

The Ethics of Meta-Witnessing in Yannick Haenel's *Jan Karski*

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We move now to outside a German wood.
Three men are there commanded to dig a hole
In which the two Jews are ordered to lie down
And be buried alive by the third who is a Pole.
Not light from the shrine at Weimar beyond the hill
Nor light from heaven appeared. But he did refuse.
A Lüger settled back deeply in its glove.
He was ordered to change places with the Jews.
Much causal death had drained away their souls.
The thick dirt mounted towards the quivering chin.
When only the head was exposed the order came
To dig him out again and to get back in.
No light, no light in the blue Polish eye.
When he finished a riding boot packed down the earth.
The Lüger hovered lightly in its glove.
He was shot in the belly and in three hours bled to death.

Anthony Hecht, 'More Light! More Light!'

A 'false novel' or a 'false testimony'?

Published in September 2009 as part of Gallimard's prestigious *L'Infini* series, *Jan Karski* narrates the life of Jan Romuald Koziellewski (Karski's real name), a key figure of the Polish Resistance who during World War II acted as one of the couriers ensuring communication between the Underground and the Polish government in exile, residing first in Paris and then, after the Germans invaded France, in London. Yet, rather than for his perilous missions, one of which ended in Karski's capture by the Gestapo, the Polish courier is best known for his efforts to persuade the Western Allies to act upon the extermination of the Jews carried out by the Nazis in German-occupied Poland. Indeed, Haenel's key objective is to pay tribute¹ to 'the man who tried to stop the Holocaust',² an ambition confirmed by the fact that all the three parts making up this self-consciously hybrid text speak of Karski's clandestine visits to the Warsaw Ghetto and the transit camp of Izbica Lubelska. Otherwise the book's three parts, which greatly vary in length and texture, focus on different stages of Karski's life and career. Part I offers an ekphratic description of the Polish courier's testimony in Claude Lanzmann's documentary *Shoah* (1985) in which he recounts his meeting with two Jewish leaders who entrusted him with the task of communicating the Jews' tragedy to the world, and his

¹ 'Entretien avec Yannick Haenel: Précisions sur *Jan Karski*', *Mémoires occupées: Fictions françaises et Seconde Guerre mondiale*, ed. by Marc Dambre (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2013), 233-47 (p. 235).

² This is how Karski has often been referred to since the publication of E. Thomas Wood's and Stanisław M. Jankowski's authorised biography, *Karski: How One Man Who Tried to Stop the Holocaust* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1994).

traumatic visits to the ghetto and the camp he infiltrated on their recommendation. Part II then summarizes the Polish courier's own memoirs, *Story of the Secret State* (1944), which relate Karski's work for the Polish resistance and his diplomatic missions to London and Washington. Much longer than Parts I and II and strikingly different in tone, Part III concentrates on the Polish hero's postwar life in America and is narrated by an imaginary Jan Karski who is speaking to us from beyond the grave. As if trying to forestall any misunderstandings or criticism provoked by this daring mix of fact and fiction, in the author's note Haenel scrupulously distinguishes between the first two parts, which are documentary, and Part III that is fictional.³

It seems that by staging a highly positive hero, whose commitment to the Jewish cause has been officially acknowledged by both Israel and America,⁴ and by displaying a truly reverential attitude towards his courageous and righteous protagonist, Haenel should have been spared the sort of criticism that Jonathan Littell faced on publishing *Les Bienveillantes* four years earlier. Indeed, having been awarded two important French literary prizes,⁵ *Jan Karski* became an overnight critical and commercial success, and earned its hitherto relatively unknown author many honours.⁶ In this context, the accusations that Claude Lanzmann levelled at Haenel in January 2010 came as a surprise; the author of *Shoah* criticised the novelist for having plagiarised his documentary and, worse still, for having written a 'false novel' and falsified history, as well as for lacking imagination and talent. Lanzmann also claimed that Haenel had misrepresented Karski by showing him in a simplistic way as a 'pleurnichard et véhément procureur qui met le monde entier en accusation pour n'avoir pas sauvé les Juifs'.⁷ Around the same time, prominent Holocaust historian, Annette Wieviorka, launched her crusade against Haenel's book, calling it a 'false testimony' and thus implicitly equating it with Jerzy Kosiński's or Binjamin Wilkomirski's faked accounts of their

³ In interviews Haenel redefined the third part as 'fiction intuitive' and highlighted the fictionality of Parts I and II. This is because these offer a subjective representation of the documentary texts that in themselves are partial in both senses of the word. See 'Entretien avec Yannick Haenel', 237.

