough time and good will. In other words, the moral thought and practice of the Enlightenment was based on the belief in the possibility of a non-ambivalent, *non-aporetic* ethical code.

⁷ Frans De Wachter, op.cit.

⁸ In a series of books, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989) *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991) and *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), Zygmunt Bauman explores the illusions and dangers of the Enlightenment project, in terms of 'the belief that the "messiness" of the human world is but a temporary and repairable state, sooner or later to be replaced by the orderly and systematic rule of reason' (p.32, *Modernity and the Holocaust*).

This search for an overarching view of human nature or moral action, as a foundation for ethics, has recently been subject to sustained critique from a variety of quarters - Anglo-American analytic philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Bernard Williams and Martha Nussbaum, French 'post-structuralists' such as Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard, Pragmatists such as Richard Rorty, feminists and liberationists.⁹

Alasdair MacIntyre, for example, describes the way in which contemporary moral debate is characterised by interminable disagreements based on conflicting, and incommensurable, moral theories - for example, an impasse between deontologists and consequentialists, the right to life versus the right to choose, public morality versus freedom of expression, individual freedom versus the good of all.¹⁰ There seems to be no rational way of securing agreement. Every one of the arguments is logically valid, the conclusions following from the premises, but the rival premises are such that there seems no rational way of weighing the claims of one against another. Thus, according to MacIntyre, contemporary culture is characterised by a kind of emotivism in ethics, where argument relapses quickly into prejudiced disagreement.¹¹

My thesis, particularly influenced by writings of Derrida and Lyotard¹², is that 'ethics', conceived as a non-aporetic moral theory, not only assumes an impossible objectivity (in

⁹ Dwight Furrow's recent book *Against Theory: Continental and Analytical Challenges in Moral Philosophy* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995) examines features shared by Analytic and Continental ethical theories.

¹⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a study in moral theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, chapter 2. MacIntyre describes the way in which, with the Enlightenment, ethics became distinguished from the theological and the aesthetic and a central concern became establishing an independent rational justification of morality. What our culture has witnessed is the inevitable breakdown of this project.

¹² Particularly Derrida's recent writings on law and justice, democracy, apartheid in South Africa, and education.

See 'Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority', in Drucilla Cornell (ed.), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 3-67.

The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992)

Derrida's terms, it assumes an *hors-texte*, or neutral perspective), but threatens the *singularity* of the ethical encounter, as the singular obligation is preconceived and dissolved in the universal. Such an understanding of ethics involves an imposition of preconceived notions rather than engagement with specific obligations. In these terms, ethics is not a matter of decision - it is merely a 'programmable application or unfolding of a calculable process' - and as such is irresponsible.¹³ Such theories are essentially reductive, eliminating ambivalence, or conflict between two decisions, making the moral agent secure by providing her with a way of defining and limiting obligations to others, who become subject to conceptual categories. Such theoretical approaches therefore fail to do justice to the immediacy and incomprehensibility of the ethical demand.¹⁴ As John D. Caputo has written:

'The Laws of Reflection: Nelson Mandela, in Admiration', in *For Nelson Mandela*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Mustapha Tlili (New York: Seaver Books, 1987).

Specters of Marx (London and New York: Routledge, 1994)

'The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils', in *Diacritics*, Fall 1993, 3-20.

Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and 'the jews'*, tr. Andreas Michel and Mark Roberts (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990)

I am indebted to the following works which pursue the possibility of a 'postmodern ethics':

Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993)

Richard Beardsworth, *Derrida and the Political* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996)

John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993)

Drucilla Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992)

Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992)

Dwight Furrow, *Against Theory: Continental and Analytic Challenges in Philosophy* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995)

Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (eds.), *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987)

Stephen K. White, *Political Theory and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991)

Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990)

¹³ See footnote 1.

¹⁴ This has been the case with regard to the tradition of *theodicy*, which has sought to dissolve the "problem of evil" by producing a justificatory narrative. The scandal of suffering is dissolved in the general discourse. It is a tradition ironised, for example, in Voltaire's *Candide* and Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, literature which refuses to allow the suffering of innocents to be "justified" by some overall plan or future resolution. To "resolve" the problem of evil in this way is essentially forgetful and, as I shall argue in chapter 2, calls for an appreciation of "textuality" or the excess of experience over interpretation. The example of Holocaust testimony, such as that of Elie Wiesel, with its sense of the ongoing and inexhaustible responsibility to tell stories, precisely runs counter to traditional theodicy.

Let us take the case - let us 'begin with' the case - of a disaster, of a damaged life, of an irretrievable loss, of innocent avoidable suffering, a case where we cannot easily blame the victim for his or her destitute condition, say, of a child born with AIDS. Such a child, on my accounting, 'lays claim' to us, 'seizes' us, without needing (and without having) a prior theory of the Good in virtue of which we can adjudicate this to be (an) evil.¹⁵

Such prior theories of 'the Good' imply the possibility of objectivity - the belief that it is possible to judge from a point of view representing all moral agents. For example, Kant reduced the contingency of experience by positing a part of the self that is independent of space and time, and thus not dependent upon contingent private ends. Utilitarianism achieved similar results by claiming to speak from the point of view of an ideally clairvoyant, disinterested observer. As Dwight Furrow, following Heidegger, points out, a number of basic presuppositions made by most ethical theories are also basic to traditional scientific methodology.

Most important among these is the notion that the object domain can be understood to exhibit a relatively fixed, unified nature. This presupposition motivates the adoption of three methodological assumptions: (1) that diverse phenomena can be ultimately understood or explained by a few integrated, fundamental principles or laws; (2) the principles or laws must be universal; and (3) the credibility of inquiry depends on the duplication of results by any competent observer.¹⁶

The assumption here is that the world can match, and be encompassed by, our reasoning about it¹⁷, that it is possible, for example, adequately to represent 'justice' or 'morality'. In

See, for example, David Jasper, *The Study of Literature and Religion: An Introduction* (London: Macmillan, 1989), chapter 9.

¹⁵ John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics*, pp.36-37.

¹⁶ Dwight Furrow, *op.cit.*, p.3.

¹⁷ There has been a distinctive emphasis in modernity on a particular way in which human beings should relate to the world. In early modern thinkers such as Descartes and Hobbes, one sees this relation beginning to emerge clearly. The individual subject is conceived as an isolated mind and will, whose vocation is to bring the world under the control of reason and thus make it available for human projects. The modern world, according to Descartes, stands under the imperative of giving a rational account of everything or, as Foucault puts it, of *interrogating* everything.

these terms, to say that an action is justified is to say that it conforms to what morality or justice really is. A justified action is one which represents an ideal model or essence. This assumes that morality and justice can be characterised independently of what moral agents actually do. 'The description which the theorist provides is of a largely absent state of affairs that agents are enjoined to make present through their actions.'¹⁸ According to Judith Shklar, the dominant tendency in philosophy has seen justice as the datum of analysis and injustice as a secondary, or derivative, phenomenon. She argues that this tendency should be reversed - that injustice should be seen as the central and ineliminable feature of the world because 'we simply cannot know enough about men or events to fulfil the demands of justice'.¹⁹

Literature and Ethics

I shall argue that literature has the capacity to register this excess of experience over interpretation, since it starts 'from below', concerned with particular narratives of particular lives.²⁰ Caputo writes,

We seem to have been forsaken by both Being and the Good and we toss back and forth between incommensurable discourses and interminable disputes about the Good. That is why I want to start from below, with the multiple disasters (evils) by which we are daily visited, with broken bodies and damaged lives, with the sort of things that are more manifest to our batlike eyes. Whether or not there is some supreme Good up the deep ascent, one that would give us the logos to define Evil as its privative lack, whether there is some transcendental high ground from which we could survey the multiple evils that everywhere beset us, from which we could point our accusatory, transcendental fingers - those are questions for which I have neither the time nor the patience. It is like waiting for the master plan of the city to come in while freezing to death in the meantime'.²¹

¹⁸ Dwight Furrow, *op.cit.*, p.2.

¹⁹ Judith Shklar, 'Giving Justice its Due', *Yale Law Journal*, vol.98, April 1989, p.1135.

²⁰ Which is why, for example, John Caputo prefers to speak of a 'poetics of obligation' rather than 'ethics'. See Caputo, *Against Ethics*.

²¹ John D. Caputo, *op.cit.*, pp.32-33.

Heidegger's refusal, in his Letter on Humanism, to complete his thought with a work on ethics, witnesses an ethical refusal of ethics, since philosophical ethics becomes anthropocentric or subjectivist by definition. If we confirm something as value, it becomes an object of 'human's estimation'. We rob it of

The task of Holocaust testimony, which will be discussed in Chapter 2, is to bear witness to the events in such a way that particular memories are rescued from the anonymity of the Nazi discourse, without trivialising these events or imposing narrative order upon them. In such testimony, what is *not* said is often as important as what *is* said. Elie Wiesel has stated that in each of his novels 'I take one character ... and give him a refuge, a book, a tale, a name, a destiny of his own ...'²² He insists that one cannot tell *the* story of the Holocaust; all one can do is register *fragments* of memory, the stories of particular personalities and particular events. He begins one of his articles, 'Let us tell tales. Let us tell tales, all the rest must wait. Let us tell tales - that is our primary obligation. Commentaries will have to come later, lest they replace or becloud what they mean to reveal'.²³ In Lyotard's terms, the Holocaust writer seeks to 'put forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself', to register an excess of experience over interpretation.²⁴ A feature characteristic of much Holocaust writing, which will be discussed in Chapter 2, is its rhetorical use of midrashic intertextuality - a subtle and jarring allusion to biblical narratives, which serves to register horror and incomprehensibility - a sense that the Holocaust cannot be integrated into antecedent perspectives.²⁵

Chapter 3 will discuss the importance of dissident literature in the former Soviet bloc, focusing on Václav Havel's and Ivan Klíma's experiences of Czech Communism.

Following in the tradition of Dostoevsky and Bakhtin, they celebrate the novel as 'polyphony', characterised by a multiplicity of voices, none of which is subjected to the

its 'worth: valuing does not let beings be'. In other words, for Heidegger, ethics involves establishing false objectivity and distancing oneself from beings.

²² Harry J. Cargas in *Conversation with Elie Wiesel* (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), p.3.

²³ Elie Wiesel, 'Art and Culture after the Holocaust', in Eva Fleischner (ed.), *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1974), p.403.

²⁴ Footnote 3.

²⁵ See, for example, David Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1984).

control of an authoritative authorial voice.²⁶ The novel can offer a variety of time, space, action, character, and perspective, which problematise the absolutism of ideology. As Milan Kundera has written, one of the virtues of the novel is that it fosters the wisdom of uncertainty. Characters are not all-good or all-bad; situations can be viewed from multiple perspectives. Kundera writes,

Man desires a world where good and evil can be clearly distinguished, for he has an innate and irrepressible desire to judge before he understands. Religions and ideologies are founded on this desire. They can cope with the novel only by translating its language of relativity and ambiguity into their own apodictic and dogmatic discourse. They require that someone be right: either Anna Karenina is the victim of a narrow-minded tyrant, or Karenin is the victim of an immoral woman; either K. is an innocent man crushed by an unjust Court, or the Court represents divine justice and K. is guilty.²⁷

Reading works of literature may promote consciousness of a surplus of meaning, awareness that a text offers more than the mind can absorb and interpret. Metaphor and inter-textuality epitomise this surplus, joining meanings together, adding to the excess. This is the significance of Derrida's style. He composes rich, lush 'overfull' texts which overlap with other texts, an excess of allusion and multi-lingual pun.

Robert Detweiler writes:

The text in this view is seen as an incredibly rich cache of meaning from which we are able to grasp and project only small portions at a time. Yet because we sense that there is much more than we can receive and channel, we remain always dissatisfied with our knowledge and interpretation of the text: in a crucial way it remains hidden and uninterpreted.²⁸

²⁶ See Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, tr. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984)

²⁷ Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, tr. Linda Asher (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) Kundera follows Husserl in his characterisation of the crisis of European humanity. He describes the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century, '...which reduced the world to a mere object of technical and mathematical investigation and put the concrete world of life, *die Lebenswelt*, as he called it, beyond their horizon (p.3, *The Art of the Novel*). Kundera sees Cervantes, that other founder of the modern era, as representative of 'a great European art...that is nothing other than the investigation of this forgotten being' (ibid., pp.4-5). Kundera contrasts what he calls 'Totalitarian Truth' with the spirit of the novel (ibid., p.14).

²⁸ Robert Detweiler, *Breaking the Fall: Religious Readings of Contemporary Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p.39.

In J. Hillis Miller's terms, becoming a good reader implies genuflecting before 'unreadability' as the universal law of language.²⁹ Miller argues that the study of literature (much as the study of ethics) has often been an attempt to find objectivity, or gain mastery over the text, seeking determinate readings through, for example, study of historical and social contexts, 'measuring and ascertaining...the meaning of the text by something nontextual outside that text: God or some other transcendent power, society, history, economic conditions, the psychology of the author, the "original" of the text in "real life"'.³⁰ Yet it is impossible to get outside the limits of language by means of language. For Hillis Miller, following Paul de Man, the reader therefore has the "impossible", though no less necessary, task of *reading unreadability*.

Literature, then, may foster a sense of mystery, the incomprehensible, the undecidable, which, though suppressed by traditional ethical theory, may be the very responsibility of ethics. As Derrida writes,

A decision which didn't go through the ordeal of the undecidable would not be a free decision, it would only be the programmable application or unfolding of a calculable process. It might be legal; it would not be just.³¹

²⁹ J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) cf. Lyotard's notion of the 'Postmodern Sublime' - a recognition of the painful inadequacy of our faculty for presentation *and* pleasure in our capacity to imagine ideas beyond their direct presentation. He argues that in the sublime we find a form of *anamnesis* of the relation of all thought to the unknown. See Lyotard, 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde', in Thomas Docherty (ed.), *Postmodernism: A Reader* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp. 244-257. According to Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, we experience the sublime when the imagination cannot find forms of representation adequate to its conceptions, or when we find ourselves confronting an idea for which we can find no adequate example. These circumstances produce the ambiguity of a pleasure that derives from the painful experience of reason when faced with its own limit; they generate a shudder of pain which is a source of elevation. See also Anthony J. Cascardi, *The Subject of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp.289-90

³⁰ J. Hillis Miller, *op.cit.*, pp.5-6.

³¹ Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"', in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (eds.), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p.24.

In chapters 2, 3 and 4 I shall explore the ethical consequences of three twentieth-century political ideologies - the Nazi 'Final Solution', Communist Czechoslovakia and Apartheid South Africa -, all of which were attempts to unify human society according to hierarchical arrangements of moral principles, assuming an objective perspective from which 'justice' and 'injustice' might be presented. I shall argue that these ideologies, which were premised on a *meta*-language, bring into focus the need for a post-structuralist understanding of *writing* as a practice which is endless and irreducible to some single perspective.

The 'Final Solution', Communism and Apartheid may all be regarded as *utopias* which, like all utopias, become dystopic in the attempt at their realisation. *Utopia* was originally a fundamentally satirical notion ('utopos' meaning 'no place'), highlighting the impossibility of a 'perfect' social order. This is true of Plato's Myth of Atlanta in *Timaeus* and of Thomas More's classic 1516 *Utopia*. While Marx and Engels emphasised utopianism's positive function of relativising existing social reality, they nevertheless criticised its lack of a thorough comprehension and analysis of current society that alone would make concrete political action possible. It is the fact that it has been believed possible to *realise* utopia which has made *dystopia* inevitable. In his discussion of Rousseau in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida exposes the utopian assumptions of Rousseau's 'social contract', where writing is viewed as a 'dangerous supplement', an addition to the 'natural' resources of speech.³² According to Rousseau, the living community of face-to-face contact had given way to a vast, impersonal network of social relations, a degenerate state of which writing is the product. As is well known, Derrida shows that Rousseau's small-scale organic community, where writing would not have worked its effects, is 'no place', since there is no *hors-texte*, no 'non-textual' or uninterpreted ground or

³² Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, tr. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1974), pp.141-164.

perspective. In his recent *Specters of Marx* (1994), Derrida contrasts the utopian with the messianic. The apostles of Marx, he argues, eliminated from Marxism a sense of the messianic, or a recognition that justice is always 'to come'; they confused law with justice.³³ In an interview with Richard Kearney, Derrida says that 'It is possible to see deconstruction as being produced in a space where the prophets are not far away... I am still looking for something... [in a] search without hope for hope... Perhaps my search is a twentieth-century brand of prophecy? But it is difficult for me to believe it'.³⁴

Zygmunt Bauman has argued that genocide is rooted in a particular construction of human virtue, a utopian vision desiring the elimination of chaos and disorder.³⁵ He sees the Holocaust as a rare test of the hidden possibilities of modern society. Racism comes into its own only in the context of a design of the perfect society and intention to implement the design through planned and consistent effort.³⁶ 'In the case of the Holocaust, the design was the thousand-year *Reich* - the kingdom of the liberated German Spirit. It was that kingdom which had no room for anything but the German Spirit. It had no room for the Jews, as the Jews could not be spiritually converted and embrace the Geist of the

³³ See Derrida, *Specters of Marx* and 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"', op.cit.

³⁴ Richard Kearney (ed.), *Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p.119. See also John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997). Caputo writes, 'deconstruction works the provocation of what is to come, *a venir*, against the complacency of the present, against the pleasure the present takes in itself, in order to prevent it from closing in on itself, from collapsing into self-identity' (p.xx). There is an important connection between justice and the notion of prophecy, which can be seen as a resistance to narrative closure and an affirmation of transcendence. There can thus be no prophets in utopia.

³⁵ See *Modernity and the Holocaust*, op.cit.

³⁶ In this view, the Holocaust was premised on a scientific reductionism. Bauman writes, 'Science was not to be conducted for its own sake; it was seen, first and foremost, as an instrument of awesome power allowing its holder to improve on reality, to re-shape it according to human plans and designs, and to assist it in its drive to self-perfection. Gardening and medicine supplied the archetypes of constructive stance, while normality, health or sanitation offered the archmetaphors for human tasks and strategies in the management of affairs. Human existence and cohabitation became objects of planning and administration; like garden vegetation or a living organism they could not be left to their own devices, lest should they be infested by weeds or overwhelmed by cancerous tissues' (p.70, *Modernity and the Holocaust*).

German *Volk*'.³⁷ In this conception of social engineering as a scientifically founded work aimed at the institution of a new and better order (a work which necessarily entails the containment and preferably elimination of any disruptive factors) racism was indeed resonant with the world-view and practice of modernity.

This is why for Emmanuel Levinas Auschwitz represents the failure of Western morality.

He writes:

The essential problem is: Can we speak of an absolute commandment after Auschwitz. Can we speak of morality after the failure of morality?³⁸

Levinas: The Trace of the Other

My thesis is premised upon a definition of ethics found in the writings of Emmanuel Levinas and developed, for example, by Jacques Derrida.³⁹

For Levinas, ethics is not concerned with our capacity for understanding or representation.

As Richard Cohen puts it,

'...ethics never *was* or *is* anything. Ethics does not have an essence, its "essence", so to speak, is precisely not to have an essence, to unsettle essences. Its "identity" is precisely not to have an identity, to undo identities ... Ethics is precisely ethics by disturbing the complacency of being (or of non-being, being's correlate). "To be or not to be," Levinas insists, is *not* the question.⁴⁰

It is in recognising the extent to which morality lies *beyond* our capacity for comprehension and understanding, in the claim imposed upon each moral agent by the incomprehensibility of suffering, that we sustain our capacity for moral judgement. To the

³⁷ Ibid., p.66.

³⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (New York: Routledge, 1988), p.156.

³⁹ See, for example, Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969) and *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985); Jacques Derrida's engagement with Levinas, 'Violence and Metaphysics' in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), pp.79-153; Derrida, 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"', op.cit; Jean-Francois Lyotard. *Heidegger and the Jews*, op.cit.

⁴⁰ Richard A. Cohen. in his introduction to Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, op.cit., p.10.

extent that human beings see themselves as autonomous subjects, able to bring reality under rational control, they are diminished in their capacity to respond ethically.

Levinas' writing involves a recognition of the 'hermeneutic circle'. Our conceptual framework means that we can only be affected by the world in ways that we have already anticipated and understood. Reality is, in a sense, possessed by the subject prior to its encounter with it. According to Levinas, Western ethical thinking since the Enlightenment has attempted to reduce moral experience to understanding by supplying a unified moral perspective. In Levinas' terms, understanding is a form of self-assertion, which misconstrues our capacity for moral judgement. Against this 'egology', as he calls it, he argues that we find ourselves always confronted by something that escapes the grasp of our concepts and undermines the autonomy of our actions - the 'other', that is one's moral relationship with another person.

Levinas' perspective involves a reappraisal of our understanding of time and memory.⁴¹

Traditionally, our experience of time has been understood as a synthesis of protentions and retentions, anticipations of a future linked to memories of the past, all of which are given coherence by a subject which experiences these moments in the present. The past is reduced to knowledge, a memory of what once happened represented in the current understanding of a subject. Yet for Levinas this understanding of time cannot account for the fact that when we encounter another person, we do not meet as contemporaries.

...time is not a simple experience of duration, but a dynamism which leads us elsewhere than toward the things we possess.⁴²

The time of the other is not the same as our own temporality. The alterity of the Other opens us up to an infinite future beyond our projections and reveals an infinite past beyond

⁴¹ See Levinas, *Time and the Other* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987).

⁴² Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p.61.

memory. The past of the Other, as well as the past of the subject, is something that in principle can never be recovered by consciousness, despite our best recollections. This dimension of the past that cannot be recovered by consciousness is referred to as the *immemorial*. Thus, we in effect live within two temporal frames - that of retention and protention, giving the illusion of synchrony and simultaneity, and the duration of diachronic time which leaves its traces but can never be fully represented. Beyond our powers of interpretation lies the alterity of an unrepresentable past and an unpredictable future recognisable only by its trace, which Levinas will argue is ultimately the trace of the other.⁴³ So time for Levinas is not merely part of consciousness. Time is a dimension that transcends experience and comprehension. It is only the encounter with the Other that brings into proximity the infinity of past and future. It is our encounter with others that gives rise to the meaning of time as not our own - as the infinite future and the immemorial past.

The ideologies I shall be discussing in the following chapters present time as a single narrative - the progress of the German *Reich*, the Communist class struggle, or the 'official' Afrikaner history of South Africa. Such historical narratives are a way of banishing difference and preconceiving the future. Ethically it becomes necessary to combat these narratives, in a writing which bears witness to the *immemorial*, a future of infinite renewal and a past of infinite obligation.

For Levinas alterity presents itself in the face of another human being. When we define others in terms of the roles they perform within societies (which in ideologies are carefully defined and prescribed), or describe them in physical or aesthetic terms, these are all ways of looking at another person as an instance of our understanding, as modifications of

⁴³ 'Trace' here means that something is deposited in experience but not clearly denoted.

ourselves, as actors within our particular social world. Levinas argues that the face of the Other also expresses something completely alien, other than me and other than all others. It expresses itself as radical singularity and absolute alterity. As an expression of absolute alterity and radical singularity, the Other cannot be grasped by familiar categories and is beyond my capacity for assimilation or comprehension.

The face is signification, and signification without context. I mean that the Other, in the rectitude of his face, is not a character within a context. Ordinarily one is a "character": a professor at the Sorbonne, a Supreme Court justice, son of son-and-so, everything that is in one's passport, the manner of dressing, of presenting oneself. And all signification in the usual sense of the term is relative to such a context: the meaning of something is in its relation to another thing. Here, to the contrary, the face is meaning all by itself. You are you. In this sense one can say that the face is not "seen". It is what cannot become a content, which your thought would embrace; it is uncontainable, it leads you beyond.⁴⁴

The face of the Other confronts me as the face of a stranger who disrupts my ordinary ways of experiencing the world. When confronted with the vulnerability of the Other, the self-interested, dominating ego is placed in question, dispossessed, and the Other appears not as an instance of my capacity for understanding but as a genuine Other, incomprehensible to the structures of rational thought.

For Levinas, the meaning of the ethical relation is that it exists in the capacity to resist any completion, to oppose what *is* with a future of infinite renewal and a past of infinite obligation. In these terms, ethical theories which seek to define the nature of obligation according to firm rules and solid foundations are fundamentally misconceived. Our obligations are inexhaustible, and only this recognition preserves our capacity to resist complicity with the dominion of evil. To resist naked self-interest is the practical expression of the resistance to the discovery of the Same in the Other. The burden of ethics, then, is to express in our conduct this capacity for resistance and transcendence,

⁴⁴ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, pp.86-87.

which ultimately involves acting on the value of love without reward. Such resistance and transcendence, akin to religious faith, involves acting independently of self-interest, giving without expectation of return. The Other is never the object of knowledge but is a perpetual questioning, and as such there can be no limit to the scope of responsibility.

Levinas' ethics represents an affirmation, an act of faith in the fundamental value and mystery of each human being. He affirms a value which transcends all experience, which is other than Being. Mystically, he indicates an absent presence, which is neither a phenomenon nor a product of cognition and must, by definition, resist logical demonstration. He posits the ethical imperative *prior to* the emergence of a constituted world - an irrecoverable past. Any attempt systematically to represent, or ground, ethics as the origin of subjectivity will therefore necessarily be self-refuting.

Derrida: Ethics and Writing

It is clear that Levinas' work has exerted a powerful and continuous influence on Derrida.⁴⁵ What Derrida finds in Levinas is an attempt to think the limits of the Western philosophical tradition. Against those who would dismiss Derridean 'deconstruction' as a form of relativistic and nihilistic free-play, Derrida's writings, like those of Levinas, represent an affirmation, an act of faith in the fundamental value and mystery of each human being, and a recognition of the violence which is the inevitable consequence of seeing the particular in the general.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ For a study of this relationship, see Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, op.cit.

⁴⁶ It is significant that so many of Derrida's works are 'occasional' pieces, and the marks of the occasion are often retained. This is true of the works I shall be discussing - a symposium on Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice, a tribute to Nelson Mandela, a colloquium on European Cultural Identity. An occasion is always both an irreducibly singular event and that which necessitates comparison, contextualisation and analysis.

Derrida's claim that there is no *hors-texte* (no outside to the text) has frequently been misrepresented as a claim that there is nothing beyond language.⁴⁷ Deconstruction is often seen as essentially negative, playfully undermining interpretations without being prepared to make any positive affirmations or political commitments. As Terry Eagleton puts it in his introduction to literary theory,

One advantage of the dogma that we are the prisoners of our own discourse, unable to advance reasonably certain truth-claims because such claims are merely relative to our language, is that it allows you to drive a coach and horses through everybody else's beliefs without saddling you with the inconvenience of having to adopt any yourself.⁴⁸

The fact that most philosophers and theologians have failed to take Derrida seriously is partly because literary critics, for example, the influential 'Yale School', have professionally annexed him as an anti-theologian and anti-philosopher.⁴⁹ However, when Derrida argues that there is no *hors-texte*, or outside to the text, the word 'text' is being used in the semiological sense of extended discourses, that is, *all* practices of interpretation which include, but are not limited to, language. In other words, Derrida is arguing that there is no uninterpreted perspective which will guarantee the legitimacy of a given philosophy or interpretation.⁵⁰ Thus, in the first chapter of *Of Grammatology*

⁴⁷ For example, in a recent issue of the *Heythrop Journal* Hugo Meynell writes: 'To sum the matter up, deconstruction is intrinsically and comprehensively subversive, fundamentally opposed to reason or God, destructive of objectivity outside the self, and undermining of the capacity of language to refer to anything' ('Archdeconstruction and Postpostmodernism', in *The Heythrop Journal*, April 1995, Vol.36, No.2, 128).

⁴⁸ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: an introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p.144.

⁴⁹ Critics of Postmodernism often fail to take account of the diversity within 'Postmodernism'. For example, in *Saints and Postmodernism*, op.cit., Edith Wyschogrod distinguishes between two kinds of post-structuralist theory - the heteromorphic kind represented by Deleuze, Guattari and Baudrillard, on the one hand, and that of Derrida and Lyotard, who have been influenced by the heteronomism of Levinas, on the other hand.

Deleuze, for example, defends a philosophy of Nietzschean pure affirmation, the affirmation of affirmation itself rather than of something else. This unencumbered willing and affirming means the free creation and invention of new values. The essence of willing and of the free spirit is to stay clear of heavy burdens. For Deleuze, totalisation is destroyed from within, by an uncontrollable dispersion which the system is helpless to contain, whereas for Levinas totalisation is destroyed from without, by an unencompassable other which throws the same into confusion.

⁵⁰ See 'Declarations of Independence', where Derrida discusses the act of violence involved in the founding of any State or Constitution (Derrida, 'Otobiographies', in *The Ear of the Other* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985, pp.1-38).

(1967), he argues for the end of 'the book', with its implication of narrative closure, and the beginning of *writing*. In Derrida, traditional commentary or hermeneutics - the search for a determinate meaning (or *hors-texte*) - is replaced by a characteristically Jewish emphasis on writing as an activity which is endless and irreducible to some supreme, self-evident truth. The point is that the emphasis on writing represents an affirmation of the excess of experience over interpretation, a recognition of the need to do justice to individuals while recognising that one is constrained by the structures of linguistic systems, which are about concepts and repetition.⁵¹ Nevertheless human beings have a responsibility to witness to 'otherness' in and through language. John D. Caputo expresses this Derridean problematic as follows:

On the one hand, we cannot speak about the individual, because the individual is ineffable and falls beneath the repeatable, universal terms in which language trades. On the other hand, we must talk about individuals - about people with proper names, e.g. - because the individual is the only thing that exists, and from time to time we desire that our discourse have something to do with what exists'.⁵²

Derrida's perspective therefore provides us with a re-characterised sense of universal moral agency (ironically, in view of the frequent charges of relativism).⁵³

The responsibility towards the other involves the struggle to create openings within which the other can appear beyond any of our programmes or predictions, can come to destroy what we know or think we know. Derrida has commented, 'I never cease to be surprised by critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language, that we

⁵¹ Derrida often speaks in theological terms of writing as a condition of the Fall.

⁵² John D. Caputo, *op.cit.*, p.73.

⁵³ Such a perspective will have an impact on an understanding of the language of identity and gender. For example, Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), argues for the importance of disrupting gender categories in unexpected and imaginative ways, so that they do not become solidified into permanent truths. In her view the project of feminism is to embody the fact that human life exceeds the bounds rational man has sought to impose, and to remind us of the sheer complexity and indefinability of human identity.

are imprisoned in language; it is, in fact, saying the exact opposite. The critique of logocentrism is above all else the search for the 'other' and the 'other of language'.⁵⁴

'Deconstruction' is an ongoing recognition of provisionality and excess, a concern to maintain the memory of that which is forgotten in the act of representation. The denseness and elliptical style of Derrida's writing, its allusiveness and use of pun are a celebration of excess and super-abundance, an act of faith in the redemptive power of language. Derrida's writing is thus, in Lyotard's words, testimony to the unrepresentable in presentation itself. It is clear that Derridean deconstruction is far from value-neutral. He has written recently that 'nothing seems...less outdated than the classical emancipatory ideal',⁵⁵ and while deconstruction represents an awareness that the language in which 'justice' and 'democracy' are formulated may fail to prevent injustices and oppression, Enlightenment values remain significant, as can be seen in Derrida's recent writings on justice and law, South Africa, Marxism.⁵⁶

In his recent work, Derrida has been particularly concerned to explore the ethical implications of deconstruction. Richard Kearney points out that, whereas before about 1972 Derrida's writings were more concerned with epistemology (though ethical implications were implied), since 1972 his intent has been more self-consciously 'ethical'.⁵⁷ Derrida is suspicious of the word 'ethics' because it implies a system of norms, rules, laws or values, which can be codified in a rigorous way and he is concerned with the violence involved in trying to construct a fully realised ethical form of life. Yet for Derrida there is

⁵⁴ Derrida, 'Deconstruction and the Other', in Richard Kearney (ed.), *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p.123

⁵⁵ Derrida, 'Force of Law', *op.cit.*, p.28.

⁵⁶ See footnote 12.

⁵⁷ See Richard Kearney, 'Derrida's Ethical Re-turn', in Gary B. Madison (ed.), *Working Through Derrida* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993), pp.28-50.

a kind of ethical need to be self-conscious about language and recognise its conventionality and insecurity. As we have seen in the various forms of totalitarianism this century, a language which is too secure can be extremely evil. According to Derrida, the Western politico-philosophical tradition of idealism has sought to construct a secure language and exclude, dominate or repress that which is different or other. Totalitarianism of the left and the right are political expressions of this governing ideology.⁵⁸ Language can mask, suppress, 'smooth over'. Since we perceive the world 'through' language, to allow language too great a security is to become morally blind.

All Derrida's work is an attempt to break away from the fatalism of philosophy built on static foundations, towards affirmation of possibility. As, again, he insists in his now famous interview with Richard Kearney, 'Deconstruction is not an enclosure in nothingness but an openness towards the other'.⁵⁹

Ethics and Narrative

Where Derrida's understanding of ethical responsibility differs from Alasdair MacIntyre's 'narrative ethics' or Richard Rorty's pragmatism, is that he provides us with a re-characterised sense of universal moral agency. Approaches like those of Alasdair MacIntyre, Bernard Williams, Richard Rorty and Martha Nussbaum offer diagnoses of the 'postmodern condition', each of them reacting against the Enlightenment quest for a unified ethical system. However, their narrative approaches are unable to avoid the problems of relativism.⁶⁰ The concern of these scholars is to abandon the quest for a unified ethical system, to recognise the difficulties in finding a consistent account of

⁵⁸ There is a close relationship between post-structuralism and the collapsing parameters of twentieth-century totalitarianism. Derrida sees structuralism - concerned with the codes and conventions of societal structures - as a form of philosophical totalitarianism, as an attempt to account for the totality of a phenomenon by reduction of it to a formula which governs it totally.

⁵⁹ Derrida, 'Deconstruction and the Other', *op.cit.*, p.124.

⁶⁰ Dwight Furrow, in his comparison of continental and analytic challenges in moral philosophy, makes a similar observation. See Dwight Furrow, *op.cit.*

morality which coheres with lived experience, while at the same time seeking criteria for judgement. The problem is posed in Bernard Williams' *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985).⁶¹ For Williams, the absence of a neutral standard of comparison against which competing moral beliefs can be measured means that we can never get outside the set of moral dispositions we have acquired through living in a particular culture and gain a genuinely independent perspective. Moreover, the attempt to find such neutral ground on moral questions might ultimately be destructive, in that it threatens to become an alien, dominating ideology destroying our capacity to exercise moral dispositions. Williams is committed to the belief that there are no moral facts independent of the beliefs of particular moral agents. However, if there is no external point of view from which to proceed, the only criteria available for the assessment of moral views will be drawn from the very beliefs and principles that are in question. There is no non-circular defense, no ultimate recourse to justifying one's moral beliefs. Williams, MacIntyre, Nussbaum and Rorty seek to address this problem through discussion of narrative. They believe that moral life takes the form of narrative and they emphasise the role of historical understanding or imaginative identification in recognising and acting upon moral obligations.

As we have seen, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that the history of philosophy since the Enlightenment is largely a history of interminable, unresolved disagreement. He describes the way in which contemporary moral debate is characterised by interminable disagreement based upon numerous conflicting, or incommensurable, procedures of justification. Every one of the arguments is logically valid and the conclusions follow from the premises, but the rival premises are such that we possess no rational way of weighing the claims of one against another. Incommensurability here refers to a disruption in

⁶¹ Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana Press, 1985).

communication across theories, vocabularies or perspectives which renders rational assessment difficult or impossible, and the absence of a set of criteria independent of the competing viewpoints being assessed.⁶² According to MacIntyre, it is the interminable nature of such debate which has led to the present climate of ethical/political cynicism. He argues that contemporary culture is characterised by a kind of emotivism in ethics, where argument relapses quickly into unargued disagreement. If there can be no rational way of judging between different philosophies, moral reasoning ends up being maintained by power, a kind of Nietzschean nihilism of conflicting and self-destructive power struggles.

Furthermore, MacIntyre is concerned that theory tends to disconnect reasons from motivational states. He is critical of the belief that ethics can be pursued outside the good life. For example, whereas deontology and consequentialism are concerned with the legitimation of *individual acts*, MacIntyre argues for a re-reading of Aristotle's ethics of virtue.⁶³

That particular actions derive their character as parts of larger wholes is a point of view alien to our dominant ways of thinking and yet one which it is necessary at least to consider if we are to begin to understand how a life may be more than a sequence of individual actions and episodes.⁶⁴

According to MacIntyre the Aristotelian virtues appreciate the habitual character of human action, that character, personal and social identity, depend upon inhabiting an historical narrative (and the commitments made over time) and a set of values. He believes that the emergence since the Reformation and the Enlightenment of the liberal individual, conceived of as abstracted from the particularities of character, history and circumstance, is fundamentally misguided. Obligation for MacIntyre is defined, at least in

⁶² The term 'incommensurability' gained currency in connection with the work of Kuhn and Feyerabend in the philosophy of science.

⁶³ One of the difficulties with such re-habilitations of 'Virtue Ethics' is that contemporary thinkers do not have available to them a credible version of the natural teleology which provides the basis for Aristotle's account of the virtues. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a study in moral theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981), p.196.

⁶⁴ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p.204.

part, in terms of the demands of social roles that make reference to the past. His principal complaint against modern individualism is the ease with which we put into question our attachments to the past. Desirable character traits will be those which allow us to recognise our place within the various social spheres and relationships which make up a particular form of life. He asserts that if we are to 'make sense' out of our lives – if we are to have moral integrity -, we must acknowledge that our aims and purposes are inherited from the social roles we occupy as a consequence of our history. That our individual narratives are embedded in the narratives of others, in part accounts for the unity of moral character. Thus, in MacIntyre's view, to be embedded in history is to discover the range of possibilities which inherited social roles make available, as well as the actions and qualities of character appropriate in the context of these social roles. Part of the point of this emphasis on narrative identity is to argue that social roles inevitably impose constraints on our choices, and to fail to take these seriously is to invite a loss of personal identity, a sense of meaninglessness and alienation from one's community.

MacIntyre writes:

We cannot...characterise behaviour independently of intentions, and we cannot characterise intentions independently of the settings which make those intentions intelligible both to agents themselves and to others.⁶⁵

Thus, in MacIntyre's perspective, to understand the binding character of morality, I need not discover or design anything; I am already in what I seek, I already have an ethical home. I cannot be bound by the abstraction 'humankind' or 'reason', but I am bound by the practices, codes and images which organise the historical life in which I am anchored.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Ibid., p.206.

⁶⁶ This emphasis on the importance of communal identity can be found, for example, in German hermeneutics (Gadamer's students), in American neo-pragmatism (Richard Rorty), in narrative theology (Stanley Hauerwas), in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, in communitarianism (Sandel, Walzer), in Bernard Williams' moral psychology, in Oakeshott's political philosophy, and the many authors, including MacIntyre and Nussbaum, who call upon Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* in their criticism of ethical rationalism.

My concern about MacIntyre's emphasis on narrative identity, the search for a coherent historical narrative regarding one's life and culture, is that it may lead to a form of moral blindness. In Levinas' terms, MacIntyre's understanding of history relies upon an essentially linear view of history. MacIntyre makes this explicit on page 219 of *After*

Virtue:

The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest...the only criteria for success or failure in a human life as a whole are the criteria of success or failure in a narrated or to-be-narrated quest.⁶⁷

Surely, though, such a view of narrative is ideological. How are we to understand obligations to 'the other', or those who owe allegiance to a different community or narrative? Moreover, the difficulty with any moral perspective taking history and tradition as the source of moral commitment is that it is open to the charge of relativism and narrowness of vision. Such approaches seem too parochial to capture the positive intuitions of our Enlightenment heritage, with its ideals of equality and justice for all. It is not clear how such narrative approaches avoid circularity and find resources for self-criticism and correction. If the only criteria available for judging which ends are appropriate are the very social roles at issue, it is not clear that MacIntyre allows room for the critical judgement required to open traditional social roles to new possibilities. Dwight Furrow puts the point like this:

The notion of immemorial time and the secret history concealed therein makes availing oneself of a preunderstanding of who one is in relation to a given social world implausible. The self, whether we understand it individually or collectively, is a topography of lost and missing pieces cobbled together by a systematically distorted narrative of the remains. The quest for social identity is just one more vain search for the solace of origins, perpetually contested and itself the source of injustice.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Similarly, on page 205 he writes of '...a concept of a self whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end'.

⁶⁸ Dwight Furrow, *op.cit.*, p.192.

Richard Kearney reminds us that 'Narrative memory is never innocent. It is an ongoing conflict of interpretations. A battlefield of competing meanings. Every history is told from a certain perspective and in the light of specific prejudice (at least in Gadamer's sense). Memory...can as easily lead to false

MacIntyre's critique of the Enlightenment tradition has been received very positively by many Christian ethicists, among them Stanley Hauerwas who develops a Christian 'narrative ethics'.⁶⁹

Robin Gill begins an article on 'Moral Communities and Christian Ethics',

For the moment the battle seems to have been largely won. Most exponents of Christian ethics today seem to agree that morality has a firm communitarian basis. The understanding of Christian ethics which was often held a generation ago - that it is a discipline concerned primarily with individual moral decision-making - seems to have been routed. The outrageous individualistic paradigms offered by 'situation ethicists' are now a dim memory. Most agree that it is virtue and character within Christian communities that should be the main concern of Christian ethics. There is even a new confidence within Christian ethics. After decades of being patronized by moral philosophy, Christian ethicists have become distinctly more apologetic and polemical. Christian ethicists also express increasing scepticism about the ability of moral philosophers to be able to resolve dilemmas with universally convincing rational arguments. In short, the key contentions of *After Virtue* have triumphed.⁷⁰

However, Hauerwas' approach suffers from a similarly impoverished view of narrative.

He tends to produce a theological understanding of churches as moral communities which underestimates the plurality of Christian resources, over-estimates the unity and cohesiveness of Christian communities, and takes insufficiently seriously the extent to which churches are influenced by the secular communities around them. The emphasis on community and cohesion through scripture tends to forget, as feminist and liberation

consciousness and ideological closure as to openness and tolerance. This distorting power is sometimes ignored by contemporary advocates of narrative ethics – MacIntyre, Nussbaum, Booth – who tend to downplay the need for a hermeneutic of critical suspicion...’ (Richard Kearney, 'Narrative and the Ethics of Remembrance', in *Questioning Ethics*, op.cit., p.27).

⁶⁹ See, for example, Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983) and *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

⁷⁰ Robin Gill, 'Moral Communities and Christian Ethics', in *Studies in Christian Ethics*, Vol.10, No.1, 1997, 1. Robin Gill goes on to argue that this picture often under-estimates some of the theological and sociological problems involved. 'It tends to produce a theological understanding of churches as moral communities which underestimates the synchronic and diachronic plurality of Christian resources' (2).

theologians remind us, that the stories of scripture may be told in different ways.⁷¹ As Sharon Welch points out, the most powerful, and potentially violent, forms of community are those shaped by a single, coherent narrative: the Christian Right and those advocating a single global culture of technological innovation and consumerism. She agrees with Hauerwas that without a meaningful narrative people are adrift, but adds that 'Without listening to and learning from many narratives, people are captive to violence and coercion'.⁷²

Edith Wyschogrod has written,

Although the move to the use of life story is an important step, the idea of narrative as the encompassing framework for moral philosophy is captive of the same naiveté as moral theory, if it is conceived, as Lyotard points out, as master narrative. Like the metaphysical presuppositions of theoretical thought, the philosophical biases in which narrative has heretofore been grounded must be brought into critical perspective. Postmodern literary theory highlights the traits of narrative such as the multiplicity of its voices and its openendedness by exposing narrative's grammatical, semiotic, and lexical tactics.⁷³

The novels I shall be discussing in the following chapters precisely register these traits of narrative - its open-endedness and multiplicity of voices - exposing the myth of objectivity and the tyranny of official versions of events. The question of which individual or group authorises or supports a particular discourse is of considerable importance.

As Edith Wyschogrod states, '...philosophers like MacIntyre or Bernard Williams, despite a richness of argumentation, remain phenomenologists of the failure of moral theory rather

⁷¹ For a critique of Hauerwas' narrative ethics, see, for example, Maurice Wiles, 'Scriptural Authority and Theological Construction: the limitations of narrative interpretation', in Garrett Green (ed.), *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987);

Janet Martin Soskice, 'Community and Morality "After Modernity": A Response to Robin Gill', in *Studies in Christian Ethics*, Vol.10, No.1, 1997, 14-19; Sharon Welch, 'Communitarian Ethics after Hauerwas', in *Studies in Christian Ethics*, *ibid.*, 82-93.

⁷² Sharon Welch, 'Communitarian Ethics after Hauerwas', *op.cit.*, 83.

⁷³ Edith Wyschogrod, *op.cit.*, p.xvii.

than thinkers who forge a new ethic in response to the radical transformation of historical circumstance'.⁷⁴

Janet Martin Soskice agrees: 'It is often said that the communitarians are better at diagnosing the ills of liberalism than themselves providing alternatives'.⁷⁵

Richard Rorty: Ethical Pragmatism

Richard Rorty shares with MacIntyre the pragmatic concern that moral 'knowledge', of the kind envisaged by Plato and the theorists of the Enlightenment, does not result in moral actions.⁷⁶ As MacIntyre recognises, if there is no common frame of reference in terms of which moral disputes can be settled, argument can continue without altering moral dispositions. Like MacIntyre, Rorty argues for a return to an Aristotelian tradition 'which sees moral education as an education of the sentiments. Rorty writes, 'We pragmatists argue from the fact that the emergence of the human rights culture seems to owe nothing to increased moral knowledge and everything to hearing sad and sentimental stories, to the conclusion that there is probably no knowledge of the sort Plato envisaged'. The particular kind of aesthetic sensibility Rorty wants to endorse is that of the novelist, with her 'taste for narrative, detail, diversity, and accidents'.⁷⁷

Pragmatists believe that there is no truth apart from what suits our present practical needs.

According to William James, truth must be defined as that which is 'good in the way of belief', that is, good insofar as it promotes the interests of a given community or culture.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p.xxv.

⁷⁵ Janet Martin Soskice, *op.cit.*, p.18.

⁷⁶ See, for example, Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and 'Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality', in Stephen Shute and Susan Hurley (eds.), *On Human Rights: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures 1993* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993).

⁷⁷ Rorty, 'Philosophers, Novelists and Intercultural Comparisons: Heidegger, Kundera and Dickens', Paper Presented to the Sixth East-West Philosopher's Conference, Honolulu, July 31 - August 11, 1989, p.19.

While I endorse Rorty's view of the importance of literature for moral reflection, there is, as Christopher Norris argues, a danger that Rorty's position produces 'a consensus-view of truth which simply reaffirms the current self-image of "North Atlantic bourgeois liberal" culture'.⁷⁸ Ultimately, like MacIntyre, Rorty's account cannot avoid the problems of relativism. A consensus-view of truth tends to endorse the political status quo and preempt any form of rational critique. For example, Rorty writes in Nietzschean terms, 'the human self is created by the use of a vocabulary rather than being adequately or inadequately expressed in a vocabulary'.⁷⁹ By contrast, Derrida's 'deconstruction' affirms such *universal* values as 'justice' and 'democracy', even as he interrogates particular cultural embodiments of these ideals.⁸⁰ John Caputo argues that Rorty, despite his account of the 'contingency of the self',⁸¹ operates within the most classical assumption of individual, subjective autonomy, which misconceives Derrida's understanding of 'writing'.

Caputo writes:

The very idea of thinking of language in terms of a language game or of a play of signifiers is to get over the idea of a game invented and played by the players, which is the familiar, common-sensical, classical, subjectivist, and 'metaphysical' model of language, one which in other respects Rorty seems intent on abandoning. The idea is rather to think of language as a game which plays the players, which precedes and overtakes, which precedes and antedates, the interiority of a private subjectivity.⁸²

Such an understanding of writing prevents 'self-creation' in any strong sense, since the 'self' is the effect of linguistic play, but Derrida's post-structuralism creates a new context for ethical reflection in which writing, and a concern with the ethical effects of language, becomes the responsibility of ethics.

⁷⁸ Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (London: Fontana, 1987), p.157.

⁷⁹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p.7.

⁸⁰ Rorty adopts a Nietzschean vocabulary which emphasises autonomy and 'self-creation' which contrasts with Derrida's distinctively Jewish and messianic language.

⁸¹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, pp.23f.

⁸² John D. Caputo, 'On Not Circumventing the Quasi-Transcendental: The Case of Rorty and Derrida', in *Working Through Derrida*, op.cit., p.162.

Martha Nussbaum: The Fragility of Goodness

Such an understanding of writing provides a context in which to discuss Martha Nussbaum's notion of the *fragility* of goodness. It seems that Derrida's notion of the 'undecidable' bears comparison with Nussbaum's discussion of tragic choice. Nussbaum distinguishes between 'luck', as our subjection to life's contingencies, and 'ethics' as the domain of the 'controlling power of human reason'; luck is the riskiness of life, ethics tries to make life 'safe'.⁸³ Whereas traditional moral theory has sought to guard against vulnerability, inconsistency and pain, irresolvable conflicts and suffering occur *precisely through* attempts to live the good life, and Nussbaum argues that part of the beauty of human goodness is its vulnerability. She argues for the importance of the tradition of tragedy for moral reflection, because such literature highlights two prominent features of moral experience - our subjection to contingency and the incommensurability of conflicting moral demands. The good person may conscientiously fulfil his or her responsibilities but things still turn out badly. Life regularly places conflicting moral demands upon us, and in acting to do the right thing we may be forced to do harm.

Tragic literature is important because it dramatises moral conflict. In such conflict, an agent is confronted with two alternative courses of action, each of which he or she is morally obliged to pursue. The conflict arises because the agent confronts circumstances that prevent the satisfaction of both claims. In situations of tragic conflict, an agent cannot avoid doing harm, and because goods are incommensurable there is no way of assessing which harm is greater.

⁸³ Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.3.

cf. Hannah Arendt's notion of the 'frailty of action' which 'political philosophy' tries to counteract. See *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp.188ff.

According to Nussbaum, what is important in situations of tragic conflict is that the agent emerge with his or her character and moral integrity intact. For Nussbaum, this means that the agent should not try to *solve* the dilemma by revising his or her commitments to the people and ideals in conflict, for to do so would be to discount something of extraordinary and irreplaceable value. She writes,

If we were such that we could in a crisis dissociate ourselves from one commitment because it clashed with another, we would be less good. Goodness itself, then, insists that there should be no further or more revisionary solving.⁸⁴

Instead of thinking of tragic conflict as a puzzle to be solved, Nussbaum argues that the demands of morality can be satisfied by genuinely expressing the appropriate moral response to one's inevitable moral failure. In doing so, moral agents maintain the force of the value not acted upon, because it is by expressing emotion that we recognise and express the value things have. This conception of moral failure and moral integrity is also a theme within tragic literature, which makes it an important vehicle for moral reflection. Nussbaum argues that when tragic heroes meet their demises, their failure is often in part a moral failure - for in their attempts to solve their dilemma, they revise their commitments, thereby suffering a loss of integrity. She illustrates this thesis using Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* as an example. In this play, Agamemnon is torn between piety to the Gods and love for his daughter. He cannot act without destroying something he values deeply. According to Nussbaum, Agamemnon's dilemma is not of his own making - it results from contingent circumstances over which he has no control. Agamemnon chooses what he judges to be the lesser of two wrongs. According to Nussbaum, Agamemnon's failure is in failing to show the appropriate remorse for his act. He behaves as if the correct resolution of the dilemma has been discovered. He oversimplifies his moral situation, to suppress the confusing and conflicting emotions that would complicate his choices and induce doubt about his chosen course of action. It is this problem-solving approach which Nussbaum

⁸⁴ Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, p.50.

finds objectionable about moral theory for moral theory assumes there must be a right answer to moral questions. However, assessing alternative courses of action on the basis of independent criteria, such as degree of utility, would violate the qualitative distinctness of the conflicting goods by reducing differences in quality to differences in quantity.

Attempts to solve moral dilemmas by employing hierarchical arrangements of antecedently formulated moral principles will be excessively reductionist. Tragic literature emphasises our openness to fortune, in contrast to a theoretical approach to moral conflict, which will advocate a course of action that regulates an agent's exposure to moral conflict by discounting something the agent values. It treats a particular kind of moral conflict as a salient and irrepressible component of life rather than a puzzle to be solved. In Furrow's words, 'tragic literature reveals the need for a more complex form of cognition, in which judgement and emotion conspire to sustain as much as possible of what is valuable in life'.⁸⁵

This introductory chapter ends, then, where it began, with Derrida's notion of the 'undecidable':⁸⁶

The undecidable is not merely the oscillation or tension between two decisions, it is the experience of that which, though heterogeneous, foreign to the order of the calculable, the rule, is still obliged...to give itself up to the impossible decision while taking account of law and rules. A decision that did not go through the ordeal of the undecidable would not be a free decision, it would only be the programmable application or unfolding of a calculable process. It might be legal, it would not be just.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), MacIntyre argues against Nussbaum, who holds (in *The Fragility of Goodness*) that Aristotle's account of the virtue of practical reason is open to the Sophoclean picture of an individual's having to choose between rival goods. MacIntyre now endorses the Thomist thesis that, if someone feels herself to be confronted by conflicting moral claims, she must be guilty (however understandably) at some point (however far back in her moral history) of some error or flaw (however deepseated) to which she is (however excusably) blind. In other words, human sinfulness generates the moral conflicts that we call tragic.

⁸⁶ See also Derrida, 'Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility', in Kearney and Dooley (eds.), *Questioning Ethics*, op.cit., p.66.

⁸⁷ Derrida, 'Force of Law', op.cit., p.24.

As Martha Nussbaum recognises, traditional moral theory has sought to thematise choice, but, as I shall argue in the succeeding chapters, a recognition of the undecidable, or the excess of experience over interpretation, is necessary if we are to sustain a capacity to respond to suffering. Such a recognition is sustained in literary terms and where, as in moral theory or political ideology, undecidability is erased, barbarism or barbarity are not far away.

cf. Lyotard's notion of the 'differend' - a difference between two parties which cannot be reduced to neutral categories of consensus or universality. It is this sublime irreducibility of 'the thing' which for Lyotard is the concern of ethics and aesthetics. Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1988).

Chapter 1

WRITING AND MEMORY

'The task of a historical and interpretative memory is at the heart of deconstruction' ¹

'Perhaps art seeks to give face to things,
and in this its greatness and deceit simultaneously lie.'²

'..... language can only indefinitely tend toward justice
by acknowledging and practicing the violence within it.'³

'The day that there will be a reading of the Oxford card,
the one and true reading, will be the end of history'⁴

“The task of a historical and interpretative memory is at the heart of deconstruction”.

I begin with this seemingly contradictory remark by Derrida, which is at the heart of my thesis. The quotation may at first sight seem surprising, given the popular association of deconstruction and amnesia – the view that deconstruction threatens scholarly tradition and the writing of history. As we have seen, Derrida is frequently charged with relativism, of claiming that *any* reading of text or history is valid. However, I will argue that Derrida’s understanding of écriture (which can be translated as both “writing” and “scripture”) is crucial if we are to avoid the negative consequences of ideology and, in the name of justice, pursue a genuine anamnesis. It is for this reason that in each chapter I

¹ Jacques Derrida, ‘Force of Law: The “Mystical Foundation of Authority”’, in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, David Gray Carlson (eds.), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (London and New York: Routledge), p.19

² Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), p.8.

³ Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics”, in *Writing and Difference*, tr. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), p.117.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *The Postcard*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), p.115.

examine particular examples of writing which have emerged under the pressure of twentieth-century political ideologies.

The thesis examines, alongside each other, three such ideologies - 'the Final Solution', Communist Czechoslovakia and Apartheid South Africa - which are all to be seen within the traditions and structures of the Enlightenment, and in each case I am concerned with the ways in which literary texts deconstruct the political/ethical consequences of philosophical closure and open up the possibility of a recovery of a theological language.

In Lyotard's terms, these ideologies may be described as attempts at totalising *metanarratives*.⁵, which in their abstraction necessarily deny the specificity of the local and traduce it in the interests of a global homogeneity, a universal history - the Thousand-Year Reich; the great narrative of emancipation proposed by Marx;⁶ the myth of 'separate development' envisaged by the South African National Party. Such narratives operate like Enlightenment reason: in order to accommodate widely diverging local traditions and histories, they abstract the meaning of those traditions in a 'translation' into the terms of the master code, a translation which leaves the traditions simply unrecognisable. As metanarratives, they also become coercive and normative: Lyotard argues that they effectively control and misshape the local under the sign of the universal.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We paid a high enough price for the nostalgia for the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible.⁷

⁵ See J-F Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p.xxiv.

⁶ As we shall see, according to Derrida followers of Marx misconceived the nature of the 'messianic', so eager to make the mystical idea of justice immediately present that they often ignored the finite historical conditions in which justice, as an ethical responsibility, is a task which always remains to be done. See Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994)

⁷ Lyotard, 'What is Postmodernism?' Appendix to *The Postmodern Condition*, op.cit., pp.81-82. In *The Differend* (1983) Lyotard explores the notion of the 'differend' - a difference between two parties which cannot be reduced to neutral categories of consensus or universality. It is this sublime irreducibility

An idyll or utopia is conceived which, inevitably, becomes dystopic in the attempt at its realisation. The novelist Milan Kundera has written of Communist utopia,

People have always aspired to an idyll, a garden where nightingales sing, a realm of harmony where the world does not rise up as a stranger against man nor man against other men, where the world and all its people are molded from a single stock and the fire lighting up the heavens is the fire burning in the hearts of men, where every man is a note in a magnificent Bach fugue and anyone who refuses his note is a mere black dot, useless and meaningless, easily caught and squashed between the fingers like an insect.

From the start there were people who realised they lacked the proper temperament for the idyll and wished to leave the country. But since by definition an idyll is one world for all, the people who wished to emigrate were implicitly denying its validity. Instead of going abroad they went behind bars. They were soon joined by thousands and tens of thousands more ...⁸

The novelists I shall be discussing in the following chapters are self-consciously contesting, or deconstructing, this Enlightenment tradition.⁹, exploring the role of writing as testimony. By concentrating on the lives and histories of individuals subject to the logic of the system, they produce writing which deconstructs that system, refusing to allow ideological readings, problematising grand historical narratives, and exposing such readings as forgetful and reductive. Such writing is an act of *anamnesis*, situating itself in what John Caputo has called the 'im/possible attempt to write proper names, the im/possible attempt to remember them'. Caputo is here appealing to the characteristically Jewish emphasis on 'the name',¹⁰ or the absolutely singular and ineffable; the individual human being who may never finally be comprehended in conceptual terms. This is a problematic of language, which, of course, is about structures and repeatability (what Derrida calls "iterability"). "The name" signifies that which exceeds "isness" (our ability to describe in positive terms). However, - in a paradox, or *aporia*, to which we will

of 'the thing' which for Lyotard is the concern of ethics and aesthetics (*The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

⁸ Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), pp. 8-9.

⁹ See, for example, Ivan Klíma's literary essays, *The Spirit of Prague* (London: Granta Books, 1994), esp. 'Our Tradition and the Limits of Growth', pp.146-155.

¹⁰ See, for example, Derrida, *On the Name*, tr. David Wood, John P. Leavey, Jr., and Ian McLeod (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

continually return - in thinking and communicating, concepts are unavoidable, writing a necessary evil. As in Romanticism, the task of the poet or artist assumes a particular importance, that of bearing witness to singularity, or of registering the excess of experience over interpretation (in a way that calls for all the resources of poetics). In other words, recognition of the necessary tension between the general and the particular requires an ethics of reading and writing.

If you let difference have its way in ethics, you would never stop writing, because you would have to write down the names of everyone, one by one, and say what is happening with them ... Deconstruction situates itself on the threshold between the universal and the singular, the common and the proper, in between ... Deconstruction situates itself in the im/possible attempt to write proper names, the im/possible attempt to remember them'.¹¹

Only such a sense of the incomprehensible or 'unreadable' can finally sustain our capacity to respond to suffering, for when language becomes ideological this necessary paradox is smoothed away and the singular forgotten within the universal.¹²

In Derridean terms, the political ideologies I shall be discussing failed to recognise *writing* as a condition of the Fall, seeking instead 'the one and true reading'¹³. These ideologies constituted a different 'fall', what Derrida has called a 'fall of language into representation'¹⁴; they sought an *hors-texte*, or objective view, a realisable framework for justice; they posited a *non-aporetic* model for ethics, and denied the necessary violence of representation. As Derrida maintains in *Memoirs of the Blind*, the first consequence of the Fall is a looking that leads to a covering up, a linguistic 'fall' which reduces the other

¹¹ John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), p.72.

¹² For example, in *Glas* Derrida uses the image of the 'eagle', "the soaring eagle of speculative knowledge which swoops down on every unsuspecting particular, lifts it up into the universal and carries it back in its grasping conceptual claws to its cold mountain top of absolute knowledge' (John D. Caputo, 'On Not Circumventing the Quasi-Transcendental: The Case of Rorty and Derrida', in Gary B. Madison, ed., *Working Through Derrida*, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993, p.152).

¹³ See footnote 4.

¹⁴ Derrida, 'Force of Law', *op.cit.*, Chapter 2.

to concept, a gaze obscured by preconceived images. In these terms, the nearest we may get to the truth is to recognise our *blindness* to the truth, or our entrapment within language.¹⁵

As Derrida's playful deconstructive readings continually remind us, any discourse or interpretive system which is allowed to develop without admitting ambivalence, contradiction or remainder is in danger of becoming destructive and forgetful. A non-aporetic ethical code or a 'perfect' society are simply not a viable project, while attempts to prove the contrary result in more cruelty.

In 'Plato's Pharmacy' (1969), Derrida focusses on Plato's *Phaedrus*, in which writing is described as a *pharmakon* for memory and wisdom. As Derrida notes, *pharmakon* is a specially ambiguous word, meaning both cure and poison. Writing is therefore undecidable, refusing a single determinate meaning. It is this condition of writing which ideologies or ethical systems fail to recognise.¹⁶

In this chapter, with particular attention to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's critique of modernity, *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, and Derrida's reading of Emmanuel Levinas, 'Violence and Metaphysics', I shall argue for an ethics of reading and writing, self-consciously acknowledging the violence of representation and pursuing a language of names. As Richard Kearney has written, one of the morals of the story of deconstruction is that language *is* ethics¹⁷, *writing* as an obsession with the irreducible other, acknowledging the necessary evil of its production, and bearing witness to the unrepresentable.

¹⁵ See Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).

¹⁶ See Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', in *Dissemination* (London: Athlone Press, 1981).

¹⁷ Richard Kearney, 'Derrida's Ethical Re-turn', in *Working Through Derrida*, op.cit., p.50.

Legacies of the Enlightenment

'What does exiled language mean? It refers to the distance between words and what they mask' (Elie Wiesel).¹⁸

A deep formative influence lying behind much contemporary thinking, is the legacy of the Frankfurt School¹⁹, most specifically in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944)²⁰, a work written when the Nazi death factories were working at full capacity. Their provocative claim was that 'Enlightenment is totalitarian',²¹ by which they meant that the representational assumptions of the Enlightenment were reductive and essentially exploitative, seeking to think the natural world in an abstract form. The modern dominance of the principle of reason went hand in hand with the interpretation of the essence of beings as *objects*, an object *present* as representation, an object positioned before a subject. The subject, the 'I', a self-contained ego, thus ensures a technological mastery over the totality of what is. A particular understanding of representation, *repraesentatio*, is involved here. An object is *made present*, by bringing it to the subject of representation, the knowing self. As a result, the material content of the world becomes a merely formal set of conceptual categories. Reason becomes a formal category, which reduces the specific contents of material realities into rational concepts.

From now on, matter would at last be mastered without any illusion of ruling or inherent powers, of hidden qualities. For the Enlightenment, whatever does not conform to the rule of computation and utility is suspect.²²

¹⁸ Elie Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences* (New York: Schocken Books, 1990), p.31.

¹⁹ For example, Walter Lowe, *Theology and Difference: The Wound of Reason* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993) makes the comparison between Derrida's critique of logocentrism and Adorno's critique of idealism.

²⁰ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1979).

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.6.

²² *Ibid.*, p.6.

A certain forgetfulness or 'disenchantment' is at issue here.²³ I use "disenchantment" in the sense coined by Max Weber - the objectification of nature in terms of rational calculation and control. Enlightenment becomes the locus of *ideology*, the assumption that the world can match, or be encompassed by, our reasoning about it, the belief that *nothing escapes the concept*. Paul de Man called ideology the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, or reference with phenomenism,²⁴ and Terry Eagleton has written:

Ideology seeks to convert culture into Nature, and the 'natural' sign is one of its weapons. Saluting a flag, or agreeing that Western democracy represents the true meaning of the word 'freedom', become the most obvious, spontaneous responses in the world. Ideology, in this sense, is a kind of contemporary mythology, a realm which has purged itself of ambiguity and alternative possibility.²⁵

Such ideology produces the illusion of absolute knowledge, abstract and utilitarian, conceived as power over nature.²⁶ To quote Adorno and Horkheimer, 'Enlightenment behaves towards things as a dictator toward man. He knows them in so far as he can manipulate them. The man of science knows things in so far as he can make them.'²⁷ Knowledge is reduced to technology, a technology which enables the *illusion* of power and domination over nature. This kind of knowledge does not give *actual* power over nature, for that which is unamenable to its formal or conceptual categories simply escapes consciousness entirely.

²³ Max Weber: "The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization, and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world'. Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life" ("Science as Vocation", quoted in Anthony J. Cascardi, *The Subject of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p.16.

²⁴ Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), p.11.

²⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p.135.

By contrast, for Eagleton the *healthy* linguistic sign is one which draws attention to its own arbitrariness, which in the very moment of conveying its meaning communicates something of its own relative, artificial status as well.

²⁶ According to Derrida, the role of the university is to challenge the notion of knowledge as technological power. See 'The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils', in *Diacritics* 13, Fall 1983, 7f.

²⁷ *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.9.

Zygmunt Bauman, writing in the tradition of Adorno and Horkheimer, makes precisely this point. Development in one discourse often involves a kind of 'tunnel vision',²⁸ so that the more securely a discourse legitimates itself, the greater the resulting chaos.

There was a task to increase agricultural crops - resolved thanks to nitrates. And there was a task of steadying water supplies - resolved thanks to stemming the flow of water with dams. Then there was a task to purify water supplies poisoned by the seepage of unabsorbed nitrates - resolved thanks to the application of phosphates in specially built sewage-processing plants. Then there was a task to destroy toxic algae that thrive in reservoirs rich in phosphate compounds... Weeds are the waste of gardening, mean streets the waste of town planning, dissidence the waste of ideological unity, heresy the waste of orthodoxy, strangerhood the waste of nation-state building.²⁹

As Walter Lowe puts it, 'Of the Enlightenment...it is true that every revealing is simultaneously a concealing. The great temptation of the Enlightenment may be associated with its very name, that is with the implication that there can be an enlightening or revealing which is *not* simultaneously a concealing'.³⁰

In post-structuralist terms, the problematic may be stated as follows: The activity of "philosophy", the very task of thinking in terms of conceptual categories, is the reduction

²⁸ See Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991)

²⁹ Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* discusses the ways in which the production of 'language games' with their own discourses and specialisms, in isolation from each other, has produced within each discourse a technological illusion of mastery in a single domain which can have destructive consequences. Milan Kundera makes a similar observation: 'The rise of the sciences propelled man into the tunnels of the specialised disciplines. The more he advanced in knowledge, the less clearly could he see either the world as a whole or his own self, and he plunged further into what...Heidegger called..."the forgetting of being" (*The Art of the Novel*, London: Faber and Faber, 1988, pp.3-4).

³⁰ Walter Lowe, *op.cit.*, pp.29-30.

(Such an understanding of 'enlightenment' has its roots in Greek thinking. In a recent article, Louis H. Feldman contrasts the Jewish preoccupation with 'history' with the Greek emphasis on 'concept'. He points out that the Greek word 'to know' (*eidēnai*) is related to the verb 'to see' (*idein*); even the word for 'idea' comes from this verb 'to see'; the Greek, consequently, is interested in things (concepts) rather than events. 'No Greek ever heard his gods order him to remember'.(Louis H. Feldman, 'Hebraism and Hellenism Reconsidered', in *Judaism*, Issue 170, Vol.43, No.2, Spring 1994, 124-125) Even in grammar, the Greek has a timeless aorist tense, such as is lacking in Hebrew, and this tense represents both a past time and an eternal present. By contrast, Judaism's allegiance, in writing and liturgy, is to an ongoing *anamnesis*, a commitment to historic traditions which must be lived, interpreted and re-interpreted in the light of new situations.

or forgetting of otherness. In seeking to think the other, its otherness is reduced or appropriated to understanding. In this sense, “philosophy” is the inescapable perversion of philosophy (as thinking). “Real” philosophy, one might say, attempts to think the unthinkable, or acknowledge in its writing the inescapable violence of its language and distinctions.³¹

Similarly, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, ‘abstraction, the tool of Enlightenment, treats its objects as did fate, the notion of which it rejects: it liquidates them’.³²

The natural world is organised according to conceptual or ‘mythic’³³ categories, the object of ‘false projection’. Whereas *mimesis* imitates the environment, according to Adorno and Horkheimer false projection makes the environment like itself.³⁴ For example, the murderer sees his victim as a persecutor against whom he must defend himself.

It is in these terms of projective behaviour that Adorno and Horkheimer examine anti-Semitism, but for Adorno and Horkheimer, the morbid aspect of anti-Semitism is not projective behaviour as such, which is inescapable, but the absence from it of reflection.

The naked pattern of power as such, which dominates all around it as well as its own decomposing ego, seizes all that is offered to it and incorporates it, without reference to specific nature, into its mythic fabric.³⁵

³¹ In his interviews with Philippe Petit, *Paroxysm* (London: Verso, 1998), Jean Baudrillard makes a similar point: “The concept of history, such as comes into general use in the nineteenth century, corresponds to the moment when we were beginning to leave history. It’s always the same. It’s at the moment when we begin to intellectualize a phenomenon that in reality it disappears” (p.20).

³² *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.13.

³³ In this tradition, myth is essentially integrative, an interpretive framework, ordering the world in which we live by turning randomness into pattern, by reconciling the frustrations produced by some contradictory experience in some higher unity. For example, in *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* (Sonoma, California: Polebridge Press, 1988), John Dominic Crossan distinguishes between myth and parables, which challenge the expectations raised in humankind by myth.

³⁴ *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.187

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.190

The French cultural critic Jean Baudrillard (1929-) has coined the term “simulacrum” to refer to a media-saturated reality in which experience can only take place at a remove. We can experience the world only through a kind of filter of preconceptions and expectations fabricated in advance by a culture swamped in images.³⁶ This is somewhat similar to Adorno and Horkheimer’s notion of “false projection” - a preconceived conceptual framework, defining roles and responsibilities, prevents one from responding to the other, and disarms one's capacity to respond to suffering:

When thought in the process of cognition identifies as conceptual the conceptual elements that are directly posited in perception and hence so compelling, it progressively draws them back into the subject and rids them of perceptive power.³⁷

As today practical scientific enterprises require an unimpaired faculty of definition - the capability of arresting thought at a point determined by the needs of society, and of defining an area that is then minutely examined without going beyond it'.³⁸

This concern to order and control, however, results in paranoia, as experience threatens our expectations:

...all words become part of the delusive system, of the attempt to possess through the mind everything for which experience is inadequate, to force meaning upon the world which makes him meaningless; but at the same time to defame the spirit and experience from which he is excluded and to attribute to them the guilt of the society which excludes him'³⁹

'... to defame the spirit and experience from which he is excluded and to attribute to them the guilt of the society that excludes them'. Here Adorno and Horkheimer are reflecting

³⁶ See Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, (Oxford: Polity Press, 1988).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.194

[NB. Adorno, in *Aesthetic Theory* (trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, London: Athlone, 1997), argues that 'No work of art should be described or explained through the categories of communication'. Again, he is objecting to the reduction of the work to the dialectic of the concept. For Adorno, if there is communication in art it must be without concept. Adorno is inserting himself into a tradition of thinking about art deriving from Kant, which Lyotard also develops. There is a thinking about art which is a non-conceptual communication.]

³⁸ *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.195

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.195-196.

on the plight of the Jews in Europe, drawing on the tradition of the Jew as 'conceptual other', the other of Western Enlightenment discourse, wanderer and exile, outsider and scapegoat.⁴⁰ According to Derrida, for example, Western metaphysics has maintained an essentially Hellenistic tradition in which philosophy has sought to eliminate within Western thought the unrepresentable. The Jew mythically represents the outsider or wanderer, from the story of Abraham to the repeated experiences of exile and alienation. The 'conceptual Jew' represents the unrepresentable, a hermeneutical tradition which refuses to establish secure boundaries, whose covenant is with an excessive God, '[t]he infinity irreducible to the *representation* of infinity'⁴¹ In these terms, the Holocaust can be seen as an attempt to eliminate within Western thought the unrepresentable itself represented by the Jews.