⁴ In 1982, Yad Vashem recognised Karski as Righteous Among the Nations, in 1994 he was made an honorary citizen of Israel, and in 2012 Barack Obama awarded Karski the Presidential Medal for Freedom.

⁵ The Prix Interallié and Prix du roman FNAC.

⁶ Haenel was made Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres and received the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland.

⁷ Claude Lanzmann, 'Jan Karski de Yannick Haenel: un faux roman', *Les Temps modernes* 657 (January-March 2010), online.

childhood survival of the Holocaust.⁸ Wiewiorka also condemned the anachronism of Haenel's conception of World War II politics consisting in the book's resolute anti-American stance. Finally, she took exception to Haenel's alleged relativisation of Polish anti-Semitism and, agreeing with Lanzmann, reproached him for having taken inadmissible liberties with historical *truth*, which the novelist reportedly replaced with 'un certain nombre de 'vérités' qui sont les siennes dans une totale désinvolture à l'égard de l'histoire'.⁹ It is noteworthy that the afore-cited accusations were quickly taken up and repeated in Karski's homeland, a fact that seems puzzling given Haenel's adulatory attitude towards the Polish hero and his romanticised image of Poland itself.¹⁰ The debate then moved from the pages of newspapers and magazines to scholarly journals where, once again, Haenel found his supporters and detractors.¹¹

Rather than trying to re-evaluate the novel's historical veracity or further discuss the ethics of its marriage of fact and fiction but nevertheless polemicising with certain points of

⁸ Published in 1965 as an autobiographical novel, Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* was later denounced as fiction. See Eliot Weinberger, *Karmic Traces 1993–1995* (New York: New Directions, 2000), 56. Likewise, Wilkomirski's *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* were exposed as a fake and its author as an impostor. See, for example, Andrea Reiter, 'Memory and Authenticity: The Case of Binjamin Wilkomirski', *The Memory of Catastrophe*, ed. by Peter Grey and Kendrick Oliver (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 132-45.

⁹ Annette Wiewiorka, 'Karski témoigne: La réponse d'Annette Wiewiorka', *L'Histoire* 379 (March 2014), online. For more details on the acrimonious exchanges between Haenel and his critics, see Richard J. Golsan, 'L'"Affaire Jan Karski": Réflexions sur un scandale littéraire et historique', *Mémoires occupées*, pp. 183-90.

¹⁰ Among the critics who reacted to Jan Karski were the journalist Leopold Unger, the President of the Jan Karski Society, Kazimierz Pawełek, and a score of prominent journalists such as Aleksandra Klich or Jarosław Kurski. See, for example, Leopold Unger, 'On ne touche pas à Jan Karski', *Courrier international*, 15.02.2010, online; Aleksandra Klich, 'Ksero z życia Karskiego' ['A Photocopy of Karski's Life'], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 28.09.2010, online; Jarosław Kurski, 'Karykatury Jana Karskiego' ['Caricatures of Jan Karski'], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 22.03.2010, online; Kazimierz Pawełek, 'Karski n'a jamais soupçonné les États-Unis de trahison', *Le Point*, 04.02.2010.

¹¹ Among Haenel's most severe critics is Golsan who has endorsed Lanzmann's and Wiewiorka's judgment of the novel, adding further arguments against Haenel's writing. He described *Jan Karski* as a novel where 'distortion bleeds into scandalous revisionism' and its protagonist as 'a problematic and dubious witness', as well as 'a falsifier of history'. See Richard J. Golsan, 'The Poetics and Perils of Faction: Contemporary French Fiction and the Memory of World War II', *The Romanic Review* 105.1-2 (2014), 53–68 (p. 63 and p. 65). More positive have been Philippe Carrard, Manuel Braganca, Pavel Hladki, and Evelyne Ledoux-Beaugrand. See Philippe Carrard, 'Historiographic Metafiction, French Style', *Style* 48.2 (Summer 2014), 181-202, Manuel Braganca, 'Faire parler les morts: Sur Jan Karski et la controverse Lanzmann-Haenel', *Modern and Contemporary France* 23.1 (2015), 35-46, Pawel Hladki, "'Qui témoigne pour le témoin?" Question de la liberté littéraire à l'exemple de *Jan Karski* de Yannick Haenel', *Études romanes de Brno* 33.1 (2012), 57-67, Evelyne Ledoux-Beaugrand, 'Les restes d'Auschwitz: Intertextualité et postmémoire dans *Jan Karski* de Yannick Haenel et *C'est maintenant du passé* de Marianne Rubinstein', *Études françaises* 49.2 (2013), 145-62, and 'Emprunt et bricolage: Traces mémorielles de la Shoah dans *Drancy Avenir* et *Jan Karski*', *French Forum* 39.1 (Winter 2014), 143-57.