According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the quest for universality, for a 'false social order', the 'paranoia of discourse' in which nothing will escape the concept, has encouraged a will to destroy the Jews.⁴² (Paradoxically, one may see Jewish sacred history as a negotiation of this problematic. The Jews have always known the "paranoia of a false social order" – for example, the Old Testament demand for a king; the temptation to become "like the other nations" and allow a particular interpretative framework too great a security. In this salvation history, deconstruction is at hand in the person of the prophet who calls Israel to repentance.⁴³)

The Jews in Europe are characterised by a distinctive way of life which, in its distinctiveness, challenges the generality to which it does not conform.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ The 'Jew' as the 'other' of Enlightenment rationality - see also Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, London and New York: Routledge, 1978; Lyotard, *Heidegger and the Jews*, trans. Andreas Michel and Mark Roberts, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990). For example, according to Hegel, development belonged to the law of universality, against which is set the law of singularity represented by the woman and the Jew!

⁴¹ 'Violence and Metaphysics', p.98

⁴² *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.168.

⁴³ See, for example, I Samuel 8: 1-9.

⁴⁴ *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.169

The general, that which fits into the functional context of society, is considered to be natural. But nature that has not been transformed through the channels of conceptual order into something purposeful, the grating sound of a stylus moving over a slate, the *haut gout* which recalls filth and decomposition, the sweat which appears on the brow of the busy man - everything which has failed to keep up, or which infringes the commandments which are the sedimented progress of the centuries - has a penetrating effect; it arouses disgust.⁴⁵

Adorno and Horkheimer recognise that anti-Semitism was based on a perversion of the ideal of equality, defined as conformity⁴⁶ When they write of the 'paranoia of discourse', they are referring to the hatred induced in finding that one's 'norm' cannot be fulfilled, resulting in the demonisation of those who do not fit the norm.⁴⁷ In terms of European rationality, the Jews are an embodiment of the 'negative principle',⁴⁸ representing the 'other' of Western Enlightenment thinking - 'happiness without power,... a home without frontiers, religion without myth'.⁴⁹ They become scapegoats - for example, an illusory conspiracy of Jewish bankers financing Bolshevism - as a way of maintaining the system, which requires 'outsiders', demonic 'others', in order to legitimate itself.⁵⁰

In his essay 'Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority', Derrida, discussing Walter Benjamin's *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*, makes the connection between the evil of the Final Solution and the 'fall' of language into representation:

...what Nazism, as the final achievement of the logic of mythological violence, would have attempted to do is to exclude the other witness, to destroy the witness of the other order, of a divine violence whose justice is irreducible to right, of a violence heterogeneous to the order

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 180

cf. Zygmunt Bauman's argument, that genocide is rooted in a particular construction of human virtue, a utopian vision desiring the elimination of chaos and disorder (*Modernity and the Holocaust*, op.cit.).

⁴⁶ *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.170.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.171

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.168

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.199

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.172

both of right (be it that of human rights or of the order of representation) and of myth.⁵¹

According to Derrida, the Holocaust ('the order of representation') tried to exterminate, not only human lives by the millions, but also a demand for justice, the possibility of singularity, the language of names, for 'To name is not to represent, it is not to communicate by signs, that is, by means of means in view of an end, etc'.⁵²

Lyotard's argument in *Heidegger and the Jews* is similar. Lyotard argues that the 'final solution', as well as attempting to eliminate without trace the *physical* presence of Jews in Europe, also sought to eliminate within Western thought the unrepresentable itself 'represented' by 'the jews'. 'The jews', for Lyotard, represent the extra-linguistic – that which falls beneath the repeatable terms of language. They represent a particular kind of anamnesis, that is an acknowledgement of the excess of experience over interpretation. Lyotard draws on Levinas' notion of the 'immemorial', a relation to what is always already forgotten in all thought, writing, literature and art, to a 'forgotten' that was never part of any memory as such and which any memory, as memory, forgets in turn by representing (that is, by giving form to it or producing an image of it). 'The jews' here signifies the entire problematic of the unrepresentable (hence the small 'j') and, according to Lyotard, does not refer to a nation, nor to a political, philosophical or religious subject. However, as David Carroll argues in his foreword to *Heidegger and the Jews*, even though 'the jews' does not designate the Jewish people directly, it cannot be separated completely from those who have suffered through forced conversion, assimilation and finally extermination.⁵³

⁵¹ Derrida, 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"', op.cit., pp.59-60.

⁵² Ibid., p.61.

⁵³ David Carroll – introduction to Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and "the jews"*, op.cit., p.xii.

Dogmatic thought has sought to incorporate the 'otherness' signified by 'the jews' into itself, or to deny, repress or exclude that 'otherness', but for Lyotard the *unrepresentable* is what all representation must strive to represent, and what it must also be aware of *not being able* to represent. This *aporia*, or double bind, is for Lyotard, as for Derrida, the concern of ethics and aesthetics. As we shall see in the next chapter, the dilemma of the Holocaust writer focuses this ethical concern - the obligation to bear witness 'lest we forget', but the question of how responsibly to represent the events which we call 'the Holocaust' without trivialising them or imposing narrative order upon them.

The issue here is the need for thought to develop its capacities to resist and undermine the dogmatic, even totalitarian, possibilities which it also inevitably carries within itself, an obligation that thought become less and less philosophical and more and more 'written'.

According to Derrida, after the Holocaust we need a return to the language of *names*, a language or a poetics of appellation, '...in opposition to a language of signs, of informative or communicative representation, beyond myth and representation...'⁵⁴

John Caputo, drawing on Derrida, makes the same point. The study of proper names - that is, an attention to the *singular* or the *particular* encouraged by poetics - is the element of obligations. Proper names allow one to say when and where obligation is happening, and to whom, and they help us to *remember*. However, as Derrida and Caputo also recognise, the particular cannot be perceived outside of the general:

If you let differance have its way in ethics, you would never stop writing, because you would have to write down the names of everyone, one by one and say what is happening to them ...

The proper name is a name for what is im/possible. Were a name truly proper, were there, properly speaking, truly a proper name, no one would understand it. Were it unique, were we utterly and totally unfamiliar with it, wholly unable to anticipate it, then we would not

⁵⁴ Derrida, 'Force of Law', *op.cit.*, p.60.

know it as a name, we would not use it or understand its use, and it would not get known because it could never be repeated.⁵⁵

The responsibility of the writer, then, as Jewish scholars like Elie Wiesel recognise, is to produce writing which registers this double bind - the impossible possibility of witnessing to proper names, against the threat of a 'fall' of language into representation.

The Final Solution, antithetical to a poetics of 'proper names', presupposed the illusion of scientific objectivity, of the reconciliation of the concept and its reference, producing a discourse which allowed the unthinkable to be thought. As Reiner Schurmann has observed,⁵⁶ 'Evil comes in an untold move, when singularization is cut off from one's constituted world, when one blinds oneself against it'.⁵⁷

Derrida writes: '...Nazism has indeed been the most pervasive figure of media violence and of political exploitation of the modern techniques of communicative language and of the language of industry, of scientific objectification to which is linked the logic of the conventional sign and of formalizing registration'.⁵⁸ The language of the Final Solution was a *simulacrum* of bureaucracy, legal language, expertise and hierarchies.

⁵⁵ Caputo, *Against Ethics*, op.cit., p.78.

⁵⁶ Reiner Schurmann, 'Conditions of Evil', trans. Ian Janssen, in Drucilla Cornell et al, *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, pp.387-403.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p.390.

The philosophical background to such thinking is the belief, which has been a feature of philosophy going back to the ancient Greeks, that out of unification comes the good and out of individuation evil. For the Greeks, evil meant to be dispossessed from 'the good'. In the tradition of Natural Law, evil meant failure to act in accordance with nature; for the Enlightened, evil meant a dispossession of enlightenment which turns one away from self-consciousness. In the tradition of Augustine, evil is seen as a privation of good. In each case, otherness is conceived as negation. In the nineteenth century, Kierkegaard significantly represented a break from such thinking. He wrote, 'Any discourse about a superior unity that would reconcile absolute contradictions is a metaphysical assault on ethics'. According to Kierkegaard, the good demands of me that I singularise myself, just as Abraham singularised himself sacrificing Isaac. However, as Schurmann recognises, though it is important to recognise the singular as irreducible, this does not mean one can somehow escape the general norms. Like Derrida, she recognises that we must live within a double bind, the tension between the general and the particular. But it is possible to enlarge one's way of thinking beyond the general view, to think for oneself the double bind. 'After hubristic sufferings - not unlike Oedipus who at Colonus wants his eyes open, wants himself open-eyed - it is possible to love differing ultimates. This, I submit, would be expanding the limits of imagination.' It is the kind of imaginative thinking provoked in tragedy, which sees singulars jarring incongruously against their world.

⁵⁸ Derrida, 'Force of Law', op.cit., p.58.

Elie Wiesel has written:

... the Nazis assassinated thousands upon thousands of Jews and spoke of 'special treatment.' 'Things, objects,' meant human beings. 'Relocation' signified deportation, evacuation, liquidation: extermination. Night and fog are evocative words; we now know what they hid. Similarly, the word 'selection.' Thanks to this verbal technique, the assassins succeeded in convincing themselves that they were not assassins. By 'obeying' they were doing no more than 'purifying' Europe of its Jews (32)

'The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing'

'Why has God used words as instruments of creation? Because all of creation lies in them. All of creation could be destroyed by them. And redeemed again' ⁵⁹

Post-structuralism has reminded us that a single, unified and objective perspective is unavailable, since there is no extra-linguistic perspective from which a given interpretation may be assessed. Human beings experience the world in and through language, which may be a 'prison house'⁶⁰ but is also our only redemption. Whereas structuralism was essentially a phenomenological study concerned with the linguistic structures which human beings inhabit, deconstruction is concerned with what these 'systems' leave unrepresented and unsaid. Deconstruction should perhaps be defined as 'good reading' - far from being merely nihilistic free-play, it is a rigorous approach to philosophical thinking, engaging in close readings of texts and exposing the excess of meaning over interpretation. These texts then become witnesses to the great ineffability of existence.

The way language is used is, therefore, of profound ethical significance. To represent is a necessary act of violence which anticipates and reduces to concept, yet writing may register this very difficulty. This is the significance of Derrida's style. He composes rich, lush 'overfull' texts which overlap with other texts, an excess of allusion and multi-lingual

⁵⁹ Elie Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences*, op.cit., p.43.

⁶⁰ Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

pun. The difficulty of Derrida's various discussions of deconstruction derives in part from his determination to *do* deconstruction at the same time as he talks about it.

Derrida explores the theme of the violence of representation in relation to the question of foundation. What, he asks, is the legitimating origin of our laws? As he puts it in his deconstructive analysis of the American Constitution in 'Otobiographies', the origin of every state is in some sense illegitimate.⁶¹ It arises from a *coup de force*, which is also an act of inscription or writing. Any founding act must be such an imposition, for it implies particular judgements, values and norms. Democracy is compromised from the outset since it must involve some form of representation, a process whereby individual voices surrender their moral autonomy and consent to take laws from elected citizens set up to govern them.⁶² It is impossible to think one's way back - as Rousseau would have us think - to the pre-social origins of society or the pre-linguistic origins of language.⁶³ Thus, all constitutions are acts of violence.

Derrida explored this aporia in his early work 'Violence and Metaphysics'. Here Derrida argues that the attempt to articulate conceptually an experience which has been forgotten or exiled by philosophy can only be stated within philosophical conceptuality. In other words, pure non-violence, like pure violence, is a contradictory concept.⁶⁴ Even in framing a question, one has already partially answered or forgotten the question, since

⁶¹ 'Otobiographies', in *The Ear of the Other* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985).

⁶² See also Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992).

⁶³ For example, in his discussion of Rousseau in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida deconstructs Rousseau's contention that the harmonic elaborations of modern French music are a 'gothic and barbarous' development, a path which 'we should never have followed if we had been more sensible of the true beauties of art, and of music truly natural' (quoted in *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1974, p.345n). As Derrida observes, it is impossible to conceptualise the nature of music without admitting that harmony has been there from the outset, as part of music's natural resources. There is always a harmony within melody, no matter how carefully Rousseau attempts to keep the two principles apart.

⁶⁴ Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics', op.cit.

questions are formulated in response to possible answers. '...the question is always enclosed; it never appears immediately as such, but only through the hermetism of a proposition in which the answer has already begun to determine the question'.⁶⁵ Later in that essay, he writes, 'Concepts suppose an anticipation, a horizon within which alterity is amortized as soon as it is announced precisely because it has let itself be foreseen'.⁶⁶

Whilst, as Derrida continually reminds us, we cannot break out of the 'prison house' of language and we *must* negotiate our world in and through language, deconstruction calls us to responsibility, the responsibility to retain what Lyotard has called a 'sixth sense', the memory of that which is always forgotten in the act of representation. According to Derrida, '...non-violent language, in the last analysis, would be a language of pure invocation, pure adoration, proffering only proper nouns in order to call to the other from afar. In effect, such a language would be purified of all *rhetoric*, which is what Levinas explicitly desires; and purified of the first sense of rhetoric, which we can evoke without artifice, that is, purified of every *verb*'.⁶⁷

Derrida raises an essentially *theological* issue akin to Martha Nussbaum's notion of the fragility of goodness. In Derrida's perspective, *contra* Rousseau, a language of purity, free of rhetoric, is unavailable. We are cast out of Eden and must live within a 'fallen' world, a language of rhetoric, as we situate ourselves 'in the im/possible attempt to write proper names, the im/possible attempt to remember them',⁶⁸ for only by rhetoric can rhetoric be redeemed.⁶⁹ As John Caputo writes in his recent book, 'deconstruction is set in motion by an overarching aspiration, which on a certain analysis can be called a religious or prophetic

⁶⁵ Ibid., p.80.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p.95.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p.147.

⁶⁸ Caputo, *Against Ethics*, op.cit., p.72.

⁶⁹ Inevitably, then, Derrida's writing becomes canonical, just as Plato may be seen as a great deconstructor who gives rise, against his will, to *Platonism*.

aspiration..., a movement of transcendence'.⁷⁰ Such thinking has more in common with a Jewish prophetic tradition, than with a Graeco-Christian tradition premised on the immanent and the actual, the Word made flesh. Deconstruction, as a movement of transcendence, means registering the excess of experience over interpretation, charged with the responsibility to witness to the unrepresentable.

Deconstruction is called forth in response to the unrepresentable, is large with expectation, astir with excess, provoked by the promise, impregnated by the impossible, hoping in a certain messianic promise of the impossible.⁷¹

The attempt to write 'proper names' can only be achieved through the resources of rhetoric. Derrida's own writing testifies to this impossible possibility, with its allusiveness, the richness of its metaphor, its use of pun. As he writes in 'Violence and Metaphysics', one must lodge oneself within traditional conceptuality in order to "destroy" it.⁷² Or again, 'it is necessary to state infinity's *excess* over totality in the language of totality... it is necessary to dress oneself in tradition's shreds and the devil's patches'.⁷³ Rhetoric, which is always originally violent, can only *do itself violence*, can only negate itself in order to affirm itself. (The deconstructor is like a tight-rope walker who risks 'ceaselessly falling back inside that which he deconstructs'⁷⁴). The attempt to articulate conceptually an experience that has been forgotten or exiled from philosophy can only be stated within philosophical conceptuality, which entails that the experience succumbs to and is destroyed by philosophy.

As Derrida argues in 'Force of Law', the language of law is inescapable but, as thematic and generalised, can never do justice to every singularity - it is always open to revision and

⁷⁰ John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), p.xix.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² 'Violence and Metaphysics', p.111.

⁷³ Ibid., p.112.

⁷⁴ *Of Grammatology*, op.cit., p.14.

improvement in the name of justice which, according to Derrida, is beyond exchange and distribution and falls beneath the general terms in which language trades. To address oneself to the other in the language of the other is the condition of all possible justice, yet this is impossible since our public language always appropriates the language of the other. The best one can do is to maintain the memory of that which we know has been forgotten, to ensure that each judgement recognises the tension between the general law and the particular case, to re-think the language in the light of new experiences. Law, rhetoric must be recognised as contingent; not easily disposable, but capable of being re-visited or revised in the light of particular responsibilities. In this sense, deconstruction *is* justice.⁷⁵ It leads to a sense of responsibility without limits, excessive, incalculable, before memory.

'Violence and Metaphysics' was a profound influence upon Levinas and it marks Levinas' linguistic turn. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas distinguishes between 'the saying' and 'the said'. The saying is the site of our responsibility for the other. 'The said' is a statement which puts the relationship with the other in a codified arrangement. For Levinas, the birthplace of ontology is the *said*. It is *the saying* which draws us to our responsibilities; *the said* covers up our responsibilities. According to Levinas, influenced by Derrida's notion of deconstruction, philosophy must draw attention to the 'saying' in the 'said', and these moments of interruption are ethical moments.

The concern of my three central chapters, on the Holocaust, Communism and Apartheid, is the consequences of failing to negotiate 'writing' as a condition of 'the Fall'.

In a 1985 essay on the system of Apartheid in South Africa, against attempts by the South African government to erase the word 'apartheid' whilst maintaining the reality, Derrida insists that the word, with all its resonances, must be retained.⁷⁶ As the Final Solution

⁷⁵ Derrida, 'Force of Law'. op.cit., p.15.

⁷⁶ See Derrida, 'Racism's Last Word', trans. Peggy Kamuf, in *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn 1985, 290-299.

should have taught us, evil is tolerated when the scandalous and unacceptable are couched in fine language. The Pretoria régime's propagandists and officials recognise that the word 'apartheid' has become a political liability, an emotive word which provokes dissent and opposition. It is expedient to cover over the wound, to mask, to forget. However, there is a responsibility to become more critical and self-conscious about the ways in which language is used in the im/possible attempt to write proper names, the im/possible attempt to remember them. Derrida wishes to maintain the word 'apartheid' against the South African regime's justificatory discourse. Not content to reproduce the official discourse, he prefers to speak for the victims, to speak of 'apartheid'. Derrida writes, 'Do not forget *apartheid*, save humanity from this evil, an evil that cannot be summed up in the principal and abstract iniquity of a system. It is also daily suffering, oppression, poverty, violence, torture inflicted by an arrogant white minority (16 percent of the population, controlling 60 to 65 percent of the national revenue) on the mass of the black population'.⁷⁷

History and Forgetting

The characteristic ways in which 'history' has been presented in nineteenth-century evolutionary thought, as a single lineage, a *metanarrative* of progress, evolution, teleology, enlightenment, is a further way of banishing difference, turning from the past, and allowing individuals, or 'proper names', to be forgotten.⁷⁸ As Lyotard writes, 'Narrative organization is constitutive of diachronic time, and the time that it constitutes has the effect of "neutralizing" an "initial" violence, or representing a presence without representation...'⁷⁹ In such a view of 'history', nothing happens for which one is not prepared. According to Levinas, the person of utopia is '...nothing but Desire: disturbed

⁷⁷ Ibid., p.293.

⁷⁸ In the novels of Central European writers such as Kafka, Hasek, Musil and Broch, 'History' is a monster which comes from outside; 'it is impersonal, uncontrollable, incalculable, incomprehensible - and it is inescapable' (Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, op.cit., p.11)

⁷⁹ Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p.16.

by the dazzling day of his human conscience, he pursues a dream as though he were still sleeping, as though another day should dawn within his day, and with it another waking that would rid him of his suffocating nightmares'.⁸⁰

In the famous image of Paul Klee, as described famously by Walter Benjamin, the storm of progress irresistibly propels the walkers backwards into the future, the debris piling up in front of them. The hope of arrival turns out to be the urge to escape immediate responsibilities, to set tasks which do not endear the future but devalue the past and present. The past and present are always wanting, which makes them ugly:

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. The storm is what we call progress.⁸¹

Historians such as Reinhart Koselleck⁸² have shown how the specific tripartite structure of past, present and future, in which the future is asynchronous with the past, arose at the turn of the seventeenth to the eighteenth century. The way in which our culture thinks of time is far from natural, even though we may experience it as such. According to Andreas Huyssen, 'in comparison with earlier Christian ages that cherished tradition and thought of the future primarily and statically, even spatially, as the time of the last judgement,

⁸⁰ Levinas, 'Place and Utopia', in *Difficult Freedom*, op.cit., p.101.

⁸¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1969), p.249.

⁸² Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990)

modern societies have put ever more weight on thinking of the secular future as dynamic and superior to the past'.⁸³

Such evolutionary thinking entails a particular understanding of 'theodicy'. The assumption is that the process of enlightenment will justify the suffering which it entails. The triumph of science or the triumph of the state will make good the sacrifices made in its name. In Arthur Koestler's novel *Darkness at Noon* (1940), the former revolutionary Rubashov is under arrest for having doubts about the doctrine of 'the end justifies the means'. In a passionate response to his inquisitor, he unfolds the horror of the policy he himself had once helped carry out:

...in the interests of a just distribution of land we deliberately let die of starvation about five million farmers and their families in one year. So consequent were we in the liberation of human beings from the shackles of industrial exploitation that we sent about ten million people to do forced labour in the Arctic regions and jungles of the East, under conditions similar to those of antique galley slaves ... Acting consequentially in the interests of the coming generations, we have laid such terrible privations on the present one that its average length of life is shortened by a quarter ...

In the effort to justify, such theodicy generates a narrative quite different from the memory of suffering. Each concrete, particular being is subjected to an all-embracing continuity. As the theologian Johann Baptist Metz puts it, 'The logic of evolution is the rule of death over history - in the end, everything makes as little difference to it as death'⁸⁴

This logic of evolution tends to define our view of narrative, which is why (as we saw in the introduction) attempts to construct a "narrative ethics" are to be regarded with suspicion. Such a narrative understanding generates an amnesia which is the opposite of the anamnesis which is the subject of this chapter.

⁸³ Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories; Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), p.8.

⁸⁴ Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), p.173.

According to Metz, in this amnesia, religious subjectivity - the human being as subject before God - is lost. Metz argues that the 'contemporary subject' defines his or her existence only by what can be counted, measured, and identified as success or gain. For Metz, religious subjectivity requires memory; an obligation to remember human misery, dependence, past suffering and the voiceless dead. Whereas in the eyes of modern society suffering is to be rejected, for Metz 'the happiness of the descendants cannot compensate for the sufferings of the ancestors and social progress cannot make up for the injustice done to the dead'.⁸⁵ As Metz observes, oppressed peoples commonly maintain their sense of themselves by telling their own stories, which are often stories of suffering.

Characteristically these stories do not place the suffering within some larger, quasi-explanatory framework. The same is true of Elie Wiesel, for whom writing is an attempt to rescue individuals from the anonymity of 'history'. He writes, 'To be a Jew means safeguarding one's past at a time when mankind aspires only to conquer the future'.⁸⁶ In contrast, the oppressor's view of history is just such a quasi-explanatory framework. It celebrates the victories, investing them with an aura of righteous inevitability. Against such triumphalism, those who have suffered have nothing to set but the simple, brute fact of suffering. Yet that fact in its starkness and simplicity becomes a powerful form of protest. Together, teller and tale resist assimilation, disturbing the teller's totalising claim.

'The task of a historical and interpretative memory is at the heart of deconstruction'

At the heart of deconstruction is an understanding of memory, *anamnesis*, which runs counter to evolutionary thinking, and has elements in common with Jewish Rabbinic tradition. Elie Wiesel writes:

⁸⁵ Ibid., p.75.

⁸⁶ Elie Wiesel, *A Jew Today* (New York: Random House, 1978), p.7.

For an interesting discussion, placing Johann Metz's thinking alongside that of Elie Wiesel, see Michon Marie Matthiesen, 'Narrative of Suffering: Complementary Reflections of Theological Anthropology in Johann Metz and Elie Wiesel, in *Religion and Literature* 18:2, Summer 1986, 47-63.

What, precisely, did being a good Jew mean? It meant taking upon oneself the entire destiny of the Jewish people; it meant living in more than one period, listening to more than one discourse, being part of more than one system; it meant accepting the teachings of Hillel as well as Shamai, and following Rabbi Akiba no less passionately than one followed his adversary, Rabbi Ishmael ...'⁸⁷

Since there is no extra-linguistic perspective available to human beings, memory is a never-ending exercise in writing and testimony; texts in conversation with other texts, struggling to do justice to particular experiences and insights.⁸⁸ Harold Fisch explores the role of testimony in the Hebrew Bible, showing the ways in which texts 'come to life again' in new circumstances, yielding new meanings. For example, the Song of Moses echoes through the Psalms and the Prophets. The poem '...is a presence evoked and re-evoked in other times and settings and in other poems'.⁸⁹ We have the disturbing shock of recognition as a remembered text comes at us charged with a new historical urgency. As we shall see in the next chapter, much Holocaust literature self-consciously explores this tradition, with subtle and jarring allusion to biblical narratives, which serve to register the horror and incomprehensibility of the events.

Such *anamnesis* is an acknowledgement of excess and the ineffability of human suffering, an attempt to witness to that which is forgotten in our attempts to memorialise. It is a tradition which refuses to countenance the enforced linearity of master narratives, in Lyotard's terms, 'put[ting] forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself'.⁹⁰ Aleida

⁸⁷ *From the Kingdom of Memory*, op.cit., p.25.

⁸⁸ This is in contrast, for example, to the ways in which the Hebrew Bible has been appropriated by Christian scholars. For example, in his essay 'Persons or Figures', Levinas castigates a Christian typological approach which views the sacred texts of the Jewish tradition through the palimpsest of The Passion. 'When it is claimed that Noah's Ark is significant only in that its wood prefigures the future Cross, or that the wells sunk by Isaac prepare us for the meeting between the Samaritan woman and Jesus, or that Miriam's leprosy symbolises Mary's whiteness, or the burning bush prefigures the crown of thorns, all this brings us to a stage of logic that surpasses logic or precedes it' (Emmanuel Levinas, 'Persons or Figures', in *Difficult Freedom*, op.cit., p.120).

⁸⁹ Harold Fisch, *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), p.65.

⁹⁰ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, op.cit., p.81.

Assmann calls this the concept of counter-memory, where memory has the function of producing and keeping up dissonance.⁹¹ Such memory, according to Assmann, provides the possibility of transcending a given context and relating to a different set of values. In *Heidegger and the Jews*, Lyotard makes the point that the very attempt to remember or memorialise can often 'forget' by having too definite, too representative, too narrativised a memory. In another suggestive passage, Lyotard writes,

By the 'immemorial', I try to express another time, where what is past maintains the presence of the past, where the *forgotten* remains *unforgettable* precisely because it is forgotten. This is what I mean by anamnesis as opposed to memory. In the time set out by concept and will, the project is only the 'projection' of present consequences on the future (as in 'futurology'). This kind of projection forbids the event; it prepares, preconceives, controls it in advance. This is the time of the Pentagon, the FBI, Security, the time of the Empire.⁹²

Lyotard believes that we owe a debt to the Jewish tradition - that singular debt of an interminable anamnesis. There is obviously an important contrast between such a notion of anamnesis and the term as it is used in Plato. Plato's notion of 'anamnesis' is analagous to his understanding of 'mimesis'. For Plato the good painter is he or she who reproduces images already engraved in the soul, submitting to the ultimate authority of a logos, *remembering* what the soul must already (however remotely) have known. Platonic anamnesis is a re-collection of spiritual truths which the soul has forgotten in its fallen state, but can still be summoned to the mind through the disciplines of self-knowledge. For philosophers like Lyotard, there are no essences or universals to be remembered by enlightened reason. The unrepresentable is what all representation must strive to represent and what it must also be aware of not being able to represent. In this *aporia*, the value of thinking, writing and painting is insofar as they do not forget the obligation to the

⁹¹ See Aleida Assmann, 'The Sun at Midnight: The Concept of Counter-Memory and its Changes', in Leona Toker (ed.), *Commitment in Reflection: Essays in Literature and Moral Philosophy* (New York and London, 1994), p.223f.

⁹² Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'What is just?', in Richard Kearney, *States of Mind: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers of the European Mind* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p.303.

forgotten but persist in 'writing' the impossibility of either remembering or forgetting it completely.

There is a hatred of literature in the writer, of art in the painter: it is the love of what art and literature conceal by representing it, and which it is therefore necessary to represent, and conceal again.⁹³

It is thus a question, and it will always be a question, of unveiling anew what the gesture of unveiling has veiled, which is repeated in the tradition from Plato to Nietzsche; it will be a question of making understood that the unveiled is never the truth (since the unveiled is always the veiled, as the named is always the betrayal of the unnameable), but that the truth is the unveiling, and that the forgotten of thought as metaphysics (and physics) cannot be presented'.⁹⁴

Lyotard argues for a certain 'literature' or modern poetics to counter conceptual thinking, a writing of exile, wandering and rootlessness, which never forgets that there is the forgotten and never stops writing its failure to remember. The following chapter will explore the possibility of such literature in relation to the Holocaust.

⁹³ Lyotard, *Political Writings*, trans. Bill Readings and Kevin Paul Geiman (London: UCL Press, 1993), p.34.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.60.

Chapter 2

THE FINAL SOLUTION AND THE LIMITS OF REPRESENTATION

No word intoned from on high, not even a theological one, exists rightfully after Auschwitz without a transformation'.¹

'The just man has a thousand truths, and that's his tragedy; the murderer has one alone, and that's his strength.'²

'Memory means to live in more than one world, to be tolerant and understanding with one another, to accept the mystery inherent in questions and the suspicion linked to answers.'³

The Ideology of the Holocaust

The basis of my argument has been that issues of ethics are inseparable from issues of narrative and representation. The ways in which we 'make' our worlds have consequences for the ways in which we act. Literary and historical worlds are never pure of each other; representations are responsible not just for interpretation of events but responses to them. This is seen no-where more powerfully than in the Holocaust. There is a curiously 'literal' quality about the language of the Final Solution. Was it, in fact, easier, asks James Young⁴, for the Germans to use Zyklon-B (roach gas) to 'exterminate' the Jews after having equated them figuratively for so many years with vermin? As Heinz Hohne writes,

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1983), p.367.

² Elie Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory* (New York: Schocken Books, 1990), p.25.

³ *Ibid.*, p.195.

⁴ James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), p.93.

'The system and the rhythm of mass extermination were directed not by sadists ...[but by] worthy family men brought up in the belief that anti-Semitism was a form of pest control, harnessed into an impersonal mechanical system working with the precision of militarized industry and relieving the individual of any sense of personal responsibility'.⁵ Through language the victim was deprived of subjectivity, which enabled the enactment of the narrative programme of extermination. Art Spiegelman's two-volume cartoon narrative of the Holocaust, *Maus*, disturbingly exposes the banality of this language.⁶ These books present the language of the Holocaust quite literally – the Nazis are pictured as cats, the Jews as mice. There is a double irony here, as this very literalism exposes the banality of the Nazi discourse. At the same time, in reading these books, one is conscious of entering a world at once familiar and unfamiliar – we are encouraged to identify with the characters but there is a sense of entering what has been called *l'univers concentrationnaire* (a world apart). Furthermore, the cartoon-strip format is a distancing strategy, which belies any attempt to 'reconstruct' the Holocaust in mimetic terms.

David Roskies points out that the Nazis encouraged the Jewish people to interpret the events of the Holocaust in terms of established paradigms – in other words, the 'success' of the Final Solution relied upon the power of historical narrative.⁷ The Nazis understood

⁵ Heinz Hohne, quoted in Peter Haidu, 'The Dialectics of Unspeakability: Language, Silence, and the Narratives of Desubjectification', Saul Friedlander (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), p.289.

In the opinion of Herbert C. Kelman, moral inhibitions against violent atrocities tend to be eroded once three conditions are met, singly or together: the violence is authorized, routinized, and the victims of the violence dehumanized (Herbert C. Kelman, 'Violence without Moral Restraint', in *Journal of Social Issues*, vol.29, 29-61 – quoted in Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989, p.21).

⁶ Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992)

⁷ David Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984). p.14. The same point is made by the historian Raul Hilberg (*The Destruction of the European Jews*, New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1985): 'The German Nazis, then, did not discard the past: they built on it. They did not begin a development; they completed it. In the deep recesses of anti-Jewish history we shall find many of the administrative and psychological tools with which the Nazis implemented their destruction process. In the hollows of the past we shall also discover the roots of the characteristic Jewish response to an outside attack'.

that the Jews are historically minded, interpreting current events in terms of themes from the past. Thus, for example, the Nazis reinstated the Renaissance ghetto, the medieval yellow star and the seventeenth-century Jewish councils, as well as co-ordinating actions with the Jewish calendar. The effect was to encourage their victims to perceive their circumstances in the light of the past and ancient archetypes and so encourage a paradigmatic response to and understanding of their predicament. The Nazis were thus able to screen from view the *difference* of the Holocaust until it was too late.

In *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989) Zygmunt Bauman proposes that the Holocaust is '...a rare, yet significant and reliable, test of the hidden possibilities of modern society'.⁸

He suggests that:

...the rules of instrumental rationality are singularly incapable of preventing such phenomena; that there is nothing in those rules which disqualifies the Holocaust-style methods of 'social engineering' as improper or, indeed, the actions they served as irrational. I suggest, further, that the bureaucratic culture which prompts us to view society as an object of administration, as a collection of so many 'problems' to be solved, as 'nature' to be controlled, 'mastered' and 'improved' or 'remade', as a legitimate target for 'social engineering', and in general a garden to be designed and kept in the planned shape by force...was the very atmosphere in which the idea of the Holocaust could be conceived, slowly yet consistently developed, and brought to its conclusion.⁹

Bauman sees racism as resonant with the world-view and practice of modernity, a scientifically founded work aimed at the institution of a new and better social order. In this utopian world-view, science was seen as an instrument of power capable of improving on reality and re-shaping it according to human plans and designs. In this perspective, genocide was not the work of destruction, but creation. Bauman suggests that gardening and medicine supplied the paradigms of this enterprise, while the management of human

⁸ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, op.cit., p.12.

Bauman points to the danger of seeing the Holocaust as a 'Jewish' or 'German' problem, which prevents the experience from being seen as a universal problem of the modern human condition.

⁹ Ibid., p.18.

affairs was seen in terms of normality, health and sanitation. Human society became the object of planning and organisation, which, like garden vegetation or a living organism, could not be left to their own devices, lest they be infected by weeds or cancerous tissue. Thus, Hitler's language and rhetoric were full of images of disease and infection. He told Himmler in 1942 that 'The discovery of the Jewish virus is one of the greatest revolutions that have taken place in the world. The battle in which we are engaged today is of the same sort as the battle waged, during the last century, by Pasteur and Koch. How many diseases have their origin in the Jewish virus... We shall regain our health only by eliminating the Jew'.¹⁰ In other words, the language of instrumental rationality succeeds in casting the victims in a position from which they cannot challenge the actor as a source of moral demands; in Levinas' terms, the victims may no longer confront the actor as a 'face'.¹¹

Hannah Arendt was thinking in these terms when she wrote of the 'banality of evil',¹² a theme which William Styron explores in his novel *Sophie's Choice* (1976).¹³ 'In the world of the crematoriums hatred is a reckless and incontinent passion, incompatible with the

¹⁰ Quoted in Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, p.71.

¹¹ See Bauman's appendix to *Modernity and the Holocaust*: "Social Manipulation of Morality: Moralizing Actors, Adiaphorizing Action".

In *Modernity and the Holocaust*, as in *Postmodern Ethics*, Bauman argues that theories of Goodness and Justice have precisely the effect of neutralising the moral demand. Similarly, Lyotard writes: 'As regards ethical decisions, if it had to authorise itself by invoking theories of Goodness or Justice, it would forfeit its ethical character forthwith. Why? Because it would lose all responsibility for what it decides submitting itself to the authority of theory. Decisions are ethical precisely when they are not authorised by a system (intelligible or otherwise), when they take upon themselves the responsibility for their "authority". An SS torturer is not ignoble because Hitler's "theory" was false, but because he refuses his own responsibility and believes himself justified by obedience. Arendt refers to this as the 'banality of evil' – the banalisation of responsibility by 'necessity'. Necessity here is poverty, but it is also theory which is the poverty of morality' (Lyotard, 'What is just?', in Richard Kearney, *States of Mind: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers of the European Mind*, p.300).

¹² Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).