Lanzmann's corrosive discourse, the present article considers Haenel's tribute to Jan Karski as an act of meta-witnessing, a term used by Jacques Derrida in reference to Paul Celan's poetry or perhaps even to his own readings of the Romanian poet's work.¹² By meta-witnessing — as opposed to secondary witnessing — I understand the act of testifying on behalf of a witness which, analogically to metafiction, is underpinned by a self-reflective meditation upon the mutually contradictory necessity and impossibility of bearing witness (for a witness). In preparation for my examination of the moral implications of Haenel's unorthodox take on World War II history, I will contextualise *Jan Karski* with the development of Holocaust memory in the face of the advent of second- and, more recently, third-generation survivors, as well as of the so-called 'non-witnesses' or 'non-survivors' who, though lacking a personal link to the Shoah, feel compelled to speak about it. Using, among others, Marianne Hirsch's taxonomy of postmemory, I will define *Jan Karski's* position in relation to existing Holocaust testimony, before discussing its author's both intense self-awareness of the morally risky nature of his project and ambition to offer a more general reflection upon the figure of the witness and the act of secondary witnessing. Guided by *Jan Karski's* epigraph — 'Qui témoigne pour le témoin?' —, which paraphrases the closing stanza of Celan's poem 'Aschenglorie', my analysis will then turn to the way Haenel addresses the aporia voiced by the poem and consisting in the moral obligation and psychological urge to testify to what is often felt to be unrepresentable for the absence of the 'real' witnesses. Finally, framing my discussion with Dan Stone's and Annette Wieviorka's considerations upon the tension between Holocaust testimony and historiography, I will read *Jan Karski* not only as a questioning of the future of Holocaust memory in the post-witness era but also as an apology of testimony, even as invented by a novelist. This is because, unlike history proper, testimony is capable of voicing feelings and especially trauma, and can therefore showcase what Jean-François Lyotard has termed a 'differend', thus performing what the French philosopher considers the postmodern writer's duty. I will thus conclude with an attempt to assess whether, as many believe, Haenel's portrayal of Karski is doing further violence to the memory of the Polish hero and the cause he championed, or, conversely, it is an ethically sound testimony to the wrongs suffered by the Jews and their advocate, which Haenel achieves precisely by finding a new idiom for the expression of their differend.

¹² Jacques Derrida, 'Poetics and Politics of Witnessing', *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. by Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 65-96 (p. 70).

Speak, postmemory

Since the emergence of the second generation of Holocaust survivors we have become accustomed not only to the idea of secondary witnessing but also to that of meta-witnessing, with children of Holocaust survivors narrating their parents' wartime ordeal. Among the numerous examples is Art Spiegelman's autobiographical graphic novel which, exhibiting postmodern narrative techniques, metatextually reflects upon the process of gathering, processing and transmitting the father's testimony by his son. *Maus* additionally explores the inheritance by the second generation of the so-called 'Survivor Syndrome', illustrating the phenomenon consisting in the victims' children suffering from their parents' wartime brutalisation.¹³ Spiegelman's graphic novel also probes the disturbance in the parent-child relationship, which has been observed by psychologists working with the survivors' children.¹⁴ Spiegelman's account thus becomes 'a paradigmatic and generative text' for Hirsch's discussion of 'postmemory',¹⁵ a neologism she coined to describe the second generation's profound internalisation of, not to say identification with their parents' traumatic experiences. And, if in Hirsch's terms, Spiegelman's meta-witnessing is 'vertical', which means that memories are passed down from parent to child, 'horizontal' transmission of Holocaust experience consists in the child's position becoming more broadly available to her/his contemporaries.¹⁶ A special example of horizontal postmemory is Marguerite Duras's autobiographical text, *La Douleur* (1985). Its authorial narrator casts herself as witness to the testimony of her husband, Robert L., imprisoned in Buchenwald and Dachau.¹⁷ While telling the story of someone waiting and then nursing a survivor of the *univers concentrationnaire*, the narrator reflects upon the process of secondary witnessing and the mediated nature of any historical evocation.¹⁸ She also makes intertextual references to her husband's own record of

¹³ Ruth Franklin, *A Thousand Darkneses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 219.