¹³ William Styron, *Sophie's Choice* (London: Corgi Books, 1980)

humdrum nature of the quotidian task'.¹⁴ Reflecting on the character of Rudolf Hoss, governor of Auschwitz, the novel's narrator contrasts 'imaginary evil' with 'real evil':

This 'imaginary evil' -...to quote Simone Weil-'is romantic and varied, while real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring.' Beyond doubt those words characterize Rudolf Hoss and the workings of his mind ... Hoss was hardly a sadist, nor was he a violent man or even particularly menacing. He might even be said to have possessed a serviceable decency. Indeed, Jerzy Rawicz, the Polish editor of Hoss's autobiography, himself a survivor of Auschwitz, has the wisdom to rebuke his fellow prisoners for the depositions they had made charging Hoss with beatings and torture. 'Hoss would never stoop to such things, Rawicz insists. 'He had more important duties to perform.' The Commandant was a homebody...but one dedicated blindly to duty and a cause; thus he became a mere servomechanism in which a moral vacuum had been so successfully sucked clean of every molecule of real qualm or scruple that his own descriptions of the unutterable crimes he perpetrated daily seem often to float outside and apart from evil, phantasms of cretinous innocence.¹⁵

Much the same can be said of the S.S. doctor 'Jemand von Niemand'. In the terrifying scene at the climax of the novel we learn of Sophie's 'choice'. Sophie and her two children undergo the 'selection' between those to be immediately murdered at Birkenau and those to be sent to the slave labour camp at Auschwitz. When he discovers that Sophie is a Christian, von Niemand allows Sophie to choose life for one of her children; the other will be sent to the gas. Styron suggests that there was a perverted religious motivation behind this man's forcing upon Sophie her terrible dilemma.

The banality of the Final Solution has left von Niemand with no consciousness of sin – he is merely a functionary in an industrial process. In a perversion of Pauline theology, therefore, he sins boldly¹⁶ – projects himself beyond the banality of the system he serves - in an attempt to restore his belief in God.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.205.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.201.

¹⁶ Romans 5:20: 'Law came in to increase the trespass; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more'. See also Mark 2:17: 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners'.

But of course the answer finally dawned on him [von Niemand], and one day I suspect the revelation made him radiant with hope. It had to do with the matter of sin, or rather, it had to do with the absence of sin, and his own realization that the absence of sin and the absence of God were inseparably intertwined. No sin! He had suffered boredom and anxiety, and even revulsion, but no sense of sin from the bestial crimes he had been party to, nor had he felt that in sending thousands of the wretched innocent to oblivion he had transgressed against divine law. All had been unutterable monotony. All of his depravity had been enacted in a vacuum of sinless and businesslike godlessness, while his soul thirsted for beatitude.

Was it not supremely simple, then, to restore his belief in God, and at the same time to affirm his human capacity for evil, by committing the most intolerable sin that he was able to conceive? Goodness could come later. But first a great sin. One whose glory lay in its subtle magnanimity – a choice. After all, he had the power to take both.¹⁷

Real evil, it seems, eradicates any sense of sin, or lack, or incompleteness - the confidence of its language drains the world of mystery and obligation, and thus eradicates any sense of God. Kenneth Surin describes this as a religious language without an eschatological dimension. The literal language of the Final Solution cannot accommodate hope as a significant category of experience. Surin writes:

Hope is a modality of love, and where there is no love there can be no hope. And where there is no hope there can be no faith in the God of the future; and where there is no faith in the God of the future there can be no surrendering of our own future into the hands of God, no trust in the mystery of God. This is perhaps why von Niemand snatches so desperately at the chance to engineer his own salvation. His faith – for he *is* a religious man – lacks an eschatological dimension, and hence resides in the ‘already’ of the God who instead of the ‘not yet’ of the God who is to come. Without an understanding of the God of the future, the God of the Resurrection, the God who brings about the death of death, the reality of the present becomes the only available horizon for human thought and action.¹⁸

We return, then, to Derrida’s notion, following Walter Benjamin, of the ‘fall’ of language into representation.¹⁹ In Nazi propaganda, language died (and became deadly). The Final

¹⁷ *Sophie’s Choice*, pp.646-647.

¹⁸ Kenneth Surin, ‘Atonement and Moral Apocalypticism: William Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice*’, in *New Blackfriars*, July/August 1983, 311.

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, ‘Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority’, in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (eds.), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp.29f.

Solution may be seen as an attempt to eliminate from Western thought the *unrepresentable*, represented by the Jews. In the wake of the Holocaust, too, the survivor and the artist are faced with the ethical problem of how responsibly to witness to the Holocaust without trivialising it or imposing narrative order upon it. Writers are invested with a responsibility to acknowledge textuality, the possibilities and slippages within language, as well as its inadequacy in the face of the enormity of events.

As Roland Barthes insisted, the 'healthy' linguistic sign is one which draws attention to its own arbitrariness - which does not claim to be 'natural' but, in the very moment of conveying a meaning, communicates something of its relative, artificial status as well. Signs which claim to be 'natural', which offer themselves as the only conceivable way of viewing the world, are authoritarian and ideological. In Terry Eagleton's words, 'It is one of the functions of ideology to "naturalise" social reality, to make it seem as innocent and unchangeable as Nature itself. Ideology seeks to convert culture into Nature, and the 'natural' sign is one of its weapons. Saluting a flag, or agreeing that Western democracy represents the true meaning of the word 'freedom', become the most obvious, spontaneous responses in the world'.²⁰

Derrida writes of the evil, or lethal power, which comes to language precisely by way of representation. For Derrida, discourse, literature and poetry after the Holocaust must reflect a 'language of names', 'a language or a poetics of appellation, in opposition to a language of signs, of informative or communicative representation, beyond myth and representation but not beyond names'. In the Holocaust names became numbers, individuals became a nameless mass. It was precisely 'the name' which the Nazis sought to destroy, for the name represents the possibility of singularity which for Derrida is the

²⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983) p.135.

demand for *justice*. For Derrida, to name is not to represent, it is not to communicate by signs, that is, by means of means in view of an end. The name represents 'the law that transcends representation and withholds the unique, all uniqueness, from its reinscription in an order of generality or of comparison'.²¹

For Derrida, the language of names is an antidote to the 'fallen', 'dead' language which breeds forgetfulness and indifference, the impulses which led to the Holocaust. As Wiesel puts it, 'the opposite of love is not hate but indifference... What is worse than death? - killing death through indifference'. Similarly, Lyotard writes in *The Differend*, reflecting on the Nazi attempt to eradicate traces of the 'Final Solution', in terms of Nazi logic 'This death must therefore be killed, and that is what is worse than death. For, if death can be exterminated, it is because there is nothing to kill. Not even the name Jew'.²²

Problematics of Holocaust Representation

The Holocaust writer is charged with an awesome responsibility and difficulty, which is an ethical responsibility - the need to keep language and memory alive, to witness to names, to fight indifference and complicity with those who sought to erase memory. Yet the Holocaust experience represents such a decisive break with other experience. Holocaust autobiographers are painfully aware that whatever the form and content of their narrative, they have not succeeded in conveying the past adequately. Elie Wiesel feels that, though his autobiographical *Night* is the centre of his work, 'what happened during that night... will not be revealed'.²³ Throughout his texts there is an unresolved conflict between the urge to cry out and the need to remain silent. Saul Friedlander writes of his own autobiography, 'I will never be able to express what I want to say; these lines, often

²¹ Derrida, 'Force of Law', op.cit., p.62.

²² Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p.101

²³ *Harry James Cargas in Conversation with Elie Wiesel* (New York; Paramus; Toronto: Paulist Press, 1976), p.86.

clumsy, are very far removed, I know from my memories, and even my memories retrieve only sparse fragments of my parents' existence, of their world, of the time when I was a child'.²⁴

Language cannot go beyond the constraints of the human intellect and imagination.

George Steiner compares the impotence of language in the face of the Holocaust with the problem of religious language.²⁵ Steiner suggests that Auschwitz, a new universe, marks the abandonment of the human and regression to bestiality, which 'both precedes language, as it does in the animal, and comes after language as it does in death'.²⁶

Similarly, Elie Wiesel has written, 'Where was I to discover a fresh vocabulary, a primeval language? The language of night was not human; it was primitive, almost animal - hoarse shouting, screaming, muffled moaning, savage howling, the sounds of beating...A brute strikes wildly, a body falls; an officer raises an arm and a whole community walks toward a common grave; a soldier shrugs his shoulders and a thousand families are torn apart, to be reunited only by death. Such was the language of the concentration camp'.²⁷

How does one witness to this primeval chaos in a language which, by its very nature, is committed to order, structures of grammar and syntax? How does one witness to discontinuity and uniqueness in language which is a web of continuities and associations. Moreover, any representation must be an abstraction, since, in addition to its content, it represents the exclusion of other perspectives.

²⁴ Quoted in Joseph Sungolowsky, 'Holocaust and Autobiography: Wiesel, Friedlander, Pizar', in Randolph L. Braham (ed.), *Reflections of the Holocaust in Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p.135.

²⁵ George Steiner, 'The Long Life of Metaphor: An Approach to "the Shoah"', in *Encounter* 48:2 (1987), 55-61.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.55

²⁷ Elie Wiesel, 'Why I Write', in *From the Kingdom of Memory*, op.cit., p.15.

Analogies, too, are impossible. Descriptions rely on comparison. Analogies are embedded in all attempts to communicate - this event, of which we do not know, is like that event of which we know at least a little. But what if there is nothing with which to make a comparison? What we see in the camps is not just the worst of our world intensified? How is Holocaust testimony to register this sense of the uncommunicable?

Holocaust writers are also afraid of eloquence; a language too sure of itself and 'in control' would be a betrayal of so many deaths. This is the meaning of Theodor Adorno's provocative call for 'no poetry after Auschwitz'. Further, we cannot share with the victims, in imagination or fact, the experience of extermination. Whoever has not lived through the event can never know it. And whoever has lived through it can never fully reveal it.

Since language presupposes community and belonging, how can it approach the experience of abjection? As Lyotard expresses it, 'To be unable to declare one's plight and excluded from interlocution altogether, as the victims of the concentration camps were, is to plumb depths of abjection which may be impossible to translate into the common discourse of our communities. The ordeal of being forgotten cannot be expressed in the sharing of speech which is ignorant of it'.

The worst fear is that Holocaust art generates an inability to hear, or rather, one hears words but cannot take them in. The words do not communicate the reality. The horrors of the Holocaust are dissipated into such meaningless abstractions as 'the six million'. Six million? A number incapable of internalisation. Just as Nazism traded in a bureaucratic deadening of language ('the final solution', 'special treatment', 'the race and resettlement laws'), the Holocaust writer is in danger of achieving no more than bland generality. This

is why Elie Wiesel insists that he writes to *surprise*, not to inform.²⁸ One can only begin to approach the horror by reflecting on individual examples which manifest the horror of the whole. This is part of the significance of the Jewish insight that 'Whoever saves one life saves the world in time'. Such witness is as necessary as ever, given that wars are increasingly fought at a distance from the enemy, sanitised by technology and bureaucracy, as well as physical distance. Wiesel has contended that the publicity accorded to the Holocaust made later atrocities easier to commit and easier to absorb into history. Similarly, there is a danger that Holocaust education may inculcate a sense that we know it all already, as the story is narrativised and its 'scandal' evaporated.

The Holocaust survivor and writer are therefore caught in a double bind - the unavoidable question, How can we dare to speak? has an unavoidable answer, Simply because we cannot dare not to speak. There is the silence which acknowledges inadequacy and the silence which constitutes betrayal - ignoring reality because reality has become unpalatable. So we have the ambivalence of a writer like Elie Wiesel who, as he feels he must bear witness, also feels that silence is the only option; that to try to speak or write intelligibly, interpretively about Auschwitz is to misconceive totally the nature of the event. However, as Leon Wieseltier puts it, Holocaust autobiographies are 'all the more illuminating, because memory is the consciousness of things and events that have *not yet disappeared completely into knowledge*'.²⁹ In Lyotard's terms, we can do nothing more than witness to the unrepresentable or communicate the impossibility of communication. For Wiesel this means the dialectic of silence and language - of transmitting silence *through* language. Wiesel has said in an interview with Harry J. Cargas, 'If I could communicate what I have to say through not publishing, I would do it. If I could, to use a poetic image,

²⁸ Lily Edelman, 'A Conversation with Elie Wiesel, in Harry J. Cargas (ed.), *Responses to Elie Wiesel: Critical Essays by Major Jewish and Christian Scholars* (New York: Persea Books, 1978), p.10.

²⁹ Joseph Sungolowsky, *op.cit.*, pp.135-6

communicate a Silence through silence I would do so. Perhaps I am not strong enough or wise enough. I try to communicate that Silence through words'.³⁰

The challenge for the Holocaust writer or artist is to maintain the Holocaust as a *scandal*, retaining the scriptural force of that word - a stumbling block, a scandal to rationalisation. If, in Foucault's terms, power's success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms, then there is a need for art which openly declares its status *as art*, witnessing to an unrepresentable 'other', evoking a sense of what Lyotard calls *dispossession*.

Dispossession commonly refers to events which prevent consciousness from being the subject of traditions, disciplines and interpretations. An 'it happens' is momentarily unconnected to acts of thought, to what has 'already been thought, written, painted in order to determine what hasn't been'. Dispossession involves 'disarming all grasping intelligence': a 'protection of the occurrence "before" defending it, by illustration of commentary' shifts cognition from its fanatical dependency on representations to experiences which may be without reason.³¹ Moreover, according to Lyotard 'dispossession' frustrates attempts to narrativise history or rely on preconceived models or paradigms. In Sande Cohen's words, dispossession 'refers to practices wherein objects do not symbolise: they do not connect desire and history or desire and sociality, but instead allow for an *exteriorization* of force which sidesteps the collective sociological ego'.³² Such dispossession makes indifference impossible. For Lyotard, such an aesthetics of the sublime will enable us to see only by making it *impossible for us to see*.

The Holocaust as Myth and History

³⁰ Harry J. Cargas in *Conversation with Elie Wiesel*, op.cit., p.5.

³¹ Lyotard 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde', quoted in Sande Cohen, 'Between Image and Phrase', in Saul Friedlander, op.cit., p.178.

³² Ibid., p.178.

If the task of the witness is to witness to the unrepresentable and transmit silence through language, then this has important consequences for an understanding of 'history' and 'memory'. We are always in danger of reducing the texture of history to a linear narrative – this, it seems, is the danger of those 'communitarian' approaches to ethics which emphasise narrative continuity.³³ A linear conception of history represents precisely the fall of language into representation which Derrida describes – an essentially ideological understanding of language. The Holocaust reminds us of a different ethical sense of history - a responsibility to retain the memory of the unrepresentable. By erecting monuments, or memorialising particular places, the rhetoric of the monument is easily mistaken for the nature of the events it communicates. As James Young observes in a study of Holocaust memorials and meaning, this confusion is most striking in the case of monuments located at the sites of the original concentration camps, where a sense of authentic place tends to literalise the meanings assigned. The memorial camps invite us to mistake their reality for the actual death-camps' reality and to confuse a monumentalised vision with unmediated history.³⁴ Art becomes guilty of a second holocaust when the Holocaust is mythicised, made conceivable and representational; it becomes subject to the same 'fall' into representation which enabled the Holocaust itself.

Perhaps the most responsible memorials are, once again, those which draw attention to themselves as pieces of human artifice, inadequate, fractured. Tadeusz Augustynek was commissioned to design a memorial that might simultaneously construct the memory of a lost community and commemorate the tremendum in Jewish memory.³⁵ The result is a freestanding tombstone-wall, twenty-five metres long and six-metres high, assembled out of the shards of shattered headstones - with a small cluster of shattered headstones still

³³ See discussion of ethics and narrative in Introduction.

³⁴ See James E. Young, *op.cit.*, pp.172f.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.179.

standing before it. Rather than attempting to mend Jewish memory, the makers of this wall have built into it the irreparable break in the continuity of both Jewish life and memory: the wall itself is torn by a jagged and gaping crack.

Once again, anamnesis is to remember that there is more than language can signify, that to conceptualise is to reduce, exclude, forget; a memory and a recognition of that which has never and can never be known. The past is remembered as past and as unassimilable, an absent presence; another time in which, to quote Lyotard, the 'forgotten remains unforgettable precisely because it is forgotten'.³⁶ As Derrida has written recently,

An inheritance is never gathered together, it is never one with itself. Its presumed unity, if there is one, can consist only in the *injunction to reaffirm by choosing*. 'One must' means *one must* filter, sift, criticize, one must sort out several different possibles that inhabit the same injunction. And inhabit it in a contradictory fashion around a secret. If the readability of a legacy were given, natural, transparent, univocal, if it did not call for and at the same time defy interpretation, we would never have anything to inherit from it. We would be affected by it as by a cause - natural or genetic. One always inherits from a secret - which says 'read me, will you ever be able to do so?'³⁷

This ethical call, 'I must', is a call to sustain the difference between the 'fallen' language of representation - the naturalised language of ideology - and textuality, that interminable web of signifiers, rich and multi-layered but never finally interpretable and never adequate to its task. It is a call to be attentive to more than one discourse rather than to seek resolution. For Wiesel, this, too, is the task of the Jew. 'What, precisely, did being a good Jew mean? It meant taking upon oneself the entire destiny of the Jewish people; it meant living in more than one period, listening to more than one discourse, being part of more than one system ...'³⁸ The memory of 'different possibles that inhabit the same injunction' easily gives way to a collective memory confident in its priorities and interpretations, the memory of myth and resolution.

³⁶ Lyotard, 'What is just?', op.cit., p.303.

³⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, tr. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p.16.

³⁸ Elie Wiesel, 'To Believe or Not to Believe', in *From the Kingdom of Memory* op.cit., p.25.

As Elaine Scarry reminds us, the mind is better able to remember events which invite strong interpretation.³⁹ The ease or difficulty with which any given phenomenon can be verbally represented also influences the ease or difficulty with which it can be forgotten. In her book *The Body in Pain* (1985), Scarry argues that physical pain resists and actively destroys language; its resistance to language is essential to what pain is. '... physical pain – unlike any other state of consciousness – has no referential content. It is not *of* or *for* anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language'.⁴⁰ As a consequence, those phenomena which can be represented more easily tend to assume greater importance in political discussions; discourses of strength tend to obscure those of weakness. Scarry writes:

If, for example, it were easier to express intellectual aspiration than bodily hunger, one would expect to find that the problem of education had a greater degree of social recognition than the problem of malnutrition or famine; or again, if property (as well as the ways in which property can be jeopardized) were easier to describe than bodily disability (as well as the ways in which a disabled person can be jeopardized), then one would not be astonished to discover that a society had developed sophisticated procedures for protecting 'property rights' long before it had succeeded in formulating the concept of 'the rights of the handicapped'.⁴¹

It is for these reasons that the phenomenon of Holocaust denial is a possibility; that which cannot be comprehended is easily denied. This would seem to be the significance of Elie Wiesel's striking objection to the Christian notion of 'forgiveness'.⁴² For Wiesel, forgiveness implies the forgetfulness of a closed narrative. To forgive, implies Wiesel, is to blot out, to forget, whereas the antidote to indifference is the memory of that unrepresentable brokenness signified by the fractured wall of Augustynek's sculpture.

³⁹ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1985).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.12.

⁴² See, for example, Wiesel, 'When Memory Brings People Together', in *From the Kingdom of Memory*, *op.cit.*, p.194.

'The Evil Demon of Images': The Holocaust and Cinemagraphic Testimony

The difficulties of Holocaust representation are perhaps most acute in relation to the medium of film. Implicit in the lateral movement of film is a sense of sequence, a linear causality that suggests explanations, or narrative understandings, of events.

Wiesel states the problem thus:

Why this determination to show 'everything' in pictures? A word, a glance - silence itself communicates more and better. How, after all, can one illustrate famine, terror, the solitude of old people deprived of strength and orphans robbed of their future? How can one "stage" a convoy of uprooted deportees being sent into the unknown, or the liquidation of thousands and thousands of men, women and children? How can one "produce" the machine-gunned, the gassed, the mutilated corpses, when the viewer knows that they are all actors, and that after the filming they will return to the hotel for a well-deserved bath and a meal?⁴³

The tyranny of the media image is its very claim to be *real*. How does one avoid trivialising human suffering by subjecting it to an intrusive 'realism'. How does one avoid the sensations of voyeurism and suspense? Film provides a possibility of providing a mimesis of everything, however extreme. Does such a 'direct' approach actually communicate the horrors? Wiesel writes of the danger of demystifying death by subjecting it to the intrusion of media imagery. 'All is trivial and superficial, even death itself: there is no mystery in its mystery. It is stripped naked, just as the dead are stripped and exposed to the dubious enjoyment of spectators turned voyeurs'.⁴⁴ Wiesel stresses that in the Jewish tradition death is a private, intimate matter, and we are forbidden to transform it into a spectacle.

Geoffrey Hartman cites Lessing's notion that the highest kind of art may 'invent allusions' to our damaged life and our mortality, but it may not present them as such.⁴⁵ Hartman

⁴³ Elie Wiesel, 'Trivializing Memory', in *From the Kingdom of Memory*. op.cit., pp.167-168.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.171.

⁴⁵ Geoffrey H. Hartman, 'The Book of the Destruction', in Saul Friedlander (ed.), op.cit., p.327.

suggests that such reticence may be realistic in its estimate of what will move rather than overwhelm or incite disbelief. Hesiod said that the fear of the gods was alleviated by giving them distinct shapes⁴⁶; so too our fear of the evil in human beings is alleviated by such super-mimesis. Lyotard would like to believe that art makes things a little harder to see, yet, as Hartman points out, the popular exploitation of the Holocaust in film suggests instead a repetition of the imaginative and ethical error that defamed the victims. With the conventions of cinema, and the paradoxical distance which cinema realism creates, once more, the victims become objectified and distanced from the audience. As Baudrillard insists, it is precisely when it appears most truthful, most faithful and most in conformity to reality that the film image is most diabolical. It is the very 'reality' of cinema image which makes it diabolical, because it *anticipates* reality, cooling and neutralising the meaning. Baudrillard charges film images with creating artificial memories which obliterate people's memories, which obliterate people from memory. The Holocaust is aestheticised and forgotten. The pervasiveness of film imagery generates a lack of differentiation between image and reality which no longer leaves room for representation as such.⁴⁷

If films are to be responsible witnesses to the unrepresentable, the difficulty is to challenge the narrowly-circumscribed Hollywood conventions of story-telling and reflect critically on the limits and impasses of film as well as utilizing its potential.

A self-reflexive way of encoding history is called for, the kind of historiography that probes most radically the limits of representation, the rejection of narrativity, the proliferation of perspectives – texts which deliberately draw attention to their style or to the way they are put together.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 331.

⁴⁷ See Jean Baudrillard, 'The Evil Demon of Images', in *Power Institute Publications*, Number 3.

One way of focusing this debate is to look at the work of two film-makers who address these issues in very different ways – Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993) and Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985). Critical opinion has tended to polarise into an opposition between these two films.⁴⁸ However, this is to over-simplify the issues. As Miriam Bratu Hansen puts it,

The critique of *Schindler’s List* in high-modernist terms...reduces the dialectics of the problem of representing the unrepresentable to a binary opposition of showing or not showing – rather than casting it, as one might, as an issue of competing representations and competing modes of representation.⁴⁹

As we have seen, a language of purity, in terms of text or film, is not available – only by language is language redeemed. Both *Schindler’s List* and *Shoah* are forms of rhetoric, which are responsible in so far as they probe the limits of representation.

Claude Lanzmann is himself partly responsible for polarising the debate.⁵⁰ He maintains that it is not possible to tell the story of the Holocaust through the eyes of a German who saved some Jews. It gives a distorted picture because for so many Jews this is not how it happened. In fact it is impossible to make any representation or reconstruction of the events. To illustrate this, Lanzmann points to a scene in his own film, *Shoah*, where a survivor describes how they were forced to open mass graves and disinter the corpses with their bare hands, and then burn the remains for days and weeks. Lanzmann writes,

It is very powerful. I wouldn't have imagined anyone daring to show this scene. But he dares to do it.

He claims that even if there had been documentary footage of the actual extermination process he would not have used it - ‘I would have destroyed it. You don't show this’.

⁴⁸ For a survey of critical responses to *Schindler’s List* and *Shoah*, see Miriam Bratu Hansen, ‘*Schindler’s List* Is Not *Shoah*: The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory’, in *Critical Inquiry*, Winter 1996, 292-312.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 302.

Commenting on those very scenes which do appear in *Schindler's List*, Lanzmann expresses a deep revulsion:

I was watching the Spielberg film and I thought he'll never go so far. And he did. But he even created suspense. There were naked women shown in the shower and we are led to believe they are inside the gas chamber. It is very twisted. And these people, all of them are actors. All of them. They're *actors*. They do not look like people who have had these experiences. It is an adventure film.

Lanzmann also criticises the end of the film which seems to offer resolution and 'meaning'. It shows scenes of a line of people singing an Israeli song in Hebrew, a song which was written after the Six Day War. He feels that this gives the impression that the establishment of the State of Israel redeemed the Holocaust or that the Holocaust gave Israel the right to exist.

Lanzmann writes,

There is a happy end for Spielberg's Schindler. But there is *no* happy end. When did the Holocaust stop? On the last day of the war? The creation of Israel? Now it is the fashion. Now there is the great reconciliation. The Jews, the Germans, the Christians. We're all OK. Everyone is saving the Jews. *Shoah* is a film about the destruction of the Jews. And Schindler is a film about the saving of the Jews. If so many wanted to save the Jews then why did so many die?

By contrast, Lanzmann's *Shoah* is a nine-and-a-half-hour documentary-style film which makes no attempt to represent the Holocaust but is based on interviews with survivors and witnesses, former concentration camp guards and Nazi officials. It is as if the disaster itself resists representation and can only be approached by studying the after-shocks. There is an inbuilt indirectness. In Lyotard's terms, *Shoah* makes us see by making it *impossible* for us to 'see'. The film is not to document experiences or present facts as such but rather to document the *witnesses* as they make their testimony and the understanding and meaning

⁵⁰ *The Evening Standard*, 10th February, 1994.

of events generated in the activity of testimony itself. In *Shoah*, all layers of translation are left intact on screen, as though experiences are in search of a language. Lanzmann asks the questions in French, they are translated by an interpreter into Polish, Yiddish or Hebrew, answered in these languages, translated back into French, then flashed onto the screen in English sub-titles. It is as though no single language is finally adequate to the task. We watch as memory enters speech, often for the first time. We see the telling act itself, its hesitations, its essential provisionality. Where writers necessarily break silence in order to represent it, in *Shoah* silence remains as much a presence as the words themselves, as those who are interviewed struggle for words or refuse to go on. The pauses and hesitations in the telling of a story remain intact. We also perceive traces of a story the survivor is not telling; eyes, movements, expressions are part of the text, suggesting much more than we are hearing and seeing. Also, by interviewing people for whom the Holocaust is present memory, the Holocaust is not just seen as an event in the past, history is not seen in narrative or linear terms; rather, past and present merge, the present is multi-layered, never truly present but haunted by the past and projecting into the future. By stringing together survivors' recollections, *Shoah* preserves broken fragments of memory. Unlike narratives which tend to hide their lines of construction, *Shoah* retains the process of construction.

Lanzmann has written, 'A film devoted to the Holocaust can only be a counter-myth, that is, an investigation into the presentness of the Holocaust, an investigation into a past whose wounds are so fresh and so keenly inscribed in consciousness that they are present in a haunting timelessness'.⁵¹ Lanzmann's multi-layered collages contain no transparent messages, but rather impressions and possibilities.

⁵¹ Claude Lanzmann, 'From the Holocaust to the *Holocaust*', *Telos* 42 (Winter 1979-80), 143.

The sheer length of the film, the silences, punctuated by the insistent noise and imagery of the train, communicate a sense of the enormity of fathomless events. The very awkwardness of the film refuses any concession to Hollywood conventions and openly declares its status as artifice; the awkward movements of the camera, the disruption of narrative as interviews follow one from another with no attempt to smooth over the joins. Lanzmann transports us to the sites of atrocities, now lush countryside retaining little trace of past horrors. This unbearable absence re-inforces the need for memory and underlines the transience of events, the ease with which they can be forgotten. Lanzmann's quest for houses in which Jews had lived for generations before the transportations also evokes a powerful sense of absence and succeeds in particularising the victims.

In one memorable sequence, the camera moves slowly along what was a trench containing the bodies of victims. There is little trace left of the trenches - just a small indentation along what is now a lush grassy area surrounded by trees. The length of time it takes the camera to span the length of the trench in silence is itself almost unbearable. Nothing is said explicitly, yet these minutes of film are immensely powerful and allusive, working by the power of association. Throughout, it is absent presence which is the true subject of the film.

Lanzmann's film is an aesthetic figuration of the very impossibility of representation. Unlike *Schindler's List*, *Shoah* refuses any direct representation of the past, whether by fictional re-enactment or archival footage. However, the strength of *Schindler's List* is that Spielberg is working *within* a Hollywood genre – which is why he was able to reach a mass audience – and using the resources and conventions of the Hollywood movie in order to keep memory alive. This is not the occasion for a detailed discussion of the film, but this is clearly a text which draws attention to itself as text, rejecting any pretence of being neutral. It is in grainy black and white with some significant sequences in colour. This reminds us of the constructed or artificial nature of the film, the fact that we are

watching a length of celluloid rather than reality unfolding. By highlighting its own artificiality (the clearest example being a monochrome sequence in which one girl's raincoat is coloured red), the film can be said to admit that it cannot, on its own, tell the whole story. This is, after all, only a film. In their different ways, then, both of these works, *Shoah* and *Schindler's List*, show that the incomprehensibility of the Holocaust is not rendered in mimetic terms but through the textures and devices of texts which seek to be responsible witnesses to the *unpresentable*. It is for this reason that much Holocaust testimony has drawn on the Jewish tradition of midrash, where meaning is produced in the relationship between texts.

Elie Wiesel's Testament

Elie Wiesel's autobiographical book *Night* (1958) is the foundation of his entire work.⁵² It describes his early life as a young Orthodox Jewish boy growing up in a small Eastern European town destined to be destroyed by the Nazis. He describes the journey that led from his native town of Sighet, nestled in the Carpathian mountains of Transylvania, to the macabre *univers concentrationnaire* of Auschwitz and Buchenwald.

Wiesel has written that he never intended to be a novelist. The only role he sought was that of a witness; his deepest fear, the fear of forgetting.⁵³ The role of the witness is a paradoxical one, to tell of the Holocaust so that their audience knows that it *cannot* be told. 'No, I do not understand. And if I write, it is to warn the reader that he will not understand either. "You will not understand, you will never understand," were the words heard everywhere in the kingdom of night. I can only echo them.'⁵⁴ He is deeply concerned that, for example, the analytic writings of the historian or the social scientist demystify the

⁵² Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Stella Rodway (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981).

⁵³ Elie Wiesel, 'Why I Write', in *From the Kingdom of Memory*, op.cit., p.14.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.18.

Holocaust by participating in a *conceptual* universe which possesses a vocabulary far removed from the void which Wiesel describes. Furthermore, Wiesel insists that we do not have the right to make a philosophy out of so many deaths, to make the suffering of countless human beings part of a general equation. He writes, 'Auschwitz signifies not only the failure of two thousand years of Christian civilization, but also the defeat of the intellect that wants to find a Meaning - with a capital M - in history. What Auschwitz embodied had none. The executioner killed for nothing, the victim died for nothing. No God ordered the one to prepare the stake, nor the other to mount it. During the Middle Ages, the Jews when they chose death were convinced that by their sacrifice they were glorifying or sanctifying God's name. At Auschwitz the sacrifices were without point, without faith, without divine inspiration. If the suffering of one human being has any meaning, that of six million has none...'⁵⁵ Lawrence Langer makes the same point when he writes that the fate of the Holocaust victims cannot be perceived in terms of literary tragedy. 'We do not recognize the features of an Oedipus or an Othello, whose destinies at least in part follow from their deeds, in the faces of the victims on the way to the gas chamber: the Jews have done nothing to deserve their fate. Unlike the tragic figure, their doom is unconnected to their previous lives ... they are deported and will die because they are Jews, and for no other reason. Their deaths will not be linked to their lives in any way...'⁵⁶ Clearly the usual notion of tragedy, with a hero caught between difficult choices but free to embrace an attitude towards the consequences, and hence preserve his or her moral stature, does not apply to people sent to the gas.

Even from the Nazi point of view, the Holocaust finally had no meaning. 'The Holocaust was an absurdity and, therefore, we can say an ontological phenomenon. It had no

⁵⁵ Quoted in Lawrence L. Langer, 'The Divided Voice', in Alvin H. Rosenfeld and Irving Greenberg, *Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1978), p.35.

⁵⁶ Lawrence L. Langer, 'The Writer and the Holocaust Experience', in Henry Friedlander and Sybil Milton (ed.), *The Holocaust: Ideology, Bureaucracy, and Genocide* (Millwood, New York: Kraus International Publications, 1980), p.312.

meaning. When they gave priority to the Jews, carrying Jews to the camps, priority over military trains carrying troops to the front - it was madness! Sheer Madness! Even from their point of view it had no meaning'.⁵⁷

Wiesel insists that one cannot tell *the* story of the Holocaust; all one can do is to tell fragments of memory, tell the stories of particular personalities and particular events. He begins one of his articles, 'Let us tell tales. Let us tell tales - all the rest can wait, all the rest must wait. Let us tell tales - that is our primary obligation. Commentaries will have to come later, lest they replace or becloud what they mean to reveal'.⁵⁸

Since the Holocaust was about removing individuality, turning people into beasts, individuals into numbers, Wiesel has said that 'in each book, I take one character out of *Night* and give him a refuge, a book, a tale, a name, a destiny of his own...'⁵⁹ In remembering the dead through his stories, Wiesel gives them honour; letting them speak again, he cheats the death factories of what would be their final victory, the silencing of each individual in the abstractness of the number six million.

This testimony is ongoing - '...I never finish [a book] because I always smuggle into every book one sentence which is the substance of the next book - a Jewish tradition. When we finish reading the Torah on Simchat Torah, we must begin again the same Torah at the same session. Because we never finish, we never begin...it's a continuous process'.⁶⁰

Wiesel shares, for example, with Derrida, the recognition that 'there is nothing outside the text'; all thought and interpretation are textual, our sense of self and the ways we perceive

⁵⁷ Harry J. Cargas in *Conversation with Elie Wiesel*, op.cit., p.91

⁵⁸ Wiesel, 'Art and Culture after the Holocaust', in Eva Fleischner (ed.), *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1974), p.403.

⁵⁹ Harry J. Cargas in *Conversation with Elie Wiesel*, op.cit., p.3.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.91.

the world. Language is a rich web of signifiers and signifieds, straining to do justice to the complexities of experience, with no access to an extra-linguistic signified. So there is no signified which can disclose the reality 'Holocaust'. This is what Wiesel means when he writes that 'The spoken word preceded creation itself. Because of that word, the world emerged from nothingness and light parted from the dark. Before acting, God spoke. Language introduced mankind into history, not the reverse'.⁶¹ Words can be both salvific and demonic, either living, rich with vitality and allusiveness, or the 'naturalised' dead language of ideology. 'Why has God used words as instruments of creation? Because all creation lies in them. All of creation could be destroyed by them. And redeemed again.'⁶² Wiesel, like Derrida, is invoking an ethical call to maintain textuality as living and vibrant, witnessing to 'names' and refusing the deadly security of ideology.

Wiesel has said of himself that he writes *against* words. He does not trust words and yet he knows their power. So he tries to write little, in a condensed style, to transmit a sense of uncertainty and fragility. He is afraid of words betraying him and him betraying words.⁶³ *Night*, Wiesel's one work dealing directly with the Holocaust, has 116 pages of text. Everything is simplicity itself. Yet every word points to complexities beyond our power to grasp. The simpler the sentence the more complex the idea. It is the silence within his speech, the silence between the words, that communicates. What is not said is as important as what is said - perhaps more so. When mother and father, daughter and son get off the train at Birkenau, the reception centre for Auschwitz, and an SS officer orders 'Men to the left! Women to the right' we read this: 'And I did not know that in that place, at that moment, I was parting from my mother and Tzipora for ever'. There is a kind of horrified silence in these words, but a silence which suggests so much. Similarly,

⁶¹ Wiesel, 'To Believe or Not to Believe', in *From the Kingdom of Memory*, op.cit., p.27.

⁶² Elie Wiesel, 'Inside a Library', in *From the Kingdom of Memory*, p.43.

⁶³ Harry J. Cargas in *Conversation with Elie Wiesel*, op.cit., p.93.

Wiesel tells of seeing a prisoner killed by his own son over a piece of bread, a son who is then immediately murdered by a group of other prisoners. Wiesel's conclusion: 'I was fifteen years old'. Again, the words speak volumes.⁶⁴

The Kingdom of Night

In *Night*, the title and the recurrent imagery of darkness represent the descent into terror, madness and the unknown. We are confronted with a world we cannot understand. Once Eliezer enters Auschwitz he loses his sense of time and reality. A border has been crossed to a fearful and unrepresentable world. *Night* narrates the passing from the context of the secure and the traditional (the *shtetl* community of Sighet) to the terrifying and macabre world of the concentration camp. As Ellen S. Fine has pointed out, at the beginning of the 'novel' Eliezer spends many of his evenings in the semi-darkness of the synagogue conversing with Moshe, his chosen master of the Kabbala. As Fine writes, 'Night, here, exudes a poetic and pious atmosphere as the time for prayer, interrogation and dialogue within the context of the secure and the traditional'.⁶⁵ The 'kingdom of night' into which Eliezer is transported is a world apart, a world which cannot be understood in terms of the continuities of language or past experience. It is for this reason that writers refer to *l'univers concentrationnaire*. When Eliezer sees the flames leaping out of a ditch where little children are being burnt alive, he pinches his face in order to know if he is awake or dreaming. *Night* is about the breaking of continuities. Separated from his mother and three sisters upon their arrival at Birkenau, Eliezer becomes obsessed with the need to hold on tightly to his father's hand, the only object of life in a universe where every moment holds the possibility of death. His father represents a life force, which combats the all-encompassing blackness. However, his father, symbol of reason, strength and humanity,

⁶⁴ See *Night*, p.106.

⁶⁵ Ellen S. Fine, *Legacy of Night: The Literary Universe of Elie Wiesel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), p.12

finally collapses under the barbaric tactics of the Nazi oppressor. Indeed part of this new world is the Nazi attempt to eradicate family ties and create a state of mind in which people view each other as enemies or strangers. This is demonstrated in *Night* through a series of incidents showing the competition for survival between fathers and sons.

The sense of discontinuity is seen finally in the face in the mirror at the end of the narrative. Several days after the liberation of Buchenwald by American soldiers, and after a severe bout of food poisoning, Eliezer looks at himself in the mirror for the first time since the ghetto. A stranger - a child of Night - peers at him.

Stories of a New Bible

Wiesel has written, 'When I speak of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, when I evoke Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai and Rabbi Akiba, it is the better to understand them in the light of Auschwitz.'⁶⁶

Wiesel's writing may be considered in the tradition of *midrash*, which, in terms of the Jewish Bible, Daniel Boyarin defines as 'radical inter-textual reading of the canon, in which potentially every part refers to and is interpretable by every other part'.⁶⁷

According to Boyarin, the Jewish Biblical texts are dialogical in nature, contesting their own assertions as an essential part of the structure of their discourse.⁶⁸ In a real sense, there is nothing outside the text, the extra-linguistic is experienced in terms of absence and allusion, in terms of allusions to and clashes with existing texts; there is no unmediated access to a transcendental signified. Midrash does not grope for *concepts* in order to solve problems and dissolve paradox; meaning is not generated through correspondence but through the clashes, paradoxes and allusiveness of the texts we inhabit. A feature

⁶⁶ Wiesel, 'Why I Write', in *From the Kingdom of Memory*, op.cit., p.19.

⁶⁷ Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), p.16.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.12.

characteristic of much Holocaust writing is its rhetorical inter-textuality, its subtle and jarring allusions to biblical narratives, which serve to register horror and discontinuity. Primo Levi has called such writing 'stories of a new Bible'.⁶⁹ This approach is in contrast to the Christian typological approach, which seeks *resolution* through typology, believing that the events of Christianity are anticipated and understood in terms of the events of the *old* covenant. In his essay 'Persons and Figures', Levinas castigates such a typological approach as a violence to the particularity of the Jewish texts.

When it is claimed that Noah's Ark is significant only in that its wood prefigures the future Cross, or that the wells sunk by Isaac prepare us for the meeting between the Samaritan woman and Jesus, or that Miriam's leprosy symbolises Mary's whiteness, or that the burning bush prefigures the crown of thorns, all this brings us to a stage of logic that surpasses logic or precedes it.⁷⁰

Such typology is in the service of an essentially 'Platonic' anamnesis. Plato's notion of anamnesis is analagous to his notion of mimesis. For Plato, the good painter is he or she who reproduces images already engraved in the soul, submitting to the ultimate authority of the logos, *remembering* what the soul must already (however remotely) have known. Platonic anamnesis is a re-collection of spiritual truths which the soul has forgotten in its fallen state, but can still be summoned to the mind through the disciplines of self-knowledge. In the Jewish tradition, there are no essences or universals to be re-collected by enlightened reason; anamnesis is a recognition of the extra-linguistic to which one has no unmediated access, a recognition of an absence which constitutes a presence. The midrashic notion of inter-textuality recognises that meaning is generated through the

⁶⁹ Primo Levi, *If This is a Man/The Truce*, trans. Stuart Woolf (1958; London: Penguin, 1979), p.72. See also Karl A. Plank, *Mother of the Wire Fence: Inside and Outside the Holocaust* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), which explores the significance of inter-textuality in Dan Pagis' 'Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway-car' and Simkhe Bunem Shayevitsh's 'Lekh-Lekho'.

⁷⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, ed. Sean Hand (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990), p.120.

relationship of texts with each other, rather than in a given text's relationship with its signified. In terms of the Holocaust, a writer like Wiesel recognises that the incomprehensible *night* of the Holocaust can only be communicated by radically subverting existing paradigms through inter-textuality.

In ethical terms, the relationship of Wiesel's *Night* with other texts is more important than its representational relationship with the Holocaust. The only way to incorporate the Holocaust, and to register its incomprehensibility, is in a scripture which is an over-turning of previous scripture. Wiesel therefore alludes to, and subverts, the stories of the Exodus and the Akedah, as well as the Christian image of the Cross. Such allusion prompts a sense of 'dispossession', preventing consciousness from being the subject of traditions and interpretations, and so registering the radical discontinuity and incomprehensibility of the Holocaust, and preventing one from anticipating its significance. An 'it happens' is momentarily unconnected to acts of thought, to what has 'already been thought, written, painted in order to determine what hasn't been'.⁷¹

David Roskies has pointed out that the kind of rhetorical inter-textuality found in the writings of Jewish writers of the Holocaust is in the tradition of the biblical writers. Earlier figures were often recalled by the survivors of destruction in order to register their inadequacy as analogies. For example, 'The chastisement of my poor people / was greater than the punishment of Sodom, / which was overthrown in a moment, / without a hand

⁷¹ Quoted in Sande Cohen, 'Between Image and Phrase: Progressive History and the "Final Solution" as Dispossession', in Saul Friedlander (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Interpretation*, op.cit., pp.177-178.

striking it' (Lamentations 4: 6).⁷² Part of the response to catastrophe has always been a self-reflexive questioning of the available archetypes. However, Roskies distinguishes between the 'sacred parodists' and the modern 'sacreligious parodists' of the tradition. Even though the scribes of Lamentations may have lamented bitterly, questioning the efficacy of the figures and archetypes available to them, they ultimately respected the covenantal framework of guilt, punishment and retribution. On the other hand, 'the modern writers use parody to unmask the artificiality of the accepted conventions and to argue for radical change'.⁷³ However, James E. Young goes further and argues that the modern parodists are not keeping faith with the tradition, because, unlike the sacred parodists of the past, the moderns repudiate both the figure of the archetype and the meaning it imposes on experience.⁷⁴

The father/son relationship in *Night* has been viewed by Andre Neher as 'an anti-*Akedah*: not a father leading his son to be sacrificed, but a son guiding, dragging, carrying to the altar an old man who no longer has the strength to continue'. Whereas in the Bible God saves Isaac from being sacrificed by sending a ram to replace him, He does not intervene to save the father at the altar of Auschwitz. God allows the father to be consumed by Holocaust flames and the son is forced to recognise that he is impotent in the face of death's conquest. He must slowly watch his father die. His father, for Wiesel symbol of reason, strength and humanity, finally collapses under the barbarism of the Holocaust.⁷⁵ This inter-textual approach maintains a powerful sense of fracture: the horror of the Holocaust is suggested by the violent and radical analogies that are evoked. There is no

⁷² David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse*, op.cit., pp.13-14.

⁷³ Ibid., p.69.

⁷⁴ See James E. Young, op.cit.

⁷⁵ Quoted in Ellen S. Fine, *Legacy of Night*, op.cit., p.21.

possibility of resolution or interpretation - we are refused what Lyotard calls 'the solace of good forms' but the violence serves as witness to the unrepresentable.

The critic Lawrence S. Cunningham argues that *Night* functions as an 'Anti-Exodus'.⁷⁶ *Night* is the story of the movement of Wiesel's people from the God-intoxicated milieu of the Hungarian town of Sighet to the death-dominated life of the camps. It is thus an inversion of the Exodus story. The town of Sighet, as Wiesel describes it, is a secure and happy place with a comforting rural way of life, a strong sense of community and of God. An angel comes to the village, in the form of Moshe the Beadle, and tells the people to flee, for death will come to them. Unlike the angel of the Passover, this angel is thought to be mad and no-one listens to his message. Moshe's warnings are shown to be justified; the orders come for the Jews to pack their possessions in haste and get ready to leave. As Cunningham points out, in Wiesel's account there is a rumour among some that they will be sent to work in brick factories in the west. So in this anti-exodus, a people were to go and make bricks as slaves rather than leave behind such slavery. But even this proves an optimistic rumour. In the biblical story of the Exodus, the Jews were to find God in the desert; they were his people, He their God. In the *anti-Exodus*, people come into the desert not to be formed into a people but to have their peoplehood exterminated. In an obscene use of biblical vocabulary, 'election' and 'being chosen' mean being marked for death.

So the life-giving biblical myth of election, liberation, covenant and promise becomes the vehicle for telling the fearful story of death and destruction. By telling the story of *Night* within the framework of an earlier story, subverting the paradigmatic story of liberation and promise, the reader is forced into recognition of horror and incommensurability. The

⁷⁶ See Lawrence S. Cunningham, 'Elie Wiesel's Anti-Exodus', in Harry J. Cargas, *Responses to Elie Wiesel*, op.cit., pp.23-28.

irony, too, is that the paradigmatic salvific narrative is alluded to in order to be overturned, as though any attempt to find narrative coherence in the Holocaust must be avoided. The Exodus is displaced from its salvific role, so this displaces any surrender of the Holocaust to frames of theological rescue. Since, according to Wiesel, it is impossible to evoke death in writing since death is *par excellence* the most ineffable and incommunicable human experience, the best that one can do is to deny and distort everything that supports structures of living and hope.

Wiesel's allusion to the image of the cross at the end of Chapter 4 of *Night* is extremely provocative, and has been seized upon by critics wishing to find a theology in the novel.⁷⁷

Wiesel describes the execution of two men in the camp who had been discovered with arms, along with a young boy. Three gallows are erected, the three are hanged and the other prisoners forced to march past with their faces turned to watch those hanging. The two adults die quickly but the child, being so light, is still alive and remains so for more than half an hour. A man asks 'Where is God now?' and the narrator hears a voice within him answer, 'Where is He? Here He is - He is hanging here on this gallows...' (p.77).

Once again, the disturbing consequence of this passage is that theology is rendered silent.

The Cross, as the Christian image of salvation, is subverted; the Christian theological response rendered ineligible. Wiesel is presenting the unrepresentable, communicating a sense of the incomprehensible, by purging the incident of 'meaning'.

God does not resuscitate the young boy slowly dying on the gallows. This is, as Lawrence Langer observes, 'the ritual of death ungraced by the possibility of resurrection'.⁷⁸

The reader is driven to search for the implications of the Christian allusion, but attempts to find a consistent message are frustrated. The passage suggests multiple possibilities; for

⁷⁷ *Night*, pp.75-76.

⁷⁸ Lawrence Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1975), p.85.

example, the suggestion of atheism; or the assertion of the presence of God in curious and deeply alien circumstances when his presence is least perceptible, the incomprehensible God whose ways are not our ways; or the God who is present in his absence from human discourse. For Byron Sherwin, the message is that God only dies insofar as the image He shares with human beings, the stamp of divinity, has been erased by apathy.⁷⁹ Perhaps God is dead when human beings seek to rid themselves of the creator's imprint, or the memory of the unrepresentable 'other'.

The effect of such rhetorical inter-textuality is to make clear that the Holocaust cannot be integrated into antecedent perspectives. The effect of the biblical allusions is 'a poetics of displacement'. They displace theological schemes that would fix the text's meaning and conscript its service within religious or cultural agenda. The text sustains a stubborn dissonance which impedes the path of ideological reading, of seizing one direction in the text and using it to suppress any other claim. *L'univers concentrationnaire* is maintained in its difference rather than integrated into the reader's familiar world. Connections are made only to be broken.

The Texture of Memory

The ethical challenge which the Holocaust imposes upon us is the challenge to remember, to be witnesses to, the incomprehensible and the unrepresentable, especially as the incomprehensible is so easily interpreted or even denied. The incomprehensibility of the Holocaust is not rendered by any mimetic representation of it but by presenting it 'scripturally' as anti-scripture. However, the unrepresentable is forgotten as we are seduced by stable notions of 'meaning' - be they media images or historical narratives - into

⁷⁹ Byron L. Sherwin, 'Elie Wiesel and Jewish Theology', in *Responses to Elie Wiesel*, op.cit., p.143-144.

believing that we truly perceive 'the real'. The Holocaust presses most radically the necessary denial of 'meaning' and the task of an interminable anamnesis of what has never and *can* never be known but must never be forgotten.

The ethical significance of memory is the sensitivity it engenders towards 'otherness', the mystery of the singular which may never be grasped by the concept. It is also to guard against indifference, which is precisely a lack of memory. Our worst sin, according to Wiesel, is not that of criminal activity, but of *nonactivity*, apathy, indifference. It was an indifference to life on the part of the executioners and spectators which, in Wiesel's view, allowed the destruction of the six million.

According to Derrida, one remembers those others 'who are not present, nor presently living, either to us, in us, or outside us' in the name of *justice*. In the name of justice '...where it is not yet, not yet *there*, where it is no longer, let us understand where it is no longer *present*, and where it will never be, no more than the law, reducible to laws or rights'.⁸⁰ In the following chapter, I will explore the relationship between law and justice through readings of Derrida's influential essay 'Force of Law' (1990) and a novel by the Czech writer Ivan Klima, *Judge on Trial* (1986). These texts are read against the background of Vaclav Havel's analysis of Soviet Communism. Once again, I will explore the importance of writing in deconstructing the consequences of political ideology.

⁸⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, tr. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p.xix.

Chapter 3

BEFORE THE LAW

`At this late hour...the only ethic that remains possible is an ethic that acknowledges its necessary entanglement with the impossible.'¹

Justice without law is another name for God (Walter Benjamin)²

`By hope we are saved but hope which is visible is not hope'³

Implied in my title is an allusion to Franz Kafka's parable 'Before the Law' in his novel *The Trial*.⁴ As Derrida does, I am playing on two senses of the phrase 'before the law' – Kafka's 'man from the country' standing before the gate of the law, and the Law (which Derrida refers to as 'justice') as an ethical demand prior to, or exceeding, statutory law.

I want in this chapter to reflect on the relationship between law and justice, taking as my starting-points an essay by the Czech play-write and politician Václav Havel and a novel by a contemporary Czech novelist writing in the tradition of Franz Kafka, Ivan Klíma. I will argue that these works, written under the pressure of Soviet Communism, call for an *aporetic* or paradoxical relationship between law and justice such as that envisaged in Derrida's recent writing.

¹ Mark C. Taylor, *Nots* (Chicago and London: The Chicago University Press, 1993), p.94.

² See Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"', in Drucilla Cornell et al, *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (New York and London, Routledge, 1992), p.51.

³ Ivan Klíma, *A Ship Named Hope*, trans. Edith Pargeter (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1970), p.196.

⁴ Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, tr. Idris Parry (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), pp.166-173.

Communist ideology as experienced in Soviet Czechoslovakia calls for an ethic ever conscious of the inescapability of language just as it is fearful of language hardening into ideology. As George Steiner writes, 'Languages are living organisms. Infinitely complex, but organisms nevertheless. They have in them a certain life-force, and certain powers of absorption and growth. But they can decay and they can die'.⁵ We are all responsible for language, its life and its death. Our fear must be what Steiner calls the erosion of the logos, of the gain of letter on spirit. It is the very freedom of language, celebrated in literature, which allows one to move beyond ideological construction. In Wolfgang Iser's words, literature involves 'a continual repatterning of the culturally conditioned shapes human beings have assumed'.⁶

Literature written under the pressure of Communism alerts us to the fearful consequences of such deadening ideology: an ethic claiming to be comprehensive and all-inclusive, an ethic which must subsume the particular in the universal. The result, anticipated by Kafka at the dawn of Nazism, and a constant theme of the powerful dissident literature which developed in the Soviet bloc, is human alienation and a kind of collective stagnation, as the 'real' world of phenomena develops its own relentless logic⁷ and individuals struggle to find the meaning of 'freedom'. In Kafka, the institution is a mechanism which obeys its own laws; no-one knows who programmed those laws or when; they have nothing to do with human concerns and are thus unintelligible. As Milan Kundera puts it, writing of Kafka's *The Trial*:

⁵ George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman* (New York: Athencum, 1976), p.96.

⁶ Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993), p.xi.

⁷ See, for example, Kafka's parable 'In the Penal Colony', in Franz Kafka, *The Transformation and Other Stories*, tr. Malcolm Pasley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), pp.127-153.

In Kafka the logic is reversed. The person punished does not know the reason for the punishment. The absurdity of the punishment is so unbearable that to find peace the accused needs to find a justification for his penalty: *the punishment seeks the offense*.

The Prague engineer is punished by intensive police surveillance. This punishment demands the crime that was not committed, and the engineer accused of emigrating ends up emigrating in fact. The punishment has finally found the offense.⁸

Ivan Klima's early work *A Ship Named Hope* (1970) functions at a number of levels, but one of its themes is the ways in which ideology makes it impossible for people to take responsibility for their lives. Klima draws on a metaphor found, for example, in Plato's *Statesman* and *Republic*, in which the state is compared to a ship and the king to a captain.⁹ A group of tourists find themselves stranded, having missed the last ferry across a Scottish loch. They find themselves aboard the passenger ship *Hope*, which they expect to convey them across the loch. However, the captain has other plans for the ship's final voyage, a voyage into open sea, and, it eventually becomes clear, to inevitable destruction. The captain is in command but 'unmoved by any consideration of what effect his commands might have on the people aboard, with an officer who fulfilled orders without allowing himself to have any doubts about them, or even to give a moment's consideration to them'.¹⁰ Klima's story shows just how easy it is to allow one's moral judgement to be compromised by the system, as the main character, Jacob, a passenger stranded on the ship, tries to foster good relations with the ship's officer in order to gain the officer's confidence and establish the ship's destination, but succeeds only in helping the ship to sail its fatal course. Like Kafka's parable 'In the Penal Colony', the system must play out its relentless logic, much as the Nazi Final Solution continued relentlessly, impervious to economic or military good sense.

⁸ Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, tr. Linda Asher (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p.103.

⁹ For a discussion of this metaphor, see Michael B. Naas' introduction to Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, tr. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), p.xliv.

¹⁰ Klima, *A Ship Named Hope*, op.cit., p.227.

In *Specters of Marx* (1994), Derrida argues that one of the historical factors influencing so-called 'deconstruction' was totalitarian terror in the countries of the Eastern bloc.¹¹

One of the lessons of the various varieties of terror which have blighted our century seems to be the need for an ethic painfully conscious that any given perspective or social vision must be partial, a necessary abstraction, and one constantly in need of revivifying or rethinking. The various monologic systems of our century call us to retain a memory of 'excess'. 'Excess' might seem a curious word in this context, particularly given Aristotle's connection, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, of morality with moderation.¹²

However, the term is being used in its Derridean sense, as that which falls beneath the repeatable terms of language. So to retain a memory of this excess is to be sensitive to the multiplicity of history, the memory of the countless forgotten voices, which enables one to raise one's conscience against injustice. Literature maintains such a memory, just as ideology kills it.

Only a sense of enormity and incomprehension sustains our capacity to respond to suffering. Any attempt to limit responsibility by fixing the ethical relation within the boundaries of norms or narratives risks limiting our capacity to recognise the suffering of others. For as Dwight Furrow puts it, in his recent book *Against Theory* (1995) reason alone makes the forgotten eminently forgettable.¹³

I should note here that, while this chapter focuses on extreme forms of totalising discourse, such an approach to ethics seems as urgent as ever in the contemporary world

¹¹ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, tr. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p.15.

¹² See Stephen H. Webb, 'The Rhetoric of Ethics as Excess: A Christian Theological Response to Emmanuel Levinas', in *Modern Theology* 15:1, January 1999, 1-16.

¹³ Dwight Furrow, *Against Theory: Continental and Analytic Challenges in Moral Philosophy* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), p.190.

of liberal democracy, where the pressures of rationalisation and bureaucracy are so insistent.¹⁴

This chapter will argue that the situation described, for example in Ivan Klima's novel *Judge on Trial* (1986), calls for an aporetic approach to ethics such as that explored in Jacques Derrida's essay 'Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority' (1990), and his recent study *Specters of Marx*. Derrida sees that law-making *requires* abstraction but that it must be enlivened, and laws must continually be revived or revised, in an attempt to deal with the particular, recognising that particular formulations are always less than ideal and must be brought into tension with the particular case. Such a vision, I will argue, implies a *messianic* perspective - a view which Derrida explores further in *Specters of Marx*.

Vaclav Havel, 'The Power of the Powerless'

To begin my reflections, I turn first to an influential essay by Vaclav Havel, 'The Power of the Powerless', a reflection on what Havel calls post-totalitarianism.¹⁵

'The power of the powerless' represents another paradox or aporia - a reconceiving of power, not in terms of ideological solutions but learning to live within the paradox, 'the power of the powerless'. Stephen K. White calls for such a shift in understanding at the end of his book on *Political Theory and Postmodernism* (1991) - the need for a

¹⁴ In *Specters of Marx*, op.cit., Derrida opposes the utopianism of certain thinkers of the New Right and neo-liberal Western democracies. Derrida opposes the political Right in its 'manic triumphalism' over the collapse of Communism. For example, the American historian Francis Fukuyama, in his book *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), celebrates a capitalist paradise as the end of history. Derrida sees capitalism and liberalism as a dogmatic discourse, and argues that 'never in history has the horizon of the thing whose survival is being celebrated been as dark, threatening, and threatened'.

¹⁵ Vaclav Havel et al (ed. John Keane), *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the state in central-eastern Europe* (London: Hutchinson, 1985)

It is ironic that Havel, like Mikhail Bakhtin, is writing within the spectre of Marx's own writings in order to expose the enormity of the totalitarian state that has arisen out of *Marxism*. Havel may be seen as the spectre of Marx exorcising Marxist ideology. Ironically, Havel's essay begins echoing the start of the Communist Manifesto.

`thoroughgoing realignment of modern consciousness ... the slow process of learning to be at home in homelessness, or reorientating ourselves to our own finitude and the meaning of otherness'.¹⁶

The background to Havel's essay is Charter 77, a call by leading dissident figures in Communist Czechoslovakia for civil and human rights to be respected.

Havel begins his essay with an analysis of the nature of power in the Eastern bloc. One feature which distinguishes this system from classical dictatorships is that it is not limited in a local geographical sense; nation states are united by a single framework throughout the power bloc. The power bloc has been systematically organised according to a set of ideals, which claims a certain comprehensiveness. A feature of the historical origins of Soviet Communism is a `correct understanding' of social conflicts in the period from which the original movement emerged. Havel describes it as a secularised religion, offering a ready answer to any question; `it can scarcely be accepted only in part, and accepting it has profound implications for human life'. The price of such a quasi-religious ideal is an abdication of one's own reason, conscience and responsibility: the centre of power becomes the centre of truth.

According to Havel, ideology offers human beings the illusion of an identity, of dignity, and of morality, while making it easier to part with them.¹⁷ Responsibilities are fulfilled if the State's demands are obeyed. The State represents a `supra-personal', objective ethical authority and enables people to deceive themselves that duty to the state represents ethical duty. It is a veil behind which people can hide their duplicities and their adaptation to the status quo. All those involved are provided with the illusion that the system is in harmony

¹⁶ Stephen K. White, *Political Theory and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.147.

¹⁷ `The Power of the Powerless', p.28.

with the human order and the order of the universe. The fearful consequence of such ideology is that the system assumes a life of its own; a fracture is opened up between human aspirations and the aims of the system. As Havel puts it, 'while life, in its essence, moves towards plurality, diversity, independent self-constitution and self-organisation..., the post-totalitarian system demands conformity, uniformity and discipline'.¹⁸ No matter what position individuals hold in the hierarchy of power, they are not considered by the system to be worth anything in themselves, but only as things intended to serve the automatism.

Ideology becomes mere simulacrum, a world of appearances and ritual, a formalised language deprived of semantic contact with reality.¹⁹ Havel gives the famous example of the greengrocer, who hangs a sign in his shop window, 'Workers of the world unite', not through any political conviction, but as a subconscious sign that he is willing to conduct his business according to the rules of the game, and to secure his business interests free from State scrutiny. In other words, he conceals his fear of losing his job behind an alleged interest in the unification of the workers of the world. Similarly, the government official can cloak his interest in staying in power in phrases about service to the working class. The significance of phenomena no longer derives from the phenomena themselves, but from their locus as concepts in the ideological context. Reality does not shape theory, but rather the reverse. In this situation, the demands of the State feed on the human fear of exclusion and alienation from society. In consequence, human beings end up living a 'double life' - at once maintaining notional conformity to the status quo, whilst seeking to

¹⁸ Ibid., pp.29-30.

¹⁹ Like Kafka, Havel is much influenced by Edmund Husserl's *The Crisis of European Sciences* (1936) and Husserl's concern that theoretical knowledge has lost contact with living human experience (*Lebenswelt*). For a discussion of Havel's writing, within the context of the Czech intellectual tradition, see Walter H. Capps, 'Interpreting Vaclav Havel', in *Cross Currents*, Fall 1997, 301-316. Capps writes, 'For Havel, the resort to *Lebenswelt* fostered the conditions of "living in truth". The alternative to top-down, mechanistic, manipulative theoretical deduction (which, in Havel's view, is the tendency of Marxism) is acute attention to what Havel calls "the flow of life"' (307).

live out personal aspirations. Hence, the recurrent theme of alienation in literature emerging from this context, and the question of what is meant by 'freedom'.

A further consequence is a kind of collective stagnation, as people become incapable of understanding any language other than the one that has stultified them.

Obviously, this experience of 'living within a lie' is not exclusive to totalitarian regimes, though such regimes do bring the issues into focus. As Havel puts it, 'A person who has been seduced by the consumer value system, whose identity is dissolved in the accoutrements of mass civilization, and who has no roots in the order of being, no sense of responsibility for anything higher than his or her personal survival, is a demoralised person. The system depends on this demoralization, deepens it, is in fact a projection of it into society'.²⁰ This is an indictment on liberal democracies as much as 'late-totalitarian' regimes.

Another way of articulating Havel's analysis is that ideologies rely on a 'literalising' of language - a reification, so that linguistic structures no longer feed on lived experience but, rather, dictate the terms in which lives are to be lived.

In order to confront this simulacrum, Havel argues for a powerful dissident literature. By 'dissidence', Havel is arguing for an intellectual stance which continually problematises any notion of ideological completeness, which, in other words remains perceptive to 'otherness'. 'Dissidence', in these terms, is not, then, simply irresponsible opposition to authority, but a constant reminder of the excess of experience over interpretation. There is an important relationship, then, between dissidence and excess, memory and literature.

²⁰ 'The Power of the Powerless', p.45.

Because, in terms of ideology, political 'reality' becomes a discreet linguistic order, informed by habitual conventions and habits of thought (all the more so as the Western media banalises political realities), there is a need for the logic to be challenged by an 'outside' voice. Havel puts it thus: 'It is because those who are not politicians are also not so bound by traditional political thinking and political habits and therefore, paradoxically, they are more aware of genuine political reality and more sensitive to what can and should be done under the circumstances'.²¹ The role of the dissident is to question abstract projects for an ideal political or economic order and to insist on a concrete and human 'here and now' - in other words, to force the universal to be called into question by the particular. 'To shed the burden of traditional political categories and habits and open oneself up fully to the world of human existence and then to draw political conclusions only after having analysed it: this is not only politically more realistic but at the same time, from the point of view of an 'ideal state of affairs', politically more promising as well'.²² A better economic or political order is not achieved by trying to realise abstract political ideals but from 'profound existential and moral changes in society'. 'A better system will not automatically ensure a better life. In fact the opposite is true: only by creating a better life can a better system be developed'.²³ Political and economic language need to be re-charged and re-enlivened by attention to concrete individual instances of injustice. More generally, using Derridean terms, such existential and moral changes require a paradoxical understanding of language which recognises its necessity as well as its 'fallenness' (it is interesting that Derrida uses such *theological* language to describe a *linguistic* condition). The dissident voice refuses to allow language to harden into ideology and insists on the need for language to retain a sense of its provisionality. It is simply not sufficient to oppose the post-totalitarian system by

²¹ Ibid., p.51.

²² Ibid., p.52.

²³ Ibid., p.52

establishing a different political line and then striving for change in government. In so doing, one would simply be re-enforcing the existing 'language game' instead of calling attention to the banality of the language itself. What I have been calling the 'dissident voice' forces politics to return to individual people. Havel insists that such a return is just as necessary in western democracies, where the violence done to human beings is not nearly so obvious and cruel (a theme I will return to again with Derrida's *Specters of Marx*). Systemic change in itself is secondary and can guarantee nothing. An attitude is required which turns away from abstract political visions of the future and towards concrete human beings and ways of defending them effectively in the here and now. Such a view is antipathetic to all forms of violence carried out in the name of a 'better future', and sees that a future secured by violence might actually be worse than what exists now: in other words, the future would be fatally stigmatised by the very means used to secure it.²⁴ As Havel suggests in the final words of his essay, the 'brighter future' might be a new way of conceiving things, what I would wish to call a sense of the aporetic, a sensitivity to 'otherness' and the necessary tension between the general and the particular. Havel writes, 'For the real question is whether the 'brighter future' is really always so distant. What if, on the contrary, it has been here for a long time already, and only our own blindness and weakness has prevented us from seeing it around us and within us, and kept us from developing it?'²⁵

Since post-totalitarian regimes are characterised by what Havel calls 'living within a lie', one's conformity to the regime being a cloak for various vested interests, the role of the dissident voice is to expose this duplicity, to insist on what the laws of the land really say, and the distance between the laws and the reality. As Derrida is continually doing, the concern is to re-energise the dead language of the law (for example, we see this in

²⁴ Ibid., p.71.

²⁵ Ibid., p.96.

Derrida's essays on Nelson Mandela and South Africa, discussed in the next chapter²⁶). Because of the system's paranoid dependence on the illusion that the laws are being observed, such a critique is extremely powerful and the system is compelled to react. Such appeals make the purely ritualistic nature of the law clear to society and to those who inhabit its power structures (which is precisely what Charter 77 attempted to do). Havel's essay aims to ruin 'this whole game of "as if" by 'consistently calling things by their proper names'.²⁷

One might claim that Havel is arguing for the power of the *irreducible* word, 'excessive', resistant to stable categories or concepts. Whilst ideologies reduce the word, freezing and 'naturalising' language, such dissident, or prophetic, literature enlivens language by insisting on the aporetic - language becomes most powerful, and most responsible, when it insists on its inadequacy and powerlessness. The dissident voice retains the linguistic condition that exists in the phrase 'the power of the powerless'.²⁸

Literature and Ethics

Such an aporetic quality is an essentially literary device and it is no accident that the dissident voice to which Havel refers is largely literary. The force of literature, as Derrida continually reminds us, is that it promotes variety and multiplicity, and avoids the imposed unity of ideology.

Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian intellectual in the 1920s and until his death in 1975, is another important literary figure in the struggle against Soviet Communism. Bakhtin opposed the

²⁶ See Derrida, 'The Laws of Reflection: Nelson Mandela, In Admiration', in Jacques Derrida and Mustapha Tlili (eds.), *For Nelson Mandela* (New York: Seaver Books, 1987).

²⁷ An interesting Derridean resonance here. The term 'proper name' is also used by Derrida to signify the particular which is always being lost in the universal.

²⁸ The notion of 'the power of the powerless' is reminiscent of St. Paul's notion of the 'foolishness of God' or the reversals of the Magnificat or the Sermon on the Mount.

linguistic formalism of leading scholars like Roman Jakobson and Viktor Shklovsky, who were favoured by the political establishment. These writers saw art as an autonomous enterprise, to be examined on its own terms.²⁹ For these writers, literature is essentially apolitical, which of course accounts for their political acceptance in the 1920s. As David Jasper puts it,

...[the Russian Formalists'] linguistic principles tended towards the production of a rhetoric which beautifully sustained an authoritarian ideology perceived in quasi-theological terms, on a vertical axis which professed an inbreaking of beneficent authority, but actually embraced a static, unified version of society which can make no moral claims outside its own structures.³⁰

Against this formalist rhetoric, Bakhtin sets a carnival world that is organised on a horizontal, rather than a vertical, axis, celebrating incompleteness and ambiguity.³¹

In *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* (1929), Bakhtin argues that Dostoyevsky institutes a new genre, the 'polyphonic' novel, which is characterised by the multiplicity of voices present in it, none of which is subjected to the authoritarian control of the author.

Dostoyevsky, like Goethe's Prometheus, creates not voiceless slaves (as does Zeus), but rather free people who are capable of standing beside their creator, of disagreeing with him, and even of rebelling against him.³²

Similarly, Havel sees the novel as a game with invented characters. One sees the world through their eyes and thus sees it from various angles. The more differentiated the characters, the more the author and the reader have to step outside themselves and try to understand.

²⁹ See Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp.59-73.

³⁰ David Jasper, *Rhetoric, Power and Community* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p.97.

³¹ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). Rabelais (1494?-1553), author of the *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua*, develops the anti-authoritarian practices of the language of carnival and popular festivity, which play freely with language to parody the languages of the Church and the magistrates. The individual character has free play against the author or social rules and conventions.

³² Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p.4.

Whereas ideology wants to convince that its truth is absolute, a novel shows everything is relative. Whilst ideology is a school of intolerance, the form of the a novel teaches tolerance and understanding. As Havel argues, the more ideological our century has become, the more anachronistic the novel, but the more anachronistic it gets, the more we need it.³³

According to Havel, the destruction of the story breeds a strange collective deadening. The life of an individual becomes the dull and uniform functioning of a component in a large machine and his or her death is merely something which puts him or her out of commission. Havel describes a late-totalitarian system in which revolutionary ethos and terror have been replaced by dull inertia, bureaucratic anonymity and mindless, stereotypical behaviour, the whole point of which is to become, ever more fully, exactly what they are. By contrast, according to Havel, every story begins with an event - the incursion of one 'logic' into the world of another 'logic'. The logic of the story is that of dialogue, encounter and the interaction of different truths, attitudes, ideas, traditions, passions - independent forces which have done nothing in advance to define each other. As such, the novel is not amenable to one overarching 'meaning'; it refuses resolution.

Derrida in his writings precisely tries to do justice to the literary text as radically *situated* - written, read and re-read at particular times and places - and as possessing a singularity (each time) which can never be reduced by criticism or theoretical contemplation.³⁴

By contrast, in late-totalitarian society, there is a single, central agent of all truth and all power. Everything is known ahead of time. And when everything is known ahead of time, there is no soil for the story to grow out of. When the story is destroyed, the feeling

³³ See Vaclav Havel, 'Stories and Totalitarianism', in *Index on Censorship*, Vol.17, No.3, March 1988.

³⁴ See, for example, Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York and London: Routledge, 1992).

of historicity disappears as well (' historicity', that is, as Lyotard envisages it, the memory *that we have forgotten*, a sense of the multiple strands which make up history, and a sense of the unforeseeable and the unknown).