¹⁴ Franklin, 219.

¹⁵ Marianne Hirsch, 'Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning and Post-Memory', *Discourse* 15.2 (Winter 1992-1993), 3-29. See also Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 12 and 25-31.

¹⁶ Marianne Hirsch, 'The Generation of Postmemory', *Poetics Today* 29.1 (Spring 2008), 103-28 (pp. 114-15). In her typology, Hirsch is indebted to Edward Said's distinction between vertical *filiation* and horizontal *affiliation*. See note 9, 114.

¹⁷ Marguerite Duras, *La Douleur* (Paris: P.O.L., 1985). The collection has been controversial because whereas Duras presented *La Douleur* as a journal she had kept during the war and found in her country house only many years later, it remains unclear when the text was actually written.

¹⁸ For an analysis of *La Douleur* as an example of a Holocaust testimony, see Camila Loew, *The Memory of Pain: Women's Testimonies of the Holocaust* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 145-84.

his stay in the camps — *L'Espèce humaine* —, which was published in 1947 but, typically for the early Holocaust testimonies, was initially paid only scant attention.¹⁹

Although some of the narratives by second-generation writers sparked polemic, which was usually to do with the violation of Holocaust memory through inappropriate form or content, or, as exemplified by the Wilkomirski or the Kosinski affairs,²⁰ through lack of authenticity, their reception has overwhelmingly reflected Georges Perec's words that '[o]n n'attaque pas la littérature concentrationnaire'.²¹ Moreover, as Ruth Franklin notes, these accounts gradually displaced survivors' testimonies as the children appropriated their parents' memory,²² becoming, in Helen Epstein's words, 'possessed by a history they never lived'.²³ What happens, however, when not only the witnesses themselves but also their offspring will no longer be in our midst? Of course, Holocaust memories can be passed on to the third generation and recent years have indeed seen a proliferation of narratives by the survivors' grandchildren.²⁴ Yet, works on the Nazi genocide have also been published by writers whose familial connection to the Holocaust is tenuous or non-existent, and whom Gary Weissman would classify as 'non-witnesses' or 'non-survivors',²⁵ and Geoffrey Hartman as 'witnesses by adoption'.²⁶

¹⁹ Robert Antelme, *L'Espèce humaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957). For the hostility or at least indifference to early Holocaust testimonies, see Tony Kushner, 'Holocaust testimony, Ethics, and the Problem of Representation', *Poetics Today* 27.2 (Summer 2006), 275-95 (pp. 276-78).

²⁰ Another example of a false testimony is Martin Gray's *For Those I Loved* (1972). The story takes the reader from the Warsaw Ghetto to Treblinka, which the author did not experience but which he – or rather his ghost writer, Max Gallo, – described to tell the 'whole' story of the Holocaust. More recently, Deli Strummer, a survivor of several concentration camps, was exposed for killing off her survivor husband in her testimony, *A Personal Reflection on the Holocaust* (1988). See Kushner, 283-84.

²¹ Georges Perec, 'Robert Antelme ou la vérité de la littérature', *L. G. Une aventure des années soixante* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), pp. 87-114 (p. 87).

²² Franklin, 221.

²³ Cited by Franklin, 223.

²⁴ See, for example, Ivan Jablonka's *Histoire des grands-parents que je n'ai jamais eus: Une enquête* (Paris: Seuil, 2012); Marianne Rubinstein, *C'est maintenant du passé* (Paris: Verticales-Phase deux, 2009); or Arnaud Rykner, *Le Wagon* (Paris: Le Rouergue, 2010). For a discussion of the ownership of Holocaust memory, see Imre Kertész, 'Who Owns Auschwitz?', trans. by John MacKay, *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14.1 (Spring, 2001), pp. 267-72.

²⁵ Gary Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 20.

²⁶ Geoffrey Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 6.