Havel argues that as the story is destroyed, the very experience of time begins to disappear: time seems to stand still or go round in circles. Totalitarian power brings bureaucratic order into the living disorder of history and thus effectively anaesthetized it as history. This nihilisation stems from the belief that ideology has fully understood the world and revealed the truth about it. In Derrida's terms, it is a failure of memory and hope, a failure to live with the inescapability of forgetting as we order our experience.

It is story which is one of the channels of Havel's dissident voice, refusing to allow the particular to be lost in the universal, refusing to allow the system to forget its 'others'. The dominant tradition in philosophy tends to see injustice as a *derivative* phenomenon: as what happens when just norms are broken. As Stephen K. White points out, injustice is not only derivative within this tradition; it is of secondary concern, because it tends to be seen as essentially correctable. So theory has tended to be concerned with the goal of justice, with injustice seen as a temporary obstacle.³⁵ Literature continually reminds us that injustice is a central and ineliminable feature of the world, because we simply cannot know enough about people or events to fulfil the demands of justice. In Derrida's terms justice is an excessive demand. The writer consistently deflates the dominant model's faith in the efficacy of norms - a faith which *blinds* us to injustice. The dissident voice of literature, with its focus on injustice, calls for engagement with neglected ethical/political issues, the different faces of victimhood, the ways in which we rationalise or learn to live with injustice. In other words, literature insists on the excess which destabilises categories

³⁵ See Stephen K. White, *Political Theory and Postmodernism*, op.cit., pp.122-4. White is discussing Judith Shklar's observations in her article, 'Giving Injustice Its Due', in *Yale Law Journal* 98 (April 1989).

of 'justice' and 'injustice'. By engaging in a deconstruction of such categories, language is continually sustained and revisited by a poetics of excess and memory. Categories of 'justice' and 'injustice', then, become subject to linguistic tropes rather than ideological structures.

Ivan Klíma, *Judge on Trial*

...the opportunity to study and reflect on law offered the greatest satisfaction while the requirement to implement it was the saddest or most painful fate that could befall one. The practice of law led either to cynicism or madness. We could see examples of the former all around us, and as for the latter, suffice it to recall Kafka, who, though few realised it, was a Prague lawyer...³⁶

...human history was an eternal clash between poets and policemen and that clash had never been resolved. And was unlikely to be.³⁷

Since the Prague Spring the Czech intelligentsia has returned to the traditional role it inherited from the nineteenth century. In the face of a massive onslaught on society by a totalitarian power, the sphere of culture became the ultimate rampart against 'normalisation' or 'sovietisation'. Much Czech literature written under the pressure of Communism charts the gradual erosion of messianic ideals by the praxis of social engineering. Often writers engage with Marxism and the Marxist concept of history and insist on the multiplicity of history which enables one to rouse one's conscience against injustice.

Ivan Klíma was born in Prague in 1931. His writing is haunted by imprisonment and the quest for 'freedom'. His protagonists seem to move from gaol to gaol, as each 'freedom' leads to disillusionment and a new incarceration. He himself witnessed the horrors of Nazi occupation during the war (he began to write in Terezin concentration camp); the Stalinist regimes of the fifties; the celebrations of the Prague Spring (he was editor of

³⁶ Ivan Klíma, *Judge on Trial*, tr. Alice and Gerald Turner (London: Chatto and Windus, 1991), p.283.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.388.

Czechoslovakia's most important literary magazine); the despair of the Soviet invasion in 1968; the bravery of the members of Charter 77; the triumph of the Velvet Revolution in 1989, and the uncertainty which followed. Much of his writing emerged during the years of Soviet Communism and a constant theme is the alienation of the individual. As in Kafka, in Klíma's novels the 'real' world of phenomena develops its own logic and leaves his characters yearning for a freedom they are unable to grasp. For Klíma's characters, every 'freedom' becomes the next incarceration, because each 'freedom', whether it be Communist ideology or, as in one of his recent novels, *Waiting for the Dark, Waiting for the Light* (1994) the liberal democracy of the post-Communist Czech Republic, each attempt to realise utopia, inevitably brings disappointment. So, for example, the Holocaust victim becomes the foot soldier of the new glorious revolution:

Convinced I had to do something to ensure that people never again lost their freedom, so that they should never again find themselves in hermetically sealed surroundings with no chance of escape, ruled solely by butchers' knives, I prepared to become a foot-soldier of the revolution, a hobby horse for a new generation of butchers to mount, and wielding their cleavers drive the scattered human herd into rebuilt enclosures, and set to with their knives to carve out the splendid future.³⁸

A discussion of Klíma's *Judge on Trial* (1986) will focus the issue of the relationship between law and justice, the need for poetics and a discourse of the messianic.

As one of Klíma's characters puts it, 'It seemed to me I had to solve the contradiction between people's yearning for justice and the institutions that pretended to be satisfying that aspiration'.

In the tradition of the polyphonic novel, *Judge on Trial* is governed by no overarching 'metanarrative'; the story of the protagonist Adam - a lawyer struggling with his sense of professional and personal alienation, having lost faith in the ideals of the Party - is not unilinear. Various stories are juxtaposed with each other, there is a variety of narrative

³⁸ Ibid., p.69.

voice and no clear distinction between past and present. Moreover, all the characters are morally ambiguous; all are sympathetic and to some extent victims. The way the characters are presented shows the difficulty of binary oppositions, such as 'just' and 'unjust', 'guilty' and 'innocent' - all are characters enmeshed in complex histories and webs of relationships.

As a lawyer working for the Party, Adam is at once excluding force and one who is excluded. He is employed to exclude individuals, not only from the legal system, but perhaps more importantly from the possibility of justice. At the same time he also feels himself to be excluded, both from society as a whole and the individuals around him, but also ultimately from the legal system which he represents and of which initially he thought himself a part.

Judge on Trial shows the human consequences when law and justice collapse into each other. At one point in the novel Adam engages in conversation with one of the 'older' law professors, who reflects that

Legislation was enacted and its implementation was assured by the rulers, and rulers always used violence; every law was intrinsically an act of violence against human liberty. He asked me whether I believed it was possible to achieve some kind of pure justice ...

Yes, of course, that was how it always started. Everyone yearned for perfection and purity. As if there existed some collective creative spirit that soared ever higher and higher. However, it soon found itself far above the earth and got lost in the clouds, whereupon it forgot why it had set out in the first place and where it was bound. At that point it could see only itself and became fascinated by its own image. It actually became bewitched by its own face, its own proceedings, its own words, its own form, its perfect logical judgement.³⁹

A constant theme in Klíma's novels is a search for a locus of freedom and value. Because the Party represents ideals which it enforces, there is little hope of anything 'other' - the

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.283.

void is filled with constant rush, a sense of merely marking time. Adam regrets that '...since most conversations consisted entirely of repetition - phrases, events, ideas, opinions - he usually kept quiet' (p.87). He asks, 'Which was the path of salvation? What was the country, where was the place where you would know you were alive?' (p.91)

It is the quest for an 'ideal' which makes Klíma's novels a catalogue of failed relationships and false hopes. Adam is no exception. His personal investment in the ideals of the Party has meant that, as his ideals are disappointed, there is nothing to fill the vacuum and he cannot relate to those around him.

Maybe life had always been like that, but previously he hadn't had time to notice the dreariness. He had channelled his interest, feelings and activity elsewhere, into developments he assumed were going to transform the world. It was from that quarter too that he had looked to see fulfilment coming. But with his unavoidable withdrawal from such involvement, he was shocked to find that he had nothing to fill the vacuum left behind. He found nowhere to turn his restless soul; nothing and no one to fix his expectations on. (p.76)

Adam's mother has learnt that one should not have different aspirations from other people, that one should only aspire after what is permitted (p.91), a pressure to conform which breeds fear of denunciation and suspicion of others.

The novel shows that there is no ideal way of life for the individual or society - human beings are the product of a whole range of variables and they lead only one of many possible lives. What all Klíma's characters fail to do is live with this ambivalence.

As he grows up, Adam, is looking for the absolute, for harmony. As Ian Ward has pointed out, in *Judge on Trial* at various points in the narrative, through Adam, Klíma considers the whole gamut of legal theories, natural law, positivism, Kantianism, and

critical legal theory.⁴⁰ Adam is seduced by the beguiling logic of the system, its quest for consistency and perfection: He reflects that '...the very attempt to encompass the whole of life and organise it into a system enthralled me' (pp.235). He joins in the quest to banish unreason from society, to realise a perfectly balanced and harmonious ideal - 'a society carefully run so as to leave no scope for unreason' (p.280).

From his first experiences as a 'judge' at school, when he is asked as a Party member to pass judgement on his classmates, to his later personal relationships, Adam believes that judgement involves exteriorising a person and measuring them against a standard (the '...pretence of being a model individual judging a malefactor, p.287), which also enables him to avoid judging himself.

At an early stage, Adam is convinced by a Marxist vision of justice.: 'The basis of all crimes' was 'inequality, and material inequality above all' (p.163) ... 'all the misery that has been caused by property...As soon as someone acquires property he starts to block the path of progress, sometimes by force of arms...When the world is ruled by those who work there will be no reason to conquer the world'. Adam's friend Mirak replies that: 'General rules were easy to formulate, and they tended to neglect the various contradictions, variables and possible objections ...'

Once an ideal of normality has been established, all kinds of crimes are justified in pursuit of the ideal. 'We commit crimes, or at least we acquiesce in them, so we can go on leading normal lives. But we can never live normally again once we are implicated' (p.131). The very desire for purity is dangerous. 'The very will to cleanse oneself of evil and to atone for guilt conceals within it the risk of new crimes and new wrongs' (p.103).

⁴⁰ Ian Ward, 'Ivan Klíma's *Judge on Trial*: A Study in Law and Literature', in *Scottish Slavonic Review*, Glasgow, 20, Spring 1993, 24.

In other words, the novel denies a world in which people can be sorted out into guilty and innocent, defendant and judges. From the beginning of the novel, we are confronted with the difficult distinction between defendant and judge. We are given an account of the life of the man Adam is judging - his mother abandoned him, his grandmother was executed, his father turned to drink. This is a pathetic figure, largely the victim of circumstances, and his life story reminds Adam of his own childhood experiences as a victim of Nazism.

A priest who knew the defendant in prison

'Don't imagine that I seek to condone that dreadful deed, if he did commit it. But ever since I heard about it, my thoughts have turned again and again to the lad. What was the extent of his guilt and the guilt of those who killed the man within him and impregnated his soul with hatred?' (p.265)

The system gives people protective roles which define them in relation to the whole; Klima exposes these definitions as flimsy and misleading.

Judge on Trial is concerned with the consequences when a system denies the tension between the universal and the particular. The alienation of individuals from the system generates a lack of hope, which forces them in on themselves.

Like Havel's essay, *Judge on Trial* is insisting that language, law, becomes most powerful, and most responsible, when it remembers its 'fallenness'. The dissident voice retains the linguistic condition that exists in the phrase 'judge on trial'. The paradox of this title is its very necessity.

Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law'

It seems that the problematic described in Klima's novel calls for an aporetic model of ethics such as that described in Derrida's important essay, 'Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority'⁴¹ and, more recently, *Specters of Marx*.

⁴¹ Derrida, 'Force of Law', op.cit.

All Derrida's writing is an attempt to break away from the fatalism of philosophy built on static foundations, towards affirmation of possibility. As he insists in his now famous interview with Richard Kearney, 'Deconstruction is not an enclosure in nothingness but an openness towards the other'.⁴² He distinguishes between 'positions' (stable foundations on which philosophies are built) and 'affirmations'. So, for example, 'justice' can never be stabilised and reduced to what *is*. He points out that founding acts, like a new constitution, are always impositions - they are never 'self-grounded'. The foundation of a law is always outside the law thus founded. The principle foundation cannot found itself. A distinction has to be maintained, then, between law, as necessary imposition, and justice. Justice is never realised, or grounded in an unshakeable foundation, because there are simply too many perspectives, too many 'proper names'. It is attempts to build justice on a stable foundation which have led to the kind of self-justifying post-totalitarian system Havel describes. Derrida speaks in messianic terms of justice 'to come'. In his interview with Kearney he shifts into strikingly theological language:

It is true that I interrogate the idea of an "eschaton" or "telos" in the absolute formulations of classical philosophy. But that does not mean that I dismiss all forms of Messianic or prophetic eschatology. I think that all genuine questioning is summoned by a certain type of eschatology, though it is impossible to define this eschatology in philosophical terms. The search for objective or absolute criteria is, to be sure, an essentially philosophical gesture. Prophecy differs from philosophy in so far as it dispenses with such criteria. The prophetic word is its own criterion and refuses to submit to an external tribunal which would judge or evaluate it in an objective or neutral fashion. The prophetic word reveals its own eschatology and finds its index of truthfulness in its own inspiration and not in some transcendental or philosophical criteriology.⁴³

The sub-title of *Force of Law* ('The *Mystical* Foundation of Authority') is extremely important. As we have seen, for Derrida justice is not self-grounded but is a responsibility

⁴² Richard Kearney (ed.), *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p.124.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.119.

to an 'other' who is always before the law. A 'mystical' ethic is an ethic premised on no ground of its own. The word 'mystical' functions negatively, as a concern that no justificatory discourse can or should assume the role of a meta-language in relation to its dominant interpretation. The term 'mystical' represents a refusal to allow law to be tautologous or self-justifying. What is rotten in a legal system, it seems, is precisely the erasure of its own mystical foundation of authority so that the system can dress itself up as justice.

The word 'justice' comes from the Latin 'iuris', denoting that which is *binding* (in Derrida's terms, perhaps, a binding responsibility, an infinite obligation, a recognition that current notions of justice are always inadequate fictions or approximations, to be questioned and improved). By contrast, the word 'law' means 'to gather or set in order', to stabilise. According to Derrida, one cannot speak directly about, thematise or objectify justice. Justice is an infinite obligation - it concerns the other as other in a unique situation, irreducible to objective law.⁴⁴ If justice is identified with positive law, the very notion of justice is undermined. Whereas law is deconstructible (constructed, interpretable, textual); justice is not.⁴⁵ Law is deconstructible to the extent that it claims to be founded on something - conventions, rules, norms, or nature itself. There is no static foundation on which laws can be built. As he repeatedly argues, any constitution is an imposition to the extent that it is a performative act, bringing about what it claims as its ground. Law is statutory and stabilizable, a matter of legality and right, calculable within a system of

⁴⁴ It is to be noted that what Derrida calls 'justice' is very close to what Levinas calls 'ethics'.

⁴⁵ Derrida's sense of the relationship between law and justice is reminiscent of Chapter 13 of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans. Here Paul urges his readers to submit themselves to the governing authorities, 'for there is no authority except that which God has established'. In verse 8 we read, 'Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow-man has fulfilled the law'. The commandments are summed up in the injunction to 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (verse 9). Paul's readers are called to live according to the law, which is finite, whereas one's binding obligation to one's neighbour is infinite. The infinite obligations of love inform and fulfil the finite obligations of legality.

regulated codes and presentations. Justice is the *possibility* of deconstruction - an unrepresentable 'before'. Derrida goes so far as to say that deconstruction *is* justice⁴⁶, by which he means that deconstruction keeps open the 'beyond' of currently unimaginable transformative possibilities precisely in the name of justice. Justice is an infinite responsibility to which we can never close our ears or eyes through an appeal to what *is*. Deconstruction thus leads to a sense of responsibility without limits, excessive incalculable, before memory (since our memories rely on narrative structures). Yet although laws are always inadequate and always open to question, they are nevertheless unavoidable. This is a version of the aporia to which Derrida returns repeatedly - we inhabit language so that there is no extra-linguistic perspective available to us; every representation is partial and exclusive since language is about repetition and generalisation, but words nevertheless have great power for good and ill and must be used responsibly, 'ethically'.

Justice is the experience of the impossible, of the undecidable, of aporia. Justice always concerns singularity, the other in a unique situation. Yet societies need to regulate justice in laws which are necessarily general and impartial. Inasmuch as the singular is unique it can never be comprehended within any general structure. Any legitimate judgement, then, must recognise the tension between the generality of the law and the singularity of the particular case. So Derrida places his emphasis not on singularity as such, but on the puzzling yet productive relation between singularity and generality.

The undecidable is not merely the oscillation or tension between two decisions, it is the experience of that which, though heterogeneous, foreign to the order of the calculable, the rule, is still obliged ... to give itself up to the impossible decision while taking account of law and rules. A decision that didn't go through the ordeal of the undecidable would not be a free decision, it would only be the programmable

⁴⁶ Derrida, 'Force of Law', *op.cit.*, p.15.

application or unfolding of a calculable process. It might be legal, it would not be just.⁴⁷

A desire for justice whose structure would not be such an experience of aporia would have no chance of being what it is, namely a call for justice. Instead, it would merely be about unfolding a particular programme or discourse. The law then loses its grounding in the particular, is reified and assumes a life of its own.⁴⁸ The absolute singular is 'before' the law. In other words, it is not a past present that can be re-membered or re-collected - it is, in Levinas' terms, an 'unrepresentable before'.

Derrida's notion of 'iterability' is important here. Iterability is the necessary repeatability of any item experienced as meaningful (for example, a law), which at the same time can never be repeated exactly since it has no essence that could remain unaffected by the potentially infinite contexts into which it could be grafted. When this notion of iterability is denied and language is literalised, we are back to the problems we identified above.

Institutions of law are charged with a responsibility to retain the memory of aporia - the irresolvable tension between the generality of the law and the specificity of the particular case.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.24.

⁴⁸ Similarly, Paul Lehmann ponders this aporia in his discussion of Romans 13: 1-10 (See Paul Lehmann, *The Transfiguration of Politics*, London: SCM Press, 1975, pp.34-48). He writes, '...a premature celebration of the messianic presence is vulnerable to demonic distortion, as well as open to divine enablement' (p.34). Lehmann argues that, according to Paul, '...the state is the instrument, not the source, of authentic sovereignty, and that the state and revolution are on a collision course, so long as the state obstructs and does not serve authentic sovereignty. As Paul interprets Jesus, however, it appears that Jesus sees more clearly than does Marx (and with him the makers of revolution and the shapers of modern revolutionary experience) that revolutions imperil the love that they so passionately practice by devouring their own children either through the self-justification of their own authority or through dissipation as rebellion against authority. A politics of confrontation in Jesus' sense in neither submission to, nor legitimization of, existing governments. *It is a much more subtle practice of the love of neighbor that recognises in existing authorities the great divide between a self-justifying legitimacy that ends in the tyranny of order and a self-justifying rebellion that ends in the tyranny of anarchy*' (p.39). Lehmann's discussion of Karl Barth's commentary on Romans 13 brings out some similar resonances. The State is to be seen as God's agent and must render certain services and duties, but, when it confuses itself with the order of God, it begets its own downfall. The revolutionary is always nearer to what God is doing in the world to make human life human but is imperiled by the temptation to mistake his own 'no' to the existing order for the new order (p.45).

Levinas sets up a contrast which is very similar to Derrida's distinction between justice and law. Levinas speaks of 'ethics', as the extreme exposure and sensitivity of one subject to another, which becomes 'morality' as soon as we move into the political world of the impersonal 'third' - the world of government, institutions, tribunals, schools, prisons, committees. But the norm which must continue to inspire and direct the moral order is the *ethical* norm of the inter-human. If the moral-political order totally relinquishes its ethical foundation, it must accept all forms of society including the fascist or totalitarian, for it can no longer evaluate or distinguish between them.

In his essay 'Before the Law', Derrida reads Kafka's famous parable of the door-keeper as illuminating these issues.⁴⁹ There is a singularity about relationship to justice (*what in this parable is called the Law*), which must come into contact with the general or universal essence of the law (small 'l') without ever being able to do so.⁵⁰ Kafka's text relates in its way this conflict between law and singularity. Like the man from the country in Kafka's story, narrative accounts would try to approach justice ('the law of laws') and make it present, to enter it and become intrinsic to it, but this cannot be accomplished. To seek to

⁴⁹ Jacques Derrida, 'Before the Law', in Derek Attridge (ed.), *Acts of Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp.181-220.

⁵⁰ In a discussion of another Kafka parable, 'In the Penal Colony', Lyotard wrestles with the same issues – the relationship between law and what he calls *the intractable* (that which resists all law). According to Lyotard, the intractable is an absolute condition of morals. The intractable is that which is prior to, or exceeds, interpretation. Drawing on the imagery of Kafka's parable – the machine for execution which works by writing the sentence on the body of the condemned – Lyotard highlights the danger of forgetting the necessary violence of law or interpretation. 'Because the Westerner has forgotten blood; because he believes that he has already redeemed the body once and for all through some incarnation (Jesus, or Louis XVI), that is, through a law that became flesh at the cost of spilled blood, *a cruor* – but once and for all. Such is the perfunctory attitude of the West regarding the law; such is its nonconfrontation with cruelty. It scarcely wants to know more about cruelty than about the cook's recipe. But you can't make an omelette without breaking some eggs' (Lyotard, 'Prescription', in *Toward the Postmodern*, ed. Robert Harvey and Mark S. Roberts, New Jersey and London: Humanities Press, 1993, p.181). Furthermore, to be just it does not suffice to be the officiant of the law: one must suffer from it. This is why, in the parable, the Commandant lays himself down on the machine, the programme having been set to write on his body the article of the law he infringes by serving it. And this article reads: 'Be Just'.

enter into relations with justice (Kafka's Law) is to act as if it no longer depended on its historical presentation. However, as Derrida puts it, 'the inaccessible incites from its place of hiding',⁵¹ and the doorkeeper does not say 'no' but 'not yet', indefinitely. What cannot and must not be approached is the *origin* or *ground* of language and interpretation - there is no foundation to be appropriated (if Derrida speaks of a foundation it is of a 'mystical foundation'). Likewise, Derrida points out that the *story* 'Before the Law' does not tell or describe anything but itself as text. The text guards itself, maintains itself - like justice, speaking only *of* itself, that is to say, of its non-identity with representations of itself. Justice as justice does not occupy a ground - it is only recognised in its other.

Like Derrida's texts, Kafka's story says what it does by doing what it says. Derrida goes on in this essay to relate the story of Kafka's man from the country to the experience of the reader confronted with the literary text. Just as one is confronted with the possibility and impossibility of justice, its readability and unreadability, its necessity and prohibition, one has the same experience when confronted with a literary text.⁵² This 'unreadability' of the literary text is, then, ethically necessary to the extent that it insists on the aporetic whilst denying a single interpretation. But this 'unreadability' is only evident *through* a reading of the text. Only by reading the text does one find that it is unreadable, so that interpretation is never singular or monologic.⁵³ Our experience of reading, then, should prompt a sense of the 'undecidable', where every reading is haunted by its forgotten others.

Derrida is careful to distinguish his notion of justice 'to come' from both the messianic demand for a kingdom and the teleology of Hegelian-Marxist revolution. Both demand a

⁵¹ Derrida, 'Before the Law', op.cit., p.191.

⁵² Ibid., p.196.

⁵³ See also J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

period of waiting, whereas, according to Derrida justice cannot wait - though it cannot be presented or realised in terms of positive law, it nevertheless cannot wait. Derrida is calling us to a sense of 'kairos', a recognition (as he puts it in *Specters of Marx*) that time is 'out of joint' - the demand for justice (like the Kingdom of God) is 'at hand' - it is here but on its way, suspended between expectation and immediacy. This notion relates to that of 'anamnesis' - Derrida asks us to leave behind a linear understanding of history, with a predetermined past and a future which has been anticipated, to an anamnesis which, one might say, looks 'from side to side' - even as one necessarily makes decisions, one is conscious of a debt to forgotten 'others'. Whenever ethics is located on a linear continuum, whether a particular understanding of the past, present or future, it will always become destructive and forgetful. Once again, memory requires an understanding of language which recognises that, although it is our only means of understanding, it is never 'naturalised' or 'at home' - that what falls beneath what is represented always threatens to haunt it.

It was this demand for justice, a mission to 'name', or an anamnesis which recognises that time is out of joint, never patient to historical concepts, always haunted by forgotten others, which the various forms of totalitarianism this century have sought to eradicate. Dogmatism or ideology are the results of worshipping the law for its own sake, or revering it as adequate to each singular decision that has to be made.

Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*

I conclude this chapter with a brief discussion of Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1994). One of the interesting features of this book is that deconstruction, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, deprived of an obvious ideological enemy, engages with the legacy of Marx. The editors in their introduction to this work, remind us of the dangers presented by the collapse of Communism in the Eastern bloc. There is every sign that the collapse of

Communism has signalled for many the triumph of capitalism, the replacement of one ideology with another, the messianic legacy of Marx now merely identified with Soviet Communism. Yet, like all Derrida's work, *Specters of Marx* is directed against those who would reduce and simplify both philosophy and literature, instead of recognising, as Derek Attridge puts it, 'that the texts to which we give these labels remain always ahead of us, making demands on us, laughing at us and with us'.⁵⁴ Such is the legacy (or legacies) of Marxism and we must avoid the temptation of thinking we 'know' the legacy of Marx and can therefore happily dispose of it.

It is clear that once again for Derrida the notion of justice is inseparable from memory. We are required to learn to live with ghosts, which I take to mean living, *qua* Lyotard, with the memory that we have forgotten, a reminder of the partiality of our memories and that the texture of history is too thick to be captured by our pale representations of history. In the name of justice, Derrida speaks about those who are not present. This memory that we have forgotten reminds us that justice is *not yet*. No justice and no politics is possible that does not recognise this painful sense of excess, which denies binary oppositions, a sense of obligation to the nameless suffering, those others who are no longer. The present must be seen as non-contemporary with itself, but haunted by a responsibility to past and future voices. The possibility of justice carries beyond present life, life as my life or our life. In other words, justice is always 'at hand' or in judgement, an urgent imperative, but never complete. One might say justice lives within the 'kairitic moment'⁵⁵ – *it is*, though it is *not yet*.

Derrida's notion of the 'proper name' is important here. Justice requires that people should never be spoken of '...in the logic of an emblem, a rhetoric of the flag or of

⁵⁴ Derek Attridge's introduction to *Acts of Literature*, op.cit., p.21.

⁵⁵ Mark 1:15 - 'The moment is *at hand*'.

martyrdom. A man's life, as unique as his death, will always be more than a paradigm and something other than a symbol. And this is precisely what a proper name should always name'.⁵⁶

For Derrida, 'ghost' or 'spectre' is a figure which stands for all that is lost in the human attempt to grant meaning to experiences by making them subject to linguistic demands. The 'presence' achieved in representation presupposes absence, the absence which must haunt our deliberations. As Derrida puts it, reflecting on the Western metaphysical tradition,

There has never been a scholar who really, and as scholar, deals with ghosts - nor in all that could be called the virtual space of spectrality. There has never been a scholar who, as such, does not believe in the sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and non-living, being and non-being.⁵⁷

Derrida argues that the writings of Marx have urgent lessons to teach us today, as long as one takes into account what Marx and Engels say about their own possible 'ageing' and their intrinsically irreducible historicity. Marx and Engels did not hold to a static view of their theories; they were open to the transformation to come of their own ideas.⁵⁸

According to Derrida, we must retain the memory and inheritance of Marx or, rather, we must remember that there is, and must be, more than one 'Marx'.

An inheritance is never gathered together, it is never one with itself. Its presumed unity, if there is one, can consist only in the injunction to reaffirm by choosing. 'One must' means one must filter, sift, criticise, one must sort out several different possibles that inhabit the same injunction. And inhabit it in a contradictory fashion around a secret. If the readability of a legacy were given, natural transparent, univocal, if it did not call for and at the same time defy interpretation, we would never have anything to inherit from it. We would be affected by it as by a cause - natural or genetic. One always inherits from a secret - which says 'read me, will you ever be able to do so?'⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, op.cit., p.xv.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p.11.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p.13.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.16.

The danger in believing that the collapse of Communism heralds the triumph of capitalism, liberalism and the virtues of parliamentary democracy, is that what we mean by these terms is the *present*, which is to say in fact *past*, forms of electoral and parliamentary apparatus.⁶⁰ Once again, in Havel's terms, we become anaesthetised to history; time stands still. Like Klíma's characters, we move from gaol to gaol, our new freedom becoming our next incarceration. We exorcise spectres at our peril.

⁶⁰ Zygmunt Bauman writes, 'The present crisis of socialism is as derivative as its past triumphs. The present crisis is not of socialism's sole making. It is the crisis of socialism as a distorted and, in the end, an ineffective form of modernity; but it is also a reflection of the crisis of the modern project as such' (*Modernity and Ambivalence*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, p.266).

Chapter 4

WRITING AGAINST APARTHEID

The 'Theology' of Apartheid

Like the Nazi 'Final Solution' and Soviet Communism, the ideology of Apartheid was an essentially utopian vision. It relied upon essentialist notions of 'nationhood' and ideal unity, a vision of the relation of 'races' to each other, known as 'separate development' - Africans and Europeans seen as distinct 'nations' separated by secure boundaries.

Apartheid was an attempt to order or control human experience according to a logic of binary opposition. It was thus resistant to 'writing' or 'scripture'¹, which precisely disturbs these oppositions, confronting the reader with the possibility and impossibility of justice, its readability and unreadability. Such writing may thus provoke a crisis for interpretation which clears the ground for new moral vision. As Robert Bernasconi points out, one of deconstruction's most profoundly 'political' contributions has been in disturbing the confidence with which the boundaries between disciplines and areas are maintained.²

Like the preceding chapters, this chapter will explore the ethical possibilities of literature (including Derrida's writings on South Africa which problematise the distinction between philosophy and literature) in destabilising the artificial boundaries set in place by apartheid and so fostering a sense of the incomprehensible, a crisis of representation making

¹ Ironically, since the regime used biblical scripture in the service of its ideology.

² Robert Bernasconi, 'Politics beyond Humanism: Mandela and the Struggle Against Apartheid', in Gary B. Madison (ed.), *Working Through Derrida* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993), pp.94-95.

In *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), Derrida considers whether the prospects of a New Europe might demand not only a new definition of European identity but also a new way of thinking identity itself.

particular ethical responsibilities immediate and urgent. J. Hillis Miller has written that '...the moral law gives rise by an intrinsic necessity to storytelling, even if that storytelling in one way or another puts in question or subverts the moral law'.³ I understand Hillis Miller to imply here that, whereas ideology seeks to make the moral law *present* within language as positive law, literature may enact a recognition of the excess of experience over interpretation, and thus offer testimony to the moral law.⁴ In his discussion of Paul de Man, Hillis Miller argues that the reader has the impossible task of *reading unreadability* 'but that does not mean that reading, even good reading, cannot take place and does not have a necessarily ethical dimension'.⁵ The ethical moment in reading is a recognition of unreadability, or of the necessary violence of interpretation.

In Apartheid theology, there was no sense of what Derrida calls 'writing' as a condition of the Fall - no sense that the ideal is never finally attainable, that no single interpretation may do justice to every individual and perspective. There was no recognition of the need for creative tension between the general law and the particular case, or of the excess of experience over interpretation. Apartheid relied upon a single interpretation of human relations for which it sought to find concrete realisation - as such it was inherently circular (in Derridean terms, a 'closed text' as opposed to an 'open text'). As Derrida reminds us, it is only in the continual attempt to break this circle, providing openings by re-reading and re-writing that justice is continually and tentatively pursued. In the terms of Derrida's essay on Edgar Allen Poe, 'The Purloined Letter', apartheid as a system represented the

³ J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p.2.

⁴ Hillis Miller is particularly critical of the tendency in some literary circles of 'measuring and ascertaining...the meaning of a text by something nontextual outside the text: God...society...history...the psychology of the author, the "original" of the text in real life' (*The Ethics of Reading*, p.6). Such approaches give the impression of having mastered or domesticated the text according to predetermined criteria. Hillis Miller's interest is in the performative power of the text to disturb such a sense of mastery. 'This ethical "I must" cannot be accounted for by the social and historical forces that impinge upon it. In fact the ethical moment contests these forces or is subversive of them.'

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.59.

purloined letter⁶, the letter stolen or appropriated, as apartheid froze and naturalised meanings according to predetermined criteria.

This failure to acknowledge 'writing' can be seen in the ways in which the Dutch Reformed Church read scripture, and this raises larger questions about the ways in which the Bible is used in theological and ethical reflection.

According to Allan Boesak, the uniqueness of apartheid does not lie in the inherent violence of the system but in the fact that this system claims to be based on Christian principles.⁷ This theology was articulated, for example, at the 1950 Dutch Reformed Church Conference. Johann Kinghorn characterises it as a 'detailed system of social ethics'.⁸ The underlying formula was: all people are equal, not as individuals but within the confines of their own nationhood. According to the 1950 vision humanity did not consist of permanently inferior or superior people but of more or less developed nations. A dream, or ideal, was constructed - an apartheid called 'separate development', a dream of 'separate freedoms'.

Apartheid theology is the expression of a comprehensive concept of reality and life - the constituent elements of which are rigidly integrated. Kinghorn argues that apartheid

⁶ See Derrida, 'The Purveyor of Truth', in *Yale French Studies*, no.52 (1975), 31-114. The essay is a response to Jacques Lacan's reading of Edgar Allan Poe's story. Derrida criticises Lacan's reading as suggesting that nothing ever escapes the privileged hermeneutical standpoint of psychoanalysis. Derrida's reading of Poe's story shows that something must always escape in the reading of a text, no matter how subtle the reading.

⁷ Allan Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984), p.85.

For a detailed discussion of the religious and moral justification of apartheid, see Cecil Ngcokovane, *Demons of Apartheid* (Braamfontein: Skotaville Publishers, 1989). Cecil Ngcokovane shows how the *Nederduitse Gereformeerde kerk*, The National Party and the Broederbond together worked out the central religious and moral legitimations of apartheid.

⁸ See Johann Kinghorn, 'The Theology of Separate Equality: A Critical Outline of the DRC's Position on Apartheid', in Martin Prozesky (ed.), *Christianity amidst Apartheid: Selected Perspectives on the Church in South Africa* (London: Macmillan, 1990), p.66.

theology was the conceptual integration, within the protestant faith, of three sets of ideas dealing with cosmology and anthropology derived from the European tradition. He calls these three sets of ideas 'evolutionary idealism', 'harmonious balance' and 'intrinsic collectivism'. In the theology of apartheid the 'unity' of humanity is always stated as a point of departure. This was interpreted in a Platonic way as an ideal unity. For example, the unity of the Church is said to be found in the 'trinitarian God', to which was usually immediately added that this unity does not negate the diversity in God's creation. Rather, it 'supersedes' it.⁹ Thus, the unity of the church is '...something different from an artificial and forced unity which is pursued merely for the sake of a visible unity'.¹⁰ Also, when apartheid theology deals with human history, an idealistic anthropology is likewise employed. From Genesis 1 and 2 it is inferred that mankind is an 'essential unity'. However, this does not mean that all individuals are 'one'. On the contrary, when humanity is viewed synchronically a multitude of 'forms' (that is, nations) becomes visible. Ideally people are 'one', but in reality they are diverse. The reason for the diversity of human forms is explained in terms of a concept of history according to which, in the course of time, different human families emerged from the original one pair of ancestors. These families developed differently, each according to their own intrinsic qualities and, thus today, they all stand at different levels of cultural achievement. According to apartheid theology this view of history is supported by the story of Babel told in Genesis 11. The story of Babel is interpreted as the first historical attempt to thwart God's creational will by uniting, instead of dividing, the different nations. This had forced God to intervene to ensure that the course of human history complies with the intended order of creation. The story of Babel therefore serves to confirm the belief that human pluriformity is, in fact, the aim of God.

⁹ Dutch Reformed Church Report, *Church and Society*, 1986, quoted in Kinghorn, *ibid.*, p.76.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

The New Testament scholar Professor E.P. Groenewald commented in 1947 in his 'Apartheid and guardianship in the light of Holy Scripture', that there are many statements in the Bible that give fixed principles with regard to race relations. He concluded that the Bible teaches the unity of mankind; that God consciously divided man into races, peoples and tongues; that apartheid is the will of God and that it leads to national, social and religious apartheid; and that there is a spiritual unity in Christ.¹¹

In apartheid theology a concept of primal balance was applied to social groups. The result was that humanity was conceived of as a constellation of different entities delicately counterbalancing one another, which, if successful, produced harmony. Thus the delicate network of counterbalances should not be disturbed. It was thought that God needs the entire diversity of reality to reflect all His glory. God being Spirit, what is one in God must therefore of necessity be many and diverse in the realms of space and time.

Apartheid theology relied upon an essentialist notion of nationhood, according to which a nation is an extended family integrated historically, as well as genetically, by a particular and unique identity. According to this type of anthropology and sociology, every individual is subordinate to a specific identity of which the individual is merely a particular expression. By means of this identity, the individual is bound to others who share the common identity. The group is therefore much more than the sum total of individuals belonging to it. The group is the individual's primal ground of being.