Among the third-generation French-language authors are Jonathan Littell, Laurent Binet, Fabrice Humbert, or Yannick Haenel.²⁷ None of these writers, however, can claim a ‘familial’ connection to the Holocaust and some of them, like Haenel, are not even Jewish. Instead, to borrow Hirsch’s term, these writers’ link to *les années noires* is ‘affiliative’, that is resulting from, on the one hand, the empathy with the actual survivors and their descendants, and, on the other, ‘mediation that would be broadly appropriate, available, and indeed compelling enough to encompass a larger collective in an organic web of transmission.’²⁸ Otherwise, Haenel’s knowledge of the Holocaust can be defined as based on ‘national postmemory’, as Frédérique Leichter-Flack calls the official commemorations of the Shoah that have intensified in France since the 1970s.²⁹ Indeed, although Haenel may be haunted by his grandfathers’ contrasting wartime choices,³⁰ his relationship with the massacre of European Jews remains purely textual. Consequently, for Evelyne Ledoux-Beaugrand, Haenel is a consumer and producer of ‘Holocaust culture’ (but not a contributor to the Holocaust industry!), a term coined by Imre Kertész to designate the moral values that have arisen from the extermination of the Jews. These values have nurtured a literature that ‘give[s] rise to redemption: the spirit, the catharsis’.³¹ For Ledoux-Beaugrand, who sadly somewhat simplifies the Hungarian writer’s thought, this means that Haenel’s work feeds off the cultural representations of the Nazi genocide which have proliferated since the end of the war and which, as exemplified by, among others, *Maus*, have also influenced the portrayals of the Holocaust created by the survivors’ children.³²

The flesh became word and made its dwelling among us

Rather than being a callous usurper of Karski’s story, as Lanzmann, Wieviorka and others would like to see him, Haenel demonstrates his acute sensitivity about his position as a ‘non-

²⁷ For an analysis of third-generation writers, see Aurélie Barjonet, ‘La Troisième Génération devant la Seconde Guerre mondiale: Une situation inédite’, *Études romanes de Brno* 33.1 (2012), 39-55.

²⁸ Hirsch, ‘The Generation of Postmemory’, 115.

²⁹ Frédérique Leichter-Flack, ‘Second Generation, Third Generation, and State Political Postmemory: The Holocaust and Its Literary Effects in Contemporary France’, *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies* 4.1-2 (Spring-Autumn 2015), 67-77 (p. 68).

³⁰ The writer’s paternal grandfather was first sent to Germany as an S.T.O. and then found himself fighting in the Wehrmacht against the Soviets. The maternal grandfather, in contrast, joined the Resistance and brought doom onto his family. Yannick Haenel, ‘The Silent Histories’, *The Australian*, 19.02.2011, online.

³¹ Imre Kertész, ‘The Holocaust as Culture’, trans. by Thomas Cooper, Imre Kertész and Thomas Cooper, *The Holocaust as Culture* (London: Seagull Books, 2011), pp. 57-8 (p. 78).

³² Hirsch observes that the son can imagine his father’s experience of Auschwitz only by way of the widely available photograph of liberated prisoners in Buchenwald. Hirsch, ‘The Generation of Postmemory’, 112.

witness'. This sensitivity informs, firstly, the book's very structure which lays bare Haenel's reliance on, on the one hand, documentary evidence, and, on the other, his own imagination in the absence of more personal sources of information about Karski and the Holocaust. Additionally, when summarising *Shoah* or *Story of the Secret State*, Haenel manifestly puts himself in the position of a candid viewer/reader whose reception of the texts is subjective and may collude with their authors' intentions. For instance, watching Lanzmann's interview with Karski, Haenel wonders with faked naivety whether, when relaying the two Jews' message, the Polish courier identifies himself with their pleas or deplores the facts that these pleas were ignored.³³ Similarly, he speculates about Lanzmann's motives for superposing Karski's monologue over the image of the Statue of Liberty:

Claude Lanzmann veut-il ainsi saluer la liberté de Jan Karski? Ou, au contraire, en jouant sur l'écart entre la voix et l'image, souligner tristement la différence entre l'Europe meurtrie dont parle Jan Karski, et le symbole éclatant de la 'Liberté éclairant le monde'? Entre la souffrance des Juifs d'Europe qui s'exprime à travers la voix de Jan Karski, et ce que l'Amérique a fait réellement pour sauver les Juifs d'Europe? Impossible de le savoir.³⁴