According to Cecil Ngcokovane, Afrikanerdom relied on a Kuyperian notion that culture is a divine product, which together with race, history, fatherland and politics differentiates nations from each other. As a divinely created entity, each *volk* is a separate social sphere,

¹¹ See Willem Vorster, 'The Bible and apartheid', in John de Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio (eds.). *Apartheid is a Heresy* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1983), p.96.

with a God-willed structure, purpose, calling and destiny. The 1966 General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church stated:

Where intentional mixing and integration might take place on a large scale, or might be enforced...God-willed diversity is in danger of being levelled down to a colourless uniformity, the distinctiveness of people destroyed, and their particular culture bastardized, then the pure religion of Christianized peoples would be threatened and peoples would, in sport, not be able to fulfill their independent vocations and live according to their distinctive character. The mixing must be resisted with every resource as wrong and sinful, and such a development must be opposed in principle.¹²

Implied in such thinking is a particular understanding of 'natural law'. For example, one of the architects of apartheid, Dr. N. Diederichs, wrote that 'any attempt to obliterate national differences abrogated God's natural law', hence his rejection of notions of human equality.¹³ Afrikanerdom relies, too, on a particular mythic understanding of history. Ngcokovane shows how Afrikaner national history is given a quasi-sacred character. The Afrikaners are God's chosen people, with a mission, as D.F. Malan put it, 'to convert the heathen to Christianity without obliterating his national identity'.¹⁴ Hence, in all past events, such as the Great Trek, the Anglo-Boer Wars, the National Party victory in 1948 and the establishment of the Republic in 1961, God is declared to be the Afrikaner God.¹⁵

Ngcokovane argues that apartheid may be seen within a theodical tradition, to the extent that apartheid enabled the oppressed black majority to accept its present condition as the will of God. Moreover, this theodicy allows the white minority to accept, explain and justify its own satisfaction with the existing social, political and economic inequalities.

¹² Quoted in Cecil Ngcokovane, *op.cit.*, p.48.

¹³ *Apartheid is a Heresy*, *op.cit.*, p.5.

¹⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, p.18.

¹⁵ *Apartheid is a Heresy*, p.10.

The approach to scripture in such a vision is clearly circular. Scripture is in the service of a powerful ideology and once such legitimation, or such a hermeneutic, has become established, Scripture is read with a series of assumptions, and fresh legitimation is discovered in the text. Apartheid theology starts with an ideology that is introduced into scripture and in the end it becomes an ideology based on scripture. A hermeneutic circle is thus in place.

By contrast, Derridean thinking involves a recognition of the inescapability of the hermeneutic circle, but requires that the circle be continually broken as new openings for alterity are recognised, even though this will establish a new circle, which in turn must be broken (this is precisely the process of reading and re-reading). The process is to continue *ad infinitum*. Such a process is a continual affirmation of the *hors-texte* which is no foundation but calls into question all foundations.¹⁶ Such a process is required in the name of justice.

It is interesting to contrast Derrida's discussion of the myth of the tower of Babel with the use of it made by the apologists of apartheid. In his essay 'Des Tours de Babel' (1985) he writes:

The myth of the tower of Babel...tells of the need for figuration, for myth, for tropes, for twists and turns, for translation inadequate to compensate for that which multiplicity denies us. In this sense it would be the myth of the origin of myth, the metaphor of metaphor, the narrative of narrative, the translation of translation, and so on ...

The 'tower of Babel' does not figure merely the irreducible multiplicity of tongues; it exhibits an incompleteness, the impossibility of finishing, of totalising, of saturating, of completing something on the order of edification, architectural construction, system and architectonics.¹⁷

¹⁶ Again, see Derrida, 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"', in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, David Gray Carlson (eds.), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992).

¹⁷ See Peggy Kamuf (ed.), *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p.244.

The second paragraph of the above quotation provides a helpful critique of the strategies of apartheid. 'The tower of Babel does not figure merely the irreducible multiplicity of tongues': it is not to be interpreted (*qua* the apologists of apartheid) in a fatalistic way, as the futility of seeking to break out of interpretative systems. The tower represents the impossibility of finally achieving the ideal.

Apartheid theology, then, raises the broader question of the nature of theology. Must theology be hermeneutical and self-fulfilling or is it to be seen, in Christian terms, as a dynamic commitment to *Basileia*, the Kingdom of God, 'at hand' but 'on its way', or a justice which requires action but is always to come? To what extent should theology be subject to 'ethical' demands? Derrida's commitment to 'writing' in the name of justice seems to provide an antidote to theological tower building, a vision of justice pursued through poetics. Jesus' teaching of the Kingdom of God, characterised by parables (performative, refusing determinate meaning) bears comparison with this notion of justice pursued through poetics. By 'poetics' I mean writing and reading ever conscious of the excess or remainder which each interpretation leaves, seeking continually to create new openings in the name of justice. 'I have not come to destroy the Law but to fulfil it': whereas ideologies involve the destruction of the Law (justice), the fulfilment of the Law requires its re-reading or re-writing.

There are points of comparison here with the Reformed notion of the supremacy of the Word, for example, Karl Barth's critique of unevangelical conservatism. Whereas for Barth the danger of theological liberalism was that of undermining the historical continuity of the faith, the danger of theological conservatism was that of denying the need for the living Word of God to speak afresh to the Church in every situation.

In these circumstances it is not the Gospel which gives to the community the faith..., on the contrary, it is the community which imposes on the Gospel its own faith, mode of thought and outlook'.¹⁸

Allan Boesak argues that the way in which Reformed Christians in South Africa have used the Bible to justify oppression is the very denial of the Reformed belief in the supremacy of scripture. Boesak writes, 'The church believes that the Bible provides us with the fundamental principles of justice, love, and peace that we in the making of our societies ignore or deny at our own peril. It is this word of God that is the critique of all human actions and that holds before us the norms of the kingdom of God'.¹⁹

Writing against Apartheid: Jacques Derrida

To pursue the relationship between poetics and justice, I turn now to an essay by Jacques Derrida 'in admiration' of Nelson Mandela.²⁰

As always with Derrida, this writing problematises the distinction between philosophy and literature, seeking to frustrate any monologic, or ideological, reading. As he says of the tone of another of his essays, 'I shall speak then of (with) an apocalyptic tone in philosophy'.²¹ There is a poetic quality to this text, allusive and endlessly productive of meaning. It is a writing self-consciously resistant to interpretation, performative in that it enacts what it celebrates, the impossibility of determinate meaning. The article is a celebration of the possibilities of writing, the multiple implications of words, and a refusal to allow the kind of freezing or naturalising of language we have seen in Apartheid's justificatory discourse.

At the risk of doing what Derrida's texts deny - that is, extrapolating a determinate 'meaning' - I want to reflect on themes and possibilities in this text.

¹⁸ See John W. de Gruchy, 'Towards a Confessing Church: The Implications of a Heresy', in John de Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio (eds.), *op.cit.*, p.89.

¹⁹ Allan Boesak, *op.cit.*, p.88.

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, 'The Laws of Reflection: Nelson Mandela, In Admiration', in Jacques Derrida and Mustapha Tlili (eds.), *For Nelson Mandela* (New York: Seaver Books, 1987).

²¹ Jacques Derrida, 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently adopted in Philosophy', in *Semeia*, 23, 1982, 63.

Derrida appends a similar proviso to the end of his reflections on Nelson Mandela:

We have looked at him [Mandela] through words which are sometimes the devices for observation, which can in any case become that if we are not careful. What we have described, in trying precisely to escape speculation, was a sort of great historical watchtower or observation post. But nothing permits us to imagine this unity as assured, still less the legitimacy of this optic of reflection, of its singular laws, of the law, of its place of institution, of presentation or of revelation, for example of what we assemble too quickly under the name of the West. But doesn't this presumption of unity produce something like an effect (I don't hold to this word) that so many forces, always, try to appropriate for themselves? An effect visible and invisible, like a mirror, also hard, like the walls of a prison.

All that still hides Nelson Mandela from our sight.²²

Derrida is wary of talking of 'Mandela' in the third person, implying an objectivity which is impossible, but he has no option but to do so. He expresses the same concern about those who extrapolate his name, 'Derrida' and the meaning of his texts, which in a very real sense are what they are and are to be experienced in the act of reading. It is the act of reading Derrida's text, and responding to its performative power, that may generate a sense of the ethical - to extrapolate a meaning from the text constitutes an act of violence. In his essay 'Signature Event Context', Derrida argues that the *performative* significance of the signature is lost when it is regarded as an authoritative stamp acting as a guarantee of the fixity of a text's meaning. He writes,

As opposed to the classical assertion, to the constative utterance, the performative does not have its referent (but here that word is certainly no longer appropriate, and this precisely is the interest of the discovery) outside of itself or, in any event, before and in front of itself. It does not describe something that exists outside of language or prior to it. It produces or transforms a situation, it effects; and even if it can be said that a constative utterance also effectuates something and always transforms a situation, it cannot be maintained that that constitutes its internal structure, its manifest function or destination, as in the case of the performative.²³

²² Jacques Derrida, 'The Laws of Reflection: Nelson Mandela, In Admiration', pp.41-42.

²³ Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', in *Limited Inc* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p.13. The distinction being made is that between *textuality* and the authorised, signed and finished work, or, as Derrida puts it in *Of Grammatology*, the end of the book (closed, signed and sealed) and the

Yet, in my case too, I have no option but to offer a commentary on Derrida's text - secondary, removed from the text itself and inevitably 'forgetful' - in the hope of prompting further commentaries. Such commentary is forgetful partly because the style of commentary suggests an authoritative perspective which is belied by Derrida's highly allusive style.

In this essay, 'The Laws of Reflection: Nelson Mandela, in Admiration', 'Mandela' becomes a trope of deconstruction and, as a trope or 'figure', he assumes a messianic stature. If we look again at the above passage, for example, 'Mandela' as a trope of deconstruction represents that which refuses to be objectified, viewed impartially and at a critical distance. Words, says Derrida, can become devices for observation if we are not careful, yet it is impossible to find a watchtower from which to observe 'Mandela'. The impossibility of doing justice to 'Mandela' represents the impossibility of fulfilling the ethical demand, because this demand, the demand to do justice to 'Mandela', is infinitely demanding of our reading and imagination.

What does it mean to 'admire' mandela. First, says Derrida, admiration is rational, it asks questions. Mandela 'forces' our admiration - what does this 'force' imply? He 'forces' even his enemies to admire him. Where does that force come from and where does it lead? First of all it is a force of (self-) reflection, of (self-) analysis. But Derrida plays on the word 'reflection', using it also in the sense of looking at oneself in a mirror. There is no law, says Derrida, without a mirror. In other words, framing laws involves justifying what has already been perceived - and is therefore forgetful of other possible perspectives ('specularity'²⁴ - the repressed spectres which haunt any interpretation).²⁵ We can never

beginning of writing (See chapter 1, *Of Grammatology*, tr. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976).

²⁴ See the discussion in the previous chapter.

²⁵ 'The Laws of Reflection: Nelson Mandela, In Admiration', p.14.

avoid seeing the other in our own terms - in this sense, the ambiguity of the word 'reflection' is significant.

Mandela, implies Derrida, forces our admiration, surprises us, forces us out of our habitual modes of thought, refuses to allow the hermeneutic circle to remain immobile.

Admiration is a recognition of the 'extraordinary', and Derrida concurs with Descartes, that outside this sense of the extraordinary there is only ignorance. Such admiration, one might say, is a recognition or recovery of a sense of the 'excess' of experience over interpretation, an unsettling of habitual modes of thought, a recognition of all that particular discourses suppress or silence.

According to Derrida, 'Mandela becomes admirable for having known how to admire'. The ability to reflect, to perceive new meanings and new possibilities, to celebrate 'textuality', forces our admiration. This 'force', argues Derrida, is 'the law itself, the law above other laws'.²⁶ It is the Law (capital 'l') that Mandela has admired and 'what inscribes it in discourse, in history, in the institution of jurisprudence'.²⁷ Once again, it is the Law, or what Derrida sometimes calls 'justice',²⁸ insatiable, impossible to stabilise or fulfil, which is Mandela's master.

Mandela 'admires' the tradition of Western democracy, 'the tradition inaugurated by the Magna Charta, the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man...parliamentary democracy and...the doctrine of the separation of powers, the independence of justice'. Elsewhere Derrida has asserted that

Nothing seems to me less outdated than the classical emancipatory ideal. We cannot attempt to disqualify it

²⁶ Ibid., p.15.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ See 'Force of Law: "The Mystical Foundation of Authority"'.

today... But {this ideal exceeds}... all self-serving interpretations,
 ... all determined and particular reappropriations of international
 law...²⁹

Derrida argues that Mandela is the inheritor of this tradition, but Derrida takes the opportunity to reflect on the meaning of 'inheritance'. The following dense passage touches on important themes in Derrida's work:

You can recognise an authentic inheritor in the one who conserves and reproduces, but also in the one who respects the logic of the legacy enough to turn it upon occasion against those who claim to be its guardians, enough to reveal, despite and against the usurpers, what has never yet been seen in the inheritance: enough to give birth, by the unheard-of act of reflection, to what had never seen the light of day.

This passage is concerned with the relationship between the general and the particular, the nature of textuality and what it means to be an authentic witness or guardian of 'memory'. 'The one who conserves and reproduces': We have seen the consequences of a certain kind of conservation, that which continually replicates a particular interpretation of the legal code, without thought of the specific case. We have seen this in the official discourse of late-totalitarianism, just as we have seen it in the justificatory discourse of Apartheid. What is the 'logic of the legacy' to which Derrida refers? Presumably the values which inhabit it - in this case those same Western democratic values. Yet the language of western democracy can itself become a mask which hides injustice, particularly if, as in South Africa, there are those who are defined as outwith this legacy, for according to the doctrine of 'separate development', the non-whites represent cultures 'other' than that of western democracy, a separate race and tradition. It is incumbent on such as Mandela, therefore, to reveal 'what has never yet been seen in the inheritance', to insist that we need to return to the legacy, re-read it, look at it with new eyes, insist on the logic of the legacy which has been forgotten by its complacent inheritors as its language has been assimilated and naturalised. Once again, this is what Derrida means by memory

²⁹ Ibid., p.28.

(*anamnesis*) - allowing the discourse of the tradition to yield new meanings and new possibilities - remembering that there are possibilities which have never been seen and new possibilities which must be seen if the tradition is to be true to its logic.

So, argues Derrida, Mandela refused to ally himself with the liberal whites who wanted to maintain the struggle against apartheid within the constitutional framework because, for Mandela, this framework was not true to its ideals, or its logic. The South African constitution, whilst standing for human rights, excluded the majority of its citizens. To some extent, as Derrida continually argues, such a *coup de force* always marks the founding of a constitution, since the values which it represents can never finally be expressed or codified, but some founding acts are more 'happy' than others to the extent that they do or do not seek to give each person his or her due. In the case of South Africa the violence of the founding act was too great because it sought to categorise and define the roles of its citizens. This excessive violence results in a kind of paranoia which generates more legislation by way of justification - 'a pathological proliferation of judicial prostheses'.³⁰ The system thus becomes increasingly destructive as legislation proliferates to maintain the *status quo* - like the late-totalitarian system Havel describes, and like any utopia, it becomes self-justifying.

Mandela thus 'contests the constitutionality of the Constitution',³¹ its failure to live up to Western democratic ideals.

Derrida quotes the Charter of Freedom (of the African National Congress):

South Africa belongs to all its inhabitants, black and white. No government can claim an authority which is not founded on the will of the entire people.

- The people will govern.

- All the national groups will enjoy equal rights ...

³⁰ 'The Laws of Reflection', p.18.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.19.

- All will be equal before the law.³²

As Derrida argues, such a declaration is not only a statement or description; it is both an urgent imperative, requiring immediate action, and it will never be fully realised. Like the Kingdom of God it cannot wait but is always 'to come'. It seems this is true of all such democratic statements (the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights or the American Declaration of Independence would be other examples) - they are necessary statements which represent fundamental convictions about the equality and worth of each human being, but to legislate for the particular needs of each human being, and the contingencies he or she will face, is finally impossible. For Derrida, the important insight is the need to maintain a creative tension between legislation and the particular needs of people.

The Freedom Charter, however, re-founds the founding act of the law, 'reflecting against the white community the principles from which it was claiming to be inspired'. In other words, these values require a new look at the founding text, a new reflection on the words themselves and their implications. South Africa must continue to be defined as a democracy but the understanding of this word must change. This time, the 'entire nation' must include all the national groups, such is the logic of the law to which the white minority was pretending to appeal.

the 'reflection' of which we are speaking here would make visible what was not even visible any longer in the political phenomenality dominated by the whites. It would oblige us to see what was no longer seen or was not yet to be seen. It tries to open the eyes of the whites; it does not reproduce the visible, it produces it. This reflection makes visible a law that it does more than reflect, because this law, in its phenomenon, was invisible - had become or continued to be invisible.

'...it does not reproduce the visible, it produces it.' 'Reflection' involves looking at the text again and again to reveal what is no longer seen or has never been seen. Beyond the particular context of South Africa, Derrida is calling for a more general concern with

³² Quoted in *ibid.*, p.21.

textuality or writing, a concern that we become good readers. As Hillis Miller reminds us, 'Deconstruction is nothing more or less than good reading as such'.³³

In the South African context, the 'invisible' has often been the 'non-white', and Derrida implies that the word 'democracy' has become identified with Western models and peoples, who have become blind to other possible models. Derrida quotes an autobiographical account from Nelson Mandela in which the elders of Mandela's village reflect on how 'democracy' was present in African societies before western imperialism imposed its particular model. Western democratic models or representations have assumed a self-evidence and, suggests Mandela, understanding of the notion of 'democracy' is enriched by reflection. Derrida quotes Mandela:

There was much in such a society that was primitive and insecure and it certainly could never measure up to the demands of the present epoch. But in such a society are contained the seeds of a revolutionary democracy in which none will be held in slavery or servitude, and in which poverty, want, and insecurity shall be no more...

According to Derrida, what is significant here is Mandela's reading of early African societies. Mandela perceives possibilities for democracy in the 'text' of early African societies. As Derrida puts it, 'Mandela lets himself be fascinated by what he sees being reflected in advance, what is not yet to be seen, what he fore-sees: the really revolutionary democracy of which the Anglo-American West would, in sum, have only given an image at once incomplete, formal, thus also potential'. Once again, such 'reflection' does not merely reflect the visible; it makes visible. 'Reflection' on early African societies reveals another possibility, another language, unseen by the habitual language of the West, indeed repressed by that dominant tradition. Such 'reflection' is a recognition that 'democracy' is never fully realisable, even whilst it is an urgent requirement. No 'representation' of

³³ J. Hillis Miller, *op.cit.*, p.10.

democracy is complete or adequate, but this is no fatalism but an affirmation of possibility - the possibility of writing and re-writing 'democracy'.

Mandela, says Derrida, is a 'man of the law'.³⁴ Paradoxically, Mandela has always appealed to the law, even if he has had to oppose himself to specific legality. It is an appeal to the law which is critical of the instantiation of the law, or any attempt to contain the law within 'the Book' rather than engage with it as 'writing'.³⁵ This law (the law of deconstruction or of justice) becomes evident, according to Derrida, in the person of Mandela himself, Mandela and his people (that is, as long as Mandela remains an absent presence, dissident to the procedures of government).

But he [Mandela] does not present himself in view of a justification which would follow his appearance.³⁶

In other words, this law is not an identifiable and stable 'ground' which could be called upon to justify Mandela's opposition to the Apartheid regime. Mandela and those he represents themselves serve and articulate this law - the law of deconstruction which requires careful reading and re-reading in the name of justice.

The presentation of the self is not in the service of the law, it is not a means. The unfolding of this history is a justification, it is possible and has meaning only before the law. He is only what he is, he, Nelson Mandela, he and his people, he has presence only in this movement of justice.³⁷

There is no 'hors-texte', no uninterpreted, extra-textual starting-point; no 'ground' for justice. What is required is a re-reading in the name of justice. Mandela and his people represent deconstruction which, according to Derrida, 'happens',³⁸ bringing to recognition forgotten voices and perspectives, shaking assumptions and redirecting focus.

³⁴ 'The Laws of Reflection', p.26.

³⁵ The reference is to Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Chapter 1.

³⁶ 'The Laws of Reflection', p.27.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ And can only happen as long as Mandela and his followers are dissident to the system – new difficulties arise when Mandela becomes President and is now 'hors-texte'.

Taking as his witness humanity as a whole, he addresses himself to the universal justice above his judges of one day only.³⁹

In Mandela's terms, his conscience is witness to a higher Law which, in the case of Apartheid, condemns statutory law.

Mandela, says Derrida, has made of his mastery of Western law `a weapon to turn against his oppressors'⁴⁰ through his insistence on reading and re-reading the law, exposing his oppressors' false guardianship of the law. According to Derrida, these false guardians

...do not finally realise, in spite of all their legal ruses, the true force of a law that they manipulate, violate, and betray.⁴¹

Derrida plays on the South African government's refusal to allow black South Africans to take part in the political process and its insistence that any such political representations be made in writing.

In order not to hear, not to understand, the white Government requires that one writes to it. But it also means thus not to answer and first of all not to read.⁴²

For Derrida, the failure of the white government is a failure to understand writing. As we have seen, Apartheid relies for its justification on making texts serve its ideology.

Apartheid is essentially `logocentric', since references are firmly fixed in relation to a static and self-serving discourse. Exchanging letters assumes a negotiation of perspectives, but the South African regime's failure to answer letters from Mandela and others is a mark of a more general failure to `read'.

Not to acknowledge receipt is to betray the laws of civility but first of all those of civilization: a primitive behavior, a return to the state of nature, a presocial phase, before the establishment of the law. Why does the government return to this noncivilized practice? Because it

³⁹ `The Laws of Reflection', p.27.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.29.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., p.30.

considers the majority of the people, the "most numerous community," as noncivilized, before or outside the law. Acting in this way, interrupting the correspondence thus in a unilateral fashion, the white man no longer respects his own law.⁴³

Civilization - law - is sustained by writing, a community of exchange, and the scandal of Apartheid is that the majority of South African citizens are excluded from that law.⁴⁴

As a 'lawyer worthy of that name,' [Mandela] sets himself against the code in the code, reflects the code, but making visible thereby just what the code in action rendered unreadable. His reflection, once more, shows what phenomenality still kept in hiding. It does not reproduce, it produces the visible. This production of light is justice - moral or political.⁴⁵

Here again Derrida reflects on the relationship between statutory law and justice.

Whereas the phenomenon of law is in danger of assuming a self-evidence which reduces legal judgements to the predictability of a programme, justice makes visible the textuality of the law, or new ways of reflecting on the law.

In Derrida's terms, Mandela does not appeal to a different law to that of the whites. He shares with the white authorities the same law, the same text, for there is no *hors-texte*.

But Mandela reads, admires, reflects on this text, challenging claims to the self-evidence of one interpretation, making the text a resource for black and white perspectives. So, in a chiasm reminiscent of Christ's claim that he had come not to cancel but fulfil the Law, Mandela's contempt for the laws of Apartheid represents an increase in respect for the Law.

⁴³ Ibid., pp.31-32.

⁴⁴ In *The Postcard*, Derrida plays on the idea of two postal systems, representing two different approaches to the text. The first maintains an efficient service, seeking hermeneutic control (with the law and police on hand if necessary), while the other opens up a realm of messages and meanings which circulate beyond any assurance of authorised control (*The Postcard*, tr. Alan Bass, Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1987).

⁴⁵ Derrida, 'For Nelson Mandela', p.34.

In Mandela's appearance before his tribunal, we see the possibility of a dynamics of justice. 'His judges must represent a universal instance.'⁴⁶ His judges represent justice which is universal, an impossible demand that every individual receive their due, yet these judges are constrained by the general terms of the laws of apartheid. In this situation it is Mandela's responsibility to tell his story and that of his people.

According to Derrida, Mandela's struggle has become a testament.⁴⁷ This prompts Derrida to reflect once again on the meaning and importance of memory. Mandela's task was to 'restitute the law for the future, as if, finally, it had never taken place'.⁴⁸ There is the kind of memory that reflects an essentially dead past which has nothing to teach the present. There is also the kind of memory which brings to light what has not yet been seen in the legacy so that the past becomes an infinite resource generating ever new possibilities.

Finally, according to Derrida, the law which Mandela serves implies a promise, and we return to Derrida's notion of the 'messianic'. I quote Derrida at length, in a passage which, interestingly, hardly mentions Mandela at all, only Mandela's reflection. What is at stake here, it seems, is 'Mandela' as 'trace' or trope of deconstruction:

...[Mandela's] reflection lets us see, in the most singular geopolitical conjunction, in this extreme concentration of all human history that are the places or the stakes today called, for example, "South Africa," or "Israel," the promise of what has not yet ever been seen or heard, in a law that has not yet presented itself in the West, at the Western border, except briefly, before immediately disappearing. What will be decided in these so-called places - these are also formidable metonymies - would decide everything, if there were still that - everything.

So the exemplary witnesses are often those who distinguish between law and laws, between respect for the law which speaks immediately to the conscience and submission to positive law (historical, national,

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.36.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.37.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

institutional). Conscience is not only memory but promise. The exemplary witnesses, those who make us think about the law they reflect, are those who, in certain situations, do not respect laws. They are sometimes torn between conscience and law, they are sometimes condemned by the tribunals of their country. And there are some in every country, which proves that the place where these things occur is also for the law the place of the first uprooting.⁴⁹

Mandela is witness to 'a law that has not yet presented itself in the West ..., except briefly, before immediately disappearing'. Mandela's law is a vision of a promise or future which can never be presented, or made present. This vision is perceived only to be neutralised as it takes linguistic form. There is no 'hors-texte', yet languages can and must be revived through what Derrida here calls the laws of reflection and Hillis Miller would call the ethics of reading. Mandela, as an 'exemplary witness', 'distinguishes between laws and law' - that is, he perceives the difference between particular verbal expressions of the law and the imperative which calls for those expressions to be re-read in the interests of justice. Moreover, this is a universal imperative ('there are some in every country'), a universal, linguistic and ethical demand, against the regime's failure to 'read'.

Writing against Apartheid: Nadine Gordimer and André Brink

In a sense, the significance of Mandela in Derrida's 1987 essay is as a fictional character, or a literary trope. We misunderstand the significance of the essay if we read it as primarily historical analysis. 'Mandela', it seems, can only represent freedom when he is in the position of deconstructing the situation, or the 'texts', in which he finds himself. Now, of course, 'Mandela' has lost that position, as President of the South African Republic. Mandela in prison, a deconstructive symbol of absence calling into question present actuality, becomes a symbol of presence, an *hors-texte*, of the new South Africa as it is being realised. Mandela, one might say, has now written his own signature.⁵⁰ This is essentially a problem of the nature of authority, the problem explored in the previous

⁴⁹ Ibid, p.38

⁵⁰ There is an interesting comparison here with Gandhi, who was also a lawyer who appealed to the law to deconstruct the law. However, Gandhi remained a dissident figure – he never wrote his own signature.

chapter in terms of the relationship between law and justice - how to seek *realisation* of a political vision while recognising the partiality of one's frame of reference. In other words, how, as an authoritative figure, to avoid becoming trapped within a self-justifying system? How to continue to read, or continue to be aware of our own forgetfulness - how to cultivate the kind of memory Lyotard commends when he speaks of 'that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable'⁵¹ 'Mandela' as a fictive character, a character concerned with writing, represented for apartheid, like novelists, poets and playwrights who fell foul of the system, a challenge to the regime's systemic logic.

Perhaps it may be said that 'Nelson Mandela' represents '*freedom*', a freedom to read or to write, which is no escape from Fredric Jameson's 'prison-house' of language⁵², but is a release from an ideological situation, where individuals are required to fulfil roles within a self-fulfilling system. Perhaps, in these terms, freedom is experienced in those moments when we are faced with what Austin Farrer called a 'rebirth of images'⁵³ - the habitual all of a sudden revived or transfigured, rendered 'unreadable', as experience overwhelms interpretation.

Derrida reflects on the nature of freedom in his essay 'Force of Law'. Discussing the relationship between law and justice, he speaks of 'the undecidable' as that which

...is not merely the oscillation or the tension between two decisions, it is the experience of that which, though heterogeneous, foreign to the order of the calculable and the rule, is still obliged ... to give itself up to the impossible decision while taking account of law and rules. A decision that didn't go through the ordeal of the undecidable would not

⁵¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), p.81.

⁵² Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton, NJ, 1972).

⁵³ The reference is to Austin Farrer's *A Rebirth of Images: The Making of St. John's Apocalypse* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1949).

be a free decision, it would only be the programmable application or unfolding of a calculable process.⁵⁴

Freedom here is expressed in negative terms, as Derrida is concerned with the consequences of what he calls, in the same essay, 'the fall of language into representation'⁵⁵- the terror of a text, such as the text of apartheid, when it is not granted textuality.

The writing of **Nadine Gordimer**, whose life spans the rise and fall of apartheid, is also much concerned with the nature of freedom and authority. Her award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1991 was an affirmation of her distinctive contribution to twentieth-century fiction and to the creation of a literature that challenged apartheid. In his study of Gordimer's novels, Dominic Head shows how her concerns are developed through increasing stress on the politics of textuality.⁵⁶ Her writing exhibits a performative power, resistant to any single interpretation. In a public address she argued, 'I remain a writer, not a public speaker; nothing I say here will be as true as my fiction'.⁵⁷ She attempts in all her work to present the many-sidedness of the social and political situations she examines. Judgements by the reader emerge from the often-neutral presentation of events by the narrative voice. For example, in her acclaimed novel *The Conservationist* (1974)⁵⁸, the constantly shifting viewpoint incorporates the thoughts and memories of the protagonist, attitudes of a wide range of characters, black, white and Indian, snatches of dialogue both remembered and direct, as well as epigraphs from a nineteenth-century treatise on the religious beliefs of the Zulus that bind sections of the text with a resonant yet oblique commentary. Such a dialogic approach, allowing voices to speak in this way, opens up a

⁵⁴ Derrida, 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"', op.cit., p.24.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p.58.

⁵⁶ See Dominic Head, *Nadine Gordimer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁵⁷ Nadine Gordimer, 'Living in the Interregnum', in Stephen Clingman (ed.), *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places* (London: Cape, 1988), p.264.

⁵⁸ Nadine Gordimer, *The Conservationist* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978).

horizontal plain of vision in which thought is expanded, and subverts a logic of hierarchy.⁵⁹

Gordimer reflects on the role of the writer in an article of 1976, in which she argues that the freedom of the writer is a freedom beyond the boundaries of particular discourses - a writer is not in the business merely of replicating a particular oppositional stance.

All the writer can do, as a writer, is to go on writing the truth as he sees it. That is what I mean by his 'private view' of events, whether they be the great public ones of wars and revolutions, or the individual and intimate ones of daily, personal life.⁶⁰

In another essay, quoting Frank Kermode, she states that her purpose is 'to use fiction for its true purpose, the discovery and registration of the human world'.⁶¹ This freedom of the writer's private view of life may be threatened by the very awareness of what is expected of him or her. The writer is often expected to conform to an orthodoxy of opposition.⁶² Gordimer quotes Philip Toynbee: 'the writer's gift to the reader is not social zest or moral improvement or love of country, but an enlargement of the reader's apprehension'.⁶³ The writer destabilises binary oppositions such as 'orthodoxy' and 'dissent' by describing the truth as she sees it, often focusing on tiny droplets of human experience, and thus enlarging the reader's apprehension. The quotation she cites from Jean-Paul Sartre is reminiscent of Derrida's reflections on Nelson Mandela and the nature of freedom:

⁵⁹ See the discussion of Mikhail Bakhtin in the previous chapter.

Similarly, in his essay 'An Act of Violence: Thoughts on the Functioning of Literature', the South African writer André Brink argues that 'The same dangers which confront democratic processes in politics – intolerance, ignorance, tyranny – are at work in the reading process. It is not a one-directional and one-dimensional encounter but a cosmopolitan and multivocal conversation...in the encounter with the literary text, tyranny lurks in any attempt by the text or by a critic (or a "school") to elicit a single response from the reader, or in any attempt by a reader to impose a single meaning on a text' (Inaugural Lecture, University of Capetown, 16th October, 1991, p.12).

⁶⁰ Nadine Gordimer, 'A writer's freedom', in *Index of Censorship*, Summer 1976, Vol.5, No.2, 53.

⁶¹ Nadine Gordimer, *Writing and Being* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), p.19.

⁶² Nadine Gordimer, 'A writer's freedom', *op.cit.*, 54.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

He [the writer] is someone who is faithful to a political and social body but never stops contesting it. Of course, a contradiction may arise between his fidelity and his contestation, but that's a fruitful contradiction. If there's fidelity without contestation, that's no good: one is no longer a free man.⁶⁴

Fidelity to ideals requires a refusal to rest content with current presentations of those ideals: like Derrida, Gordimer argues for an ethics which continually renegotiates, rereads or rewrites written codes, in the pursuit of justice.

Gordimer's novel, *None to Accompany Me* (1994)⁶⁵ is precisely concerned with the relationship between 'fidelity and contestation'. Like Ivan Klima's *Waiting for the Dark*, *Waiting for the Light*, Gordimer is exploring the consequences of the collapse of the former régime. The collapse of the régime represents a major *ethical* collapse, since people were suddenly deprived of roles, either within the system or in positions of opposition. The ideological enemy, which had been the focus of opposition and a thirst for justice, had been destroyed, but both Gordimer and Klima present a sense of disillusionment, as the new liberation brings with it new and unforeseen difficulties. The danger seems to be that the collapse of both Apartheid and Communism brings to an end the restless idealism which had brought the ideological walls down. The 'beyond' of as yet unimaginable possibilities is closed off because freedom is thought to have arrived. Yet, in Marcel Proust's words, which are an epigraph to *None to Accompany Me*, 'We must never be afraid to go too far, for truth lies beyond'.

Gordimer is grappling with the problem of authority discussed at the beginning of this section. What happens when 'Nelson Mandela', a deconstructive symbol of absence calling into question present actuality, becomes a symbol of presence, of the new South Africa as it is being realised? *None to Accompany Me* shows the life of exile to be more productive of identity than the 'freedom' which follows. It proves to be impossible fully to

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Nadine Gordimer, *None to Accompany Me* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995).

realise the ideals of democracy and equality required in the post-Apartheid world and the danger is disillusionment or reactionary voices calling for a return to the securities of the old regime (as is happening in the countries of the former Eastern bloc). In this situation, 'Nelson Mandela' as the deconstructive trope which Derrida describes, remains all the more important. Each of the characters in the novel is shown to be incapable of living up to the ideals they represent. The protagonist, Vera Stark, like Adam in Klíma's *Judge on Trial*, is a lawyer on trial who is found wanting in various ways. She is physically crippled in her pursuit of justice, as she is attacked on one of her visits to the townships. As in *Judge on Trial*, those who devote their lives to the legitimate pursuit of justice are not presented with an easy path but 'limp' through life. The paradox being explored in both novels is the necessary tension between the pursuit of the ideal and the impossibility of finally realising the ideal.

The characters in the novel are people who represent reconciliation and harmony but are unable to live up to these ideals. For example, when liberation leaders like Vera Stark's friends, Didymus and Sibongile Maqoma, return from exile, not only are the new black authorities dismissive and forgetful of Didymus' past heroic actions, refusing him a place among those in authority, but Sibongile, who does acquire such authority, becomes preoccupied with the trappings of power and forgetful of the ideals which have brought about the new situation. It seems that no character is able either to live up to their ideals or to perceive the needs of the next generation, perhaps because they have anticipated the next generation or failed to re-apply their values to new challenges.

The novel suggests that justice is misconceived if it is thematised according to a binary logic of good and evil, guilty and innocent - such thematisation implies that justice can finally be achieved - and to believe this is to grant one's own perspective a self-evidence that belies its textuality. The ethical possibility is continually to question particular

constructions of ethics. As the apartheid regime failed to make the distinction between the ideal and the necessary failure to realise the ideal, *None to Accompany Me* explores the failure of people, with the collapse of apartheid, to re-negotiate values in new situations with new demands. Justice, though unobtainable as pure presence, requires immediate moral engagement and imagination, even whilst one cannot hope to do justice to *all* our obligations.

André Brink, *A Dry White Season*

To conclude this chapter, I turn to André Brink's novel, *A Dry White Season* (1979)⁶⁶, which explores the nature and importance of writing as testimony.

Ben Du Toit, the protagonist, is an Afrikaner, a teacher of the 'official' history of South Africa. He finds his life overtaken with contemporary history when Jonathan Ngubene, and later Jonathan's father, Gordon, dies at the hands of the Security Police. Du Toit begins an investigation into how and why these men died. Shortly before he is 'accidentally' killed in a car accident, Du Toit asks a former university friend, now a writer of romantic fiction, to accept his notes and papers and 'use them if necessary' (p.13). Like his subject, the writer is slowly drawn into the experience: he reads Du Toit's diaries and papers and eventually writes a book. The reader follows the writer into Du Toit's story and is progressively confronted by a real alternative history of South Africa in place of the approved official version.

The novel is concerned with *one man's* crusade for justice, 'an ordinary, good-natured, harmless, unremarkable man' (p.9) - the general, the horrors of apartheid, are explored and made palpable, through the particular. Ben's crusade concerns two ordinary men brutally

⁶⁶ André Brink, *A Dry White Season* (London: Minerva, 1992). All page references are from this edition.

and unjustly killed, and this concentration on injustice towards two individuals makes the injustice being suffered by thousands of Africans in South Africa all the more disturbing. It is the plight of one family which captures Ben's imagination and the lives of these individuals draw Ben and the reader into a whole new world of experience. Ben reflects,

One always reads about this sort of thing ... One hears so many things. But it remains part of a totally different world really. One never expects it to happen to someone you actually know (p.56).

As Ben is drawn into the stories of Jonathan and Gordon, his whole sense of reality is unsettled as he is forced to engage imaginatively with a form of life of which he had hardly been aware:

...one can't help wondering, can one? Where is he tonight while we're talking here in this room? Where is he sleeping? Or isn't he sleeping at all? Perhaps he's standing in some office under a bare bulb, his feet on bricks and a weight tied to his balls. (p.56)

Later in the novel, Stanley, an African taxi driver, asks Ben why he is so concerned about one man's death:

`What is it to you, Ianie?...This sort of thing happens all the time, man. Why bother about Gordon?'
 `Because I knew him... I don't think I ever really knew before. Or if I did, it didn't seem to directly concern me. It was - well, like the dark side of the moon. Even if one acknowledges its existence it wasn't really necessary to live with it...Now people have landed there' (p.96).

The novel shows how apartheid gave individuals particular roles to fulfil within the system, which set them against others. Occupants of the white suburbs are terrified of `Communists'; youths in the townships identify whites as the enemy.

Ben's experiences explode these categories - Gordon `... was a very ordinary person. Just like myself or anyone else. Don't you see? That's the whole point' (p.116).

Ben's lover, Melanie, replies: `Very few people seem prepared to be simply human - and to take responsibility for it' (p.116).

Respectable people of the white minority, like the clergyman Mr. Bester (pp.142f.) seem to find no difficulty in believing in the essential goodness of the system because of the outward show of respectability and justice which the system uses to maintain itself - correct procedures, like the inquest into Gordon's death, are observed, even though they are carefully manipulated (as Mr. Bester argues, 'Suppose this had been Russia: what do you think would have happened then? Or one of the African states? I can assure you it would never have reached the courts at all', p.143); atrocities are denied and plausible explanations fabricated; fear and self-interest are exploited with rumours of Communist activities in the townships. To the black majority the real situation is clear, but to the majority of whites, including initially Ben, the system is assumed to be essentially just. If one has doubts, it is easier and more comfortable to convince oneself, especially as one's position in the system is at stake.

As an antidote to the stereotyped behaviour required by the system, this is a novel about *writing*, and for Ben, Melanie and the narrator writing provides an important outlet.

Melanie becomes a journalist to 'prevent myself from slipping back into that old euphoria again. To force me to see and to take notice of what was happening around me' (p.131).

The novel is about the nature of writing as testimony and we are aware throughout of the layers of interpretation which comprise Ben's story - Ben's diaries and jottings, the writer's reading of Ben's story and our own readings. In this way, the novel refuses any false sense of objectivity⁶⁷ - the account could have been written in many other ways. We are told at the end of the novel that this testimony is only an inadequate construction. We are

⁶⁷ Similarly, Brink's novel *The Wall of the Plague* (London: Faber, 1984) appears initially to be a first-person narrative but the ending reveals that it is in fact a re-creation, in which the character Joubert endeavours to understand and to come to terms with Andrea's desertion. Here again Brink puts a 'writer' in his narrative as a putative 'author', displacing his own role to one further remove. The reader thus experiences the seeming immediacy of a first-person narrative for most of the story, only to have that sense of immediacy framed by Joubert's confession of authorship - and his own inability to 'explain' Andrea's decision. His bewilderment problematises the attempt of any person to understand or explain another person.

conscious from the first page that the story of Ben Du Toit's life is a reconstruction based on fragments - '...diaries, the notes, the disconnected scribbles, the old accounts paid and unpaid, the photographs, everything indiscriminately lumped together...' (p.9)

'And the possibilities suggested by my often misused imagination' (p.33).

The narrator muses,

I have to immerse myself in [Ben's story], the way he entered into it on that first fatal day. Except that he did not know, and had no way of knowing, what was lying ahead; whereas I am held back by what I already know. What was unfinished to him is complete to me; what was life to him is story to me; first-hand becomes second hand. (p.33)

Because the writer has an ending in view, the danger is that events are described as contributing towards that sense of ending, a narrative frame is imposed.

Yet, having reached the end of the novel, one feels compelled to start at the beginning again, where Ben's friend reflects on the events which led to his being given the task of reconstructing Ben's life. This circularity reinforces a sense of the novel as writing, rather than closed narrative, yielding new meanings and reflections on each reading, just as our reflections on our own lives and those of others must not come to an end, but as stories read and re-read.

Brink has written that the literary text

... is not a transparent glass through which a "world beyond" can be observed. The qualities of the glass itself - its opacity, thickness, coloration, convexity or concavity, its smoothness or otherwise - demand the attention of the spectator ... in the final analysis it is the density of the literary experience which determines our way of looking "through" it at the world beyond.⁶⁸

Since we are now reading Ben's testimony, there is a sense that Ben's crusade for justice has not come to an end (p.13); the reader is now somehow implicated and challenged to be responsible, if not for Ben's crusade, for the small every-day injustices which surround us and which we cause. One is reminded of the concern of the Holocaust survivor that

⁶⁸ André Brink, *Mapmakers: Writing in a State of Siege* (London: Faber, 1983), p.122.

what happened must not be forgotten, that the Nazis' hope of obliterating the evidence of destruction must be frustrated; to forget is to reinforce the closed interpretation of the system. As Ben is handing over his testimony to his friend, he says:

They've taken everything from me. Nearly everything. Not much left. But they won't get that. You hear me? If they get that there would have been no sense in it at all... That's what they're aiming for... They want to wipe out every sign of me, as if I'd never been here. And I won't let them' (p.13)

The writer of Ben's story knows that he has to write this testimony because of his own realisation, having been entrusted with Ben's notes, that Ben was a total stranger. Significantly, the narrator has spent much of his life as a writer of romantic fiction, where individuals' lives are subject to predetermined narratives, offering order and shape, affording the reader a false sense of security and not requiring her to engage with the complexity of particular characters and our failure ever fully to know ourselves and others. The writer is paralysed by a 'vast apathy' which has been affecting him for months, a 'dry white season'. Importantly, the process of writing Ben's testimony offers the narrator an imaginative opening, a vision to pursue: '...I have to grasp at him [Ben] in an effort to write myself out of my own sterile patch' (p.33).

Like Joseph K. in Kafka's *The Trial* or the individuals in Klima's novels, in *A Dry White Season* Ben finds himself pitted against the irrepressible power of the State. The system must play out its relentless logic. When the enquiry into Gordon's death finds that he committed suicide, despite the strong evidence of police brutality, Melanie sees that the verdict could have been no different:

'What else could they have decided? They can't admit that they are wrong, can they? It's the only way they can keep going' (p.121).

It is a system which cannot afford to be challenged by the demand of justice; it must simply replicate itself, apply its laws:

Again, Melanie says,

'You've got to face it, Ben: it's not really the function of the court to decide on right and wrong in absolute terms. Its first duty is to apply the laws' (p.121).

This is the terror of a total relativism, where there is no absolute demand except for the self-fulfilling demand of the system – the particular is subsumed within the general.

As one reads through the novel, there is a sense of inevitability about the events which unfold, especially as we already know, from the opening account, that the events will end with Ben's death.

In this novel, as in Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me*, we are made very conscious that the pursuit of justice in a world of contingency is ambivalent but vital. By devoting his life to uncovering the truth about the two black detainees killed in prison, Ben destroys his life and those of others. The security police are forced to respond to cover their tracks by destroying the witnesses Ben has discovered. Ben's obsession leads to his neglecting his wife and bringing disgrace and discomfort to his family. There is a sense that to pursue one responsibility is to neglect others, that moral purity is impossible. Even the security police are presented with a degree of sympathy, decent family men trapped by the system, having convinced themselves that they are fighting a battle against 'Communists'.⁶⁹

Significantly, Ben is a teacher of Geography and History. Apartheid South Africa is constituted by its particular sense of Geography and History, where South Africa is supposed to comprise separate nations allowed to develop separately and Afrikaners possess a unique role and destiny. As Stanley remarks,

'...you lanies keep thinking history is made right here where you are and noplacelse. Why don't you come with me one day, I'll show you what history really looks like. Bare-arsed history, stinking with life. Over at my place, in Sofasonke City.' (p.86)

⁶⁹ See, for example, p.59.

If justice is to be pursued, historical narratives have to be examined critically and their status as writing recognised. Novels, because they bring to life individual histories, from particular points of view (and novels like this with a self-conscious sense of artifice) witness to the fact that history is never written, but that histories, many histories, must continue to be written. In his small way, Ben represents a deconstructive force unsettling the boundaries of the history and geography of apartheid, and it is for this reason that the system, if it is to maintain its integrity, cannot tolerate his activities.

In an important section of the novel (pp.158-163), Ben reflects on these issues. The Afrikaner view of history which he has been teaching his pupils, the Afrikaner myth reads as follows:

We Afrikaners were the first freedom fighters of Africa, showing the way to others. And now that we have finally come to power in our own land, we wish to grant the same right of selfdetermination to all the other nations around us. They must have their own separate territories. Peaceful coexistence. Plural development. It is an expression of our own sense of honour and dignity and altruism. (p.160)

This myth has been exploded by Ben's own experiences and this prompts a crisis of legitimation as he reflects on the arbitrariness of the particular cultural categories which have ordered his experience:

A name painted on a white board, so many feet above sea-level, so many miles from Kimberley, so many from Cape Town. The pure senselessness of it all heightened by the fact that everything is recorded fastidiously. What the hell does it matter that this is the name of the station, or that it is so many miles away from the next?

From a very early age one accepts, or believes, or is told, that certain things exist in a certain manner. For example: that society is based on order, on reason, on justice. And that, whenever anything goes wrong, one can appeal to an innate decency, or commonsense, or a notion of legality in people to rectify the error and offer redress. Then, without warning, there occurs what Melanie said and what I refused to believe: you discover that what you accepted as premises and basic conditions - what you had no choice but to accept if you wanted to survive at all - simply does not exist. Where you expected something solid there turns out to be just nothing. Behind a board stating a name and heights and distances there is a vacuum disguised, at most, by a little corrugated iron building, milk cans, a row of empty red fire-buckets. Nothing.

Everything one used to take for granted, with so much certainty that one never even bothered to enquire about it, now turns out to be illusion. Your certainties are proven lies. And what happens if you start probing? Must you learn a wholly new language first? (pp.160-161)

Ben is facing an extreme form of the crisis of legitimation which is the 'postmodern condition'. The question he faces, which is the crucial question of postmodernity, is What now? (p.161). Having discovered that the framework he had taken for granted is without foundation, he craves a locus of value, a justification for his actions. He finds that to look for legitimation in terms of rational justification or practical arguments is fruitless, and so he changes the nature of the question:

Perhaps simply to do what one has to do, because you're you, because you're there (p.162).

No general principles can do justice to the particularity of Ben's situation, the person he is and the situation in which he finds himself. Apartheid has fundamentally distorted the nature of the ethical, constructed false divisions of race and responsibilities to one's own. As a discourse, it has thus denied the ethical responsibilities of particular people to those they encounter day by day. Ben reflects as follows, and I quote this important passage at length:

Perhaps that is part of the very choice involved: the fact that I've always taken 'my own people' so much for granted that I now have to start thinking from scratch. It has never been a problem to me before. 'My own people' have always been around me and with me. On the hard farm where I grew up, in church on Sundays, at auctions, in school; on stations and in trains or in towns; in the slums of Krugersdorp; in my suburb. People speaking my language, taking the name of my God on their lips, sharing my history. That history which Gie calls 'the History of European Civilisation in South Africa'. My people who have survived for three centuries and who have now taken control - and who are now threatened with Extinction.

'My people'. And then there were the 'others'. The Jewish shopkeeper, the English chemist; those who found a natural habitat in the city. And the blacks. The boys who tended the sheep with me, and stole apricots with me, and scared the people at the huts with pumpkin ghosts, and who were punished with me, yet were different. We lived

in a house, they in mud huts with rocks on the roof. They took over our discarded clothes. They had to knock on the kitchen door. They laid our table, brought up our children, emptied our chamber pots, called us *Baas* and *Miesies*. We looked after them and valued their services and taught them the Gospel, and helped them, knowing theirs was a hard life. But it remained a matter of 'us' and 'them'. It was a good and comfortable division; it was right that people shouldn't mix, that everyone should be allotted his own portion of land where he could act and live among his own. If it hadn't been ordained in the Scriptures, then certainly it was implied in the variegated creation of an omniscient Father, and it didn't behove us to interfere with His handiwork or to try and improve on His ways by bringing forth impossible hybrids. That was the way it had always been.

But suddenly it is no longer adequate, it no longer works. Something has changed irrevocably. I stood on my knees beside the coffin of a friend. I spoke to a woman mourning in a kitchen the way my own mother might have mourned. I saw a father in search of his son the way I might have tried to find my own. And that morning and that search had been caused by 'my people'.

But who are 'my people' today? To whom do I owe my loyalty? There must be someone, something. Or is one totally alone on that bare veld beside the name of a non-existent station?

The single memory that has been with me all day, infinitely more real than the solid school buildings, is that distant summer Pa and I were left with the sheep. The drought that took everything from us, leaving us alone and scorched among the white skeletons.

What had happened before that drought has never been particularly vivid or significant to me: that was where I first discovered myself and the world. And it seems to me I'm finding myself on the edge of yet another dry white season, perhaps worse than the one I knew as a child. What now? (pp.162-163)⁷⁰

Ben's 'dry white season' signifies the realisation that his language, outlook and assumptions are without foundation and do not enable him to confront the injustice he feels so intensely, yet here he 'discovers' himself and the world.

Brink's novel, like *None to Accompany Me*, is tragic to the extent that Ben is finally defeated in a losing battle against overwhelming odds. However, the performative power of the written testimony is itself a source of hope. The process of reading such literature

⁷⁰ Brink writes in similar terms about the experience of reading: '...reading is at heart a risky occupation, and in order to expose ourselves to the fullness of that experience we must be prepared to confront that danger, to face the possible violation of whatever we have been predisposed to take for granted. It means abandoning the certainties of prejudgement and tradition and a readiness to revise everything, including our perception of ourselves and our world' ('An Act of Violence: Thoughts on the Functioning of Literature', op.cit., p.12).

may bring us to recognition of Ben's dilemma 'What now?' - and recognition of this as a question which confronts us at every moment, as the obligations of justice are seen as immediate and inexhaustible.

CONCLUSION

'Except the Lord of Hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom and we should have been like unto Gomorrah.'¹

'Democracy practises the ongoing interruption of politics by ethics, of totality by infinity.'²

Through discussion of three twentieth-century political ideologies, we have seen the destructiveness of attempts to realise the Enlightenment dream of a *non-aporetic* model of ethics or political philosophy. Such an attempt is premised on an illusion of objectivity, the belief that a perspective, or *hors-texte*, may be found from which innocence and guilt, right and wrong may be adjudicated. Such projects fail to recognise writing as a condition of the Fall, positing instead an extra-linguistic perspective which may finally legitimate a given judgement or interpretation.

The three ideologies considered in this study focus the issues clearly, and produce dissident literature, like the *samizdat* literature of the former Eastern bloc, concerned with the plight of individuals subject to the impersonal laws of the system.³ However, Chapters 3 and 4 end with discussion of writers who are now confronting the challenges presented by the *collapse* of the former regimes - Ivan Klíma's *Waiting for the Dark, Waiting for the Light* and Nadine Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me*, as well as Derrida's *Specters of Marx*. These works remind us of the danger that, with the ideological enemy vanquished, a new non-aporetic political code is assumed, that

¹ Isaiah 1:9.

² Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992), p.240.

³ Robert Detweiler argues that it is the task of the religious-reading community to locate and disseminate 'texts of pain' *wherever they are found*. 'One suspects that such private texts of pain are generated daily in Lebanon, Iran, Northern Ireland, South Africa, the American ghettos, the Amazon Valley; in middle-class families, penitentiaries, mental institutions, hospices and in places we cannot imagine, and that literary fictions seeking to amplify these witnesses already exist, unknown to the literary establishment' (Robert Detweiler, *Breaking the Fall: Religious Readings of Contemporary Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p.49.

of Western-style liberal democracy. The collapse of the former regime deprives Klíma's film-maker Pavel of his role as dissident and leaves issues of freedom and purpose unresolved - 'no matter where you are, you get tangled up in some kind of spider's web that you can't get free of'.⁴ In Gordimer's novel, the guardians of post-Apartheid South Africa find that the collapse of the Apartheid regime represents a major *ethical* collapse, as people are deprived of roles, either within the system or in positions of opposition. As Derrida reminds us in *Specters of Marx*, the danger in the current situation is that liberal democracy, as represented by Western Europe and the United States, is seen as a *realised* ideal. The triumphalist tone of the American historian Francis Fukuyama, with his new gospel at the end of our millennium, is symptomatic of this danger.⁵

In this context, Derrida's writings on democracy, law and justice are extremely significant. In *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe* (1991), he argues that what is proper to a culture is not to be identical to itself, 'at home' with itself.⁶ He believes that we have a duty of assuming the European heritage of the idea of democracy - the Enlightenment values of human rights, political liberties and responsibilities - while also recognising that this idea is never simply given, but something that remains to be thought and 'to come' (*a venir*), not something that is certain to happen tomorrow, not the democracy of the future, but a democracy that must have the structure of a *promise* (the promise of what must remain without

⁴ Ivan Klíma, *Waiting for the Dark, Waiting for the Light*, tr. Paul Wilson (London: Granta Books, 1994), p.139.

⁵ See also Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, tr. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992). For example: '...I am thinking about the necessity for a new culture, one that would invent another way of reading and analyzing *Capital*, both Marx's book and capital in general; a new way of taking capital into account while avoiding not only the frightening totalitarian dogmatism that some of us have known how to resist up until now, *but also, and simultaneously*, the counter-dogmatism that is setting in today, (on the) left and (on the) right ... it is necessary to analyze and earnestly address - and this is the whole problem of ethico-political responsibility - the disparities between law, ethics, and politics, or between the unconditional idea of law...and the concrete conditions of its implementation...' (pp.56-57).

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.9-10.

example).⁷ As we saw in Derrida's discussion of Nelson Mandela, the imperative is to return to the discourses of human rights, to question the exemplarity of that language in order to encounter or experience what remains necessarily absent and unthought, necessarily without example, in them.

This 'messianic' thinking may also inform contemporary understandings of national identity in a world threatened by nationalism, in which a desire to draw cultural boundaries may lead to fragmentation and disharmony. Such a 'postmodern ethic' may offer a new way of conceiving universal moral agency without the homogenizing drives of ideology. Derrida writes,

It is necessary to make ourselves the guardians of an idea of Europe, of a difference of Europe, but of a Europe that consists precisely in not closing itself off in its own identity and in advancing itself in an exemplary way toward what it is not, toward the other heading or the heading of the other, indeed toward the other of the heading, which would be the beyond of this modern tradition, another border structure.⁸

Once again, pursuing justice or democracy involves that experience of *aporia*, a recognition and acceptance of irreconcilable responsibilities, or what Derrida calls the 'undecidable'. It is necessary that this experience be maintained (and here, as we have seen, the creative writer assumes an almost prophetic role) rather than resolved or neutralised in theory. In the terms of Isaiah 1, it is the role of 'the remnant' to keep the text alive, and refuse the security of ideological closure. This should not suggest fatalism or moral inertia but an honest acceptance that responsibilities exceed our ability to act or interpret. Justice requires immediate response, yet is always 'to come'.

With regard to European cultural identity, this must not be dispersed into a multiplicity of petty nationalisms, each one jealous and untranslatable. We must engage in

⁷ For a discussion of the prophetic and messianic resonances in Derrida's writing, see John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997).

⁸ Derrida, *The Other Heading*, op.cit., p.29.

translation and communication, even as we recognise difference and untranslatability.

On the other hand, we must resist pressure to centralise and standardise.

[Europe] cannot and must not accept the capital of a centralizing authority that, by means of trans-European cultural mechanisms, by means of publishing, journalistic, and academic concentrations - be they state-run or not - would control and standardize, subjecting artistic discourses and practices to a grid of intelligibility, to philosophical and aesthetic norms, to channels of immediate and efficient communication, to the pursuit of ratings and commercial profitability. For by reconstituting places of an easy consensus, places of a demagogical and 'salable' consensus, through mobile, omnipresent, and extremely rapid media networks, by thus immediately crossing every border, such normalization would establish a cultural capital at any place and at all times.⁹

It is necessary to avoid both the nationalistic tensions of linguistic difference and the homogenization of languages through the 'neutrality' of a translating medium which would claim to be transparent, metalinguistic, and universal.¹⁰ These are two irreconcilable responsibilities but, as Derrida continually reminds us, there is no responsibility that is not the experience of the impossible.¹¹

In the final chapter of his book *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991), Zygmunt Bauman examines the factors which seem to have rendered Western-style liberal democracy immune from social critique. He argues that the privatisation of human concerns has been a significant factor and the fact that the free market is assumed to be inevitable, with its own checks and balances.

It is not necessarily the case that the denizens of postmodern - privatized and commodified - society enjoy the sum-total of greater happiness (one would still wish to know how to measure happiness objectively and compare it), and that they experience their worries as less serious and painful; what does truly matter is that it would not occur to them to lay the blame for such troubles they may suffer at the door of the state, and even less to expect the remedies to be handed over through that door. Postmodern society proved to be a well-nigh perfect translating machine - one that interprets any extant and prospective *social* issue as *private* concern.¹²

⁹ Ibid., pp.39-40.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.58.

¹¹ Ibid., p.41.

¹² Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p.261.

Consumer society celebrates the 'freedom' of the individual, yet the supra-individual market machine has already defined the terms of that 'freedom'. Bauman writes:

Consumer freedom means orientation of life towards market-approved commodities and thereby precludes one crucial freedom: freedom from the market, freedom that means anything else but the choice between standard commercial products. Above all, consumer freedom successfully deflects aspirations of human liberty from human affairs and the management of collective life.¹³

In the market economy, diversity thrives, but only such diversity is allowed to thrive as benefits the economy. Moreover, if liberty means consumer choice, then in order to enjoy that liberty one must be a consumer, a condition which leaves out millions. We hear much of the virtue of tolerance, but, as Bauman reminds us, tolerance does not necessarily encourage human solidarity. It may be that tolerance encourages an unconcern for others which makes cruelty easier to commit.

In our type of society, economic and political domination may well do without hegemony; it found the way of reproducing itself under conditions of cultural variety. The new tolerance means irrelevance of cultural choice for the stability of domination. And irrelevance rebounds in *indifference*. Alternative forms of life arouse but spectator interest of the type offered by a sparkling and spicy variety show; they may even trigger less resentment (particularly if viewed from a safe distance or through the secure shield of the TV screen), but no fellow-feeling either; they belong to the outer world of theatre and entertainment, not to the inner world of the politics of life.¹⁴

In a society dominated by the hyper-reality of media-driven consumerism, the importance of democracy - a democracy characterised by memory (the memory of what is preconceived and forgotten in the correlation of image and reference) and promise - is as important as ever.

In the final chapter of *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (1992), Simon Critchley considers the role of the philosopher in politics. The philosopher is not one who wishes to establish politics on an absolute foundation, but one who dwells in the *polis* and questions, criticises and judges.

¹³ Ibid., p.262.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.274.

Philosophy, as the wisdom of love at the service of love, is the discourse which, through its activity of open, agnostic critique, ensures that the community remains an open community, at the service of ethical difference. Philosophical critique, like Antigone herself, is the eternal irony of the community, the fact that the community is legitimised only by calling the legitimacy of the community into question. The just polity is one that can actively maintain its own interruption or ironization as that which sustains it.¹⁵

Legitimate communities are those which hold themselves in question; and to that extent legitimate communities are philosophical (or, one might say, legitimate communities are 'reading communities').¹⁶ According to Critchley, 'democracy practises the ongoing interruption of politics by ethics, of totality by infinity'¹⁷ One must not restrict oneself to conceiving of democracy as an existent political form but as a task, or project to be attempted.

For Derrida, philosophy and the university have a crucial role to play in this process.¹⁸ According to Derrida, an important role of the university is to question the heritage of our language and thought, to be conscious of the danger of a homogeneity of discourse - for example, the elevation of technology and instrumental rationality, or a philosophical discourse which would plead for transparency, for the univocality of democratic discussion. The *College International de Philosophie* was founded in 1984 by Derrida and others as an exemplary place for questioning the forms, structures and institutions of education and communication, including the university.

In 'The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils', Derrida writes of the dangers of academic disciplines being subject to programming by the pressures of the State, or by civil society or capital interests, so that thought is appropriated by socio-political forces. One of the tasks of the university is therefore to study these

¹⁵ Simon Critchley, *op.cit.*, p.238.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.239. cf. Robert Detweiler, *op.cit.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.240.

¹⁸ See, for example, Derrida, 'The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils', in *Diacritics* 13, Fall 1983, 7ff.

Derrida with Geoff Bennington, 'On Colleges and Philosophy', in Lisa Appignanesi (ed.), *Postmodernism: ICA Documents* (London: Free Association Books, 1989), pp. 209-228.

pressures. Derrida argues that there is a need to keep alive the memory of a tradition (for example, a philosophical tradition - hence his advocacy of Philosophy teaching in French schools) *and* make an opening beyond any programme, that is towards what he calls 'the future'. In other words, it is necessary both to teach the traditions of Western philosophy and continually to re-read these traditions - thinking about 'the abyss beneath the university'.¹⁹

Derrida's vision for the university is in many ways analogous to Robert Detweiler's understanding of what it could mean to 'read religiously'. Indeed, perhaps Detweiler's 'reading community' provides a responsible alternative to Stanley Hauerwas' communitarian ethic, for whereas Hauerwas' understanding seems to rely on a shared interpretation of the Christian story, Detweiler celebrates an interactive response to texts, 'a trustful exchange based on principles of friendship rather than power'²⁰, countering the privatising tendencies of our culture.

A religious reading, therefore, might be one that finds a group of persons engaged in gestures of friendship with each other across the erotic space of the text that draws them out of their privacy and its stress on meaning and power.²¹

In Detweiler's view, a religious reading is one in which a reader understands him- or herself as part of a community engaged in simultaneously recognising, criticising and reshaping the myths and rituals it lives by. Such reading is a way of responding to the surplus of meaning which reading supplies, an awareness that a text always offers more than the mind can absorb or signify. It is a celebration of the excess of experience over interpretation, a witness to the great ineffability of existence.

Religious reading is the deep play that reminds us how the text can never really be completed, no more than can the author or reader. The text as other, or other as text, refuses to be grasped conceptually, requires that the reader opens himself to what the text has to say. It is an effort which requires belief because we are always on the verge of being seduced by the non-vision of nothingness, the ultimate

¹⁹ Derrida, 'The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils', *op.cit.*, 17.

²⁰ Robert Detweiler, *op.cit.*, p.33.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp.34-35.

abstraction and the final goal of interpretation, and we need to recall, against that nihilism, the enduring inexpressibility that incessantly inspires our desire.²²

The terms in which these issues are discussed, by Derrida and others, have powerful theological resonances ('the name', 'the ineffable', 'anamnesis', 'the mystical foundation of authority', 'justice or democracy to come', 'the fall of language into representation') and a number of contemporary scholars have recently explored the theological implications of Derrida's work.²³ I would argue that to take the 'postmodern condition' seriously involves seeing the discipline of theology as *subject to* ethics. In Kierkegaard's terms, the religious disturbance proceeds by way of the ethical. Nazism, Soviet Communism and Apartheid may all be seen as 'theology' become ideological. Communism was a messianic vision which, as Derrida argues in *Specters of Marx*, lost sight of its messianism; Nazism and Apartheid sought justification through a 'pure' reading of scripture. Against these horrors, theology²⁴ may be conceived as an obligation to write and to read, witnessing to the 'unpresentable in presentation itself'. In this sense, for example, the burden of the Holocaust writer, to write against oblivion, becomes a religious vocation.

This, too, is the significance of the so-called 'Death of God' theology prominent in the 1960s. God - the God of metaphysics, the God of *onto-theology*, is dead. After the death of that God, the ethical subject is able to discover the sense of transcendence that was lost or reified in metaphysics, so that the 'death' of God is the precondition for the possibility of religiosity and morality.

²² Ibid., p.45.

²³ See, for example, John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, op.cit; Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); David Jasper, 'From Theology to Theological Thinking: The Development of Critical Thought and its Consequences for Theology', in *Literature and Theology*, Vol.9, No.3, September 1995, 293-305; Walter Lowe, *Theology and Difference: The Wound of Reason* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993).

²⁴ The term 'theological thinking' may avoid the implication of logocentricity. See, for example, David Jasper, 'From Theology to Theological Thinking', op.cit.

Twentieth-century theology has been struggling to respond to the breakdown of Enlightenment confidence and the natural theology which accompanied it, and to confront the reality of world war and genocide. As Walter Lowe puts it, 'In the nineteenth century experience had become the touchstone for doing theology. With the twentieth century, experience became unbearable'.²⁵

Yet the postmodern 'crisis' may provide an impetus for a re-visiting of theological categories. Derrida has written as follows:

in general, to summarize very succinctly, the point would seem to be to liberate theology from what has been grafted on to it, to free it from its metaphysico-philosophical super ego, so as to uncover an authenticity of the 'gospel', of the evangelical message. And thus, from the perspective of faith, deconstruction can at least be a very useful technique...And [the point would also seem to be] a real possibility for faith both at the margins and very close to Scripture, a faith lived in a venturous, dangerous, free way.²⁶

As Walter Lowe argues, Derridean deconstruction, with its emphasis on writing as a condition of 'the Fall', may be read as testifying to the reality of human brokenness and, as a depiction of the human condition, this provides a basis for human solidarity and universal moral agency.²⁷

Reading - reading 'religiously' - and recognising *unreadability* become a kind of repentance, a recognition of the fallibility of the theories, values and practices legitimated by our own fictional worlds. The contemporary interest in apocalyptic may

²⁵ Walter Lowe, *Theology and Difference*, , op.cit., p.1.

²⁶ 'Deconstruction in America: An Interview with Jacques Derrida', ed. James Creech, Peggy Kamuf and Jane Todd, *Critical Exchange* 17 (Winter 1985), p.12; published by The Society for Critical Exchange, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio.

²⁷ Ibid., p.12. Walter Lowe points out that what Derrida has done is to take with full seriousness the assertion in Heidegger's *Being and Time* that classical metaphysics failed because in such metaphysics, 'entities are grasped in their Being as "presence"; this means that they are understood with regard to a definite mode of time - the *Present*' (Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (London: SCM, 1962), p.47 - quoted in Walter Lowe, *Theology and Difference*, op.cit., p.19.

Walter Lowe argues that the attempt, particularly in the 1960s, to develop the implications of Heidegger's thought for theology, never fulfilled its promise because it did not take the critique of presence sufficiently seriously. See Walter Lowe, *Theology and Difference*, pp.18-19.

be seen in this perspective - the radical disturbance or revelation which exposes the atrocities which we mask with our systems of reality.

The recognition of human brokenness calls for a theology which recognises the radical 'otherness' of God, a God who may not be represented in the discourses of theology. As Mark C. Taylor puts it, 'it would not be too much to suggest that deconstruction is the "hermeneutic" of the death of God'²⁸ In 1960, Thomas Altizer wrote that 'Despite its great relevance to our situation, the faith of the radical Christian continues to remain largely unknown, and this is so both because that faith has never been able to speak in the established categories of Western thought and theology and because it has so seldom been given a visionary expression'.²⁹ Walter Lowe argues that such acknowledgement of the radical otherness of God might actually have a liberating effect, because it allows finite difference and the richness of creation to be affirmed.

The violence done to creation has sprung time and time again from the human effort to become, ourselves, the link between finite and infinite. We have sought to make of our own finite transcendence a bridge beyond; we have tried to find in our finite reality some reassuring correspondence with the absolute. But no such form or correspondence exists. Rather that to which we are to correspond is our 'veritable situation', which is the absence of such a link, an absence which compels humankind to bow to the One who is wholly other.³⁰ The distinction remains rigorous - and therefore the creation is free to be what it is: various, many-faceted, a festival of innocent difference. Nature is released from the requirement that it deliver a saving presence. And we are freed to live without that anxious, idolatrous demand.³¹

It may be that Derridean deconstruction provides a language with which to re-visit the *crisis* theology of Karl Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*, written in the aftermath of the First World War.³² For example, Walter Lowe believes that the early theology of Karl

²⁸ Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), p.6.

²⁹ Thomas J.J. Altizer and William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (Harmondsworth, 1968), p.182.

³⁰ Lowe is here alluding to Karl Barth's *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p.444.

³¹ Lowe, *Theology and Difference*, op.cit., p.127.

³² As well as Walter Lowe's *Theology and Difference*, see, for example, David E. Klemm, 'Back to Literature - and Theology?', in David Jasper (ed.), *Postmodernism, Literature and the Future of*

Barth might be read, not as naively pre-Enlightenment, but as profoundly post-critical. Barth wrote that 'nothing is so meaningless as the attempt to construct a religion out of the Gospel, and to set it as one human possibility in the midst of others'.³³ According to Barth, theology is the *crisis* of Western culture and religiosity, and the 'veritable worship of God' requires an act of repentance. Repentance is the primary ethical action upon which all secondary ethical conduct depends.³⁴ For Barth, 'the power and earnestness of Christian ethics lie in its persistent asking of questions and in its steady refusal to provide answers to these questions'.³⁵ It is only as problem that ethics can effect or reflect the 'great disturbance'. Barth's concern here is to set aside a 'metaphysical' conception of God, a belief that there exists a direct link between the creation and God, a hidden correspondence to be discovered. The word 'God' means the unity of things, but not a unity which can serve as the first principle of order in the cultural sphere.³⁶

The fact that ethics constitutes a problem reminds us that the object about which we are conversing has no objectivity, that is to say, it is not a concrete world existing above or behind our world ... The fact that ethics are presented to us as a problem ... provides us with a guarantee that, when we repeat - sometimes tediously perhaps - the formula 'God himself, God alone,' we do not mean by it some divine thing, or some ideal world contrasted with the visible world.³⁷

A human gesture towards God which believes itself to be direct is a gesture which has confidence in its own sufficiency, lacking repentance; but once broken, or repentant, that gesture becomes a gesture towards God.

As we have seen, this is the 'brokenness' or experience of *aporia*, the 'unreadable' or 'undecidable', without which there can be no freedom but only the unfolding of a

Theology (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp.180-190; David Jasper, 'From Theology to Theological Thinking: The Development of Critical Thought and its Consequences for Theology'; Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Theology of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995)

³³ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, op.cit., p.225.

³⁴ Ibid., p.436.

³⁵ Ibid., p.466.

³⁶ One is reminded here of Derrida's notion of the 'mystical foundation of authority'.

³⁷ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, op.cit., pp.424-5.

programme, no democracy but only ideology, no justice but only law, no theology but only metaphysics.

'We ought therefore to recognise both our obligation and our inability and by that very recognition give God the glory'.³⁸

³⁸ Karl Barth, quoted in David Klemm, 'Back to Literature – and Theology?', in David Jasper (ed.), *Postmodernism, Literature and the Future of Theology* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p.183.

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