Haenel's awareness of the mediated rather than empirically-based character of his knowledge also comes through in his book's overt intertextuality, which, typically for postmodern fiction, symptomatises the view that all writing, be it historical or fictional,³⁵ is necessarily interdiscursive. As imagined by Haenel, Karski himself is a textual construct, for he is repeatedly identified with — or even reduced to — the message he carries. This means that he is either figured as a prophet through whom God speaks or is assimilated with the two Jewish leaders. That the fictional Karski is not meant to be the man of flesh and blood whom Lanzmann met and believes to know intimately, not to say, to own,³⁶ also transpires from Haenel's amalgamation of his protagonist with other fictional characters, such as the proud, solitary and melancholy Polish Rider from Rembrandt's 1637 painting, Kafka's Joseph K. or Moses, to whom Karski is likened when he seeks refuge in the bulrush basket-like bathtub standing in the middle of his hotel room: 'En remplissant le fond [de la baignoire] avec des couvertures et un oreiller, j'avais réussi à me confectionner un abri idéal. [...] Cette baignoire

³³ Yannick Haenel, *Jan Karski* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), 20-1.

³⁴ Haenel, *Jan Karski*, 19.

³⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (Oxford: Routledge, 1988), 124-40.

³⁶ A similar point is made by Ledoux-Beaugrand who states: '[Karski] est une présence désincarnée constituée d'un amalgame de textes et de représentations, tout à l'image d'un "patchwork" textuel. Autrement dit, Jan Karski ne revit sous la plume de Haenel qu'au prix de sa réduction à l'état de texte: il devient une fiction, précisément intitulé de son nom, où sa parole désormais désincarnée trouve momentanément ancrage' Evelyne Ledoux-Beaugrand, 160.

[...] m'importait; c'était une barque, un navire, une nacelle; j'étais conduit vers le récit'.³⁷ Consequently, rather than depicting Karski a one-dimensional character, as Lanzmann claims, Haenel incrusts his hero in the intricate web of intertextual references to Europe's rich cultural tradition and thus captures the complexity of the Polish courier's both character and condition, while highlighting his inexorable fictionality.

Faced with the conundrum created by the passing of the last eyewitnesses and his desire to honour both Karski's admittedly undervalued efforts and the Jews whose plea the Allies never heeded,³⁸ Haenel echoes Arnaud Rykner who, in the prologue to his 2010 novel about Convoy n° 7909 to Dachau, questions his license to narrate a Holocaust story or to combine historical facts with literary invention in doing so.³⁹ More succinct than the author of *Le Wagon*, Haenel conveys his dilemma by using as his novel's epigraph a paraphrase of the closing stanza of Celan's 'Aschenglorie' ['Ash-glory'], 'Niemand/ zeugt für den/ Zeugen' ['No one/ bears witness for the / witness'].⁴⁰ By rephrasing the poet's constative or perhaps even prohibitive statement as an interrogation, the author probes both the means of preserving Holocaust memory in what, alluding to Wieviorka's expression 'l'ère du témoin',⁴¹ Ledoux-Beaugrand has called 'the post-witness era',⁴² and his own legitimacy to substitute for a witness. Additionally, with the epigraph and the novel itself, which is indeed devoted to the man thought to be the first or at least one of the first to report on the Germans' crimes against Jews, Haenel engages a dialogue with those judging testimonial literature more morally suitably to the representation of the Shoah than fiction.⁴³ Paradoxically, however, he also, as I will argue later, seems to be challenging the conception of the work of historians, believed capable of a neutral and balanced view of the past thanks to their emotional detachment from that past, as superior to testimony, which is unavoidably subjective and marked by affect and trauma.⁴⁴ And this is despite, as Dan Stone points out following Giorgio Agamben, that 'Histor is in origin the eyewitness, the one who has seen'.⁴⁵

³⁷ Haenel, *Jan Karski*, 141.

³⁸ 'Entretien avec Yannick Haenel', 235.

³⁹ Rykner, 13-14.

⁴⁰ In an interview, Haenel talks of his quasi-compulsive urge to write about Karski. 'Entretien avec Yannick Haenel', 233-34.

⁴¹ Annette Wieviorka, *L'Ère du témoin* (Paris: Hachette, 2002).

⁴² Ledoux-Beaugrand, 145-62, 147.

⁴³ This position is mentioned by, among others, S. Lillian Kremer in the Introduction to *Witness through the Imagination* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 13.

⁴⁴ For a re-evaluation of testimony as a source of information about the Holocaust, see Dan Stone, 'Holocaust Testimony and the Challenge to the Philosophy of History', *History Memory and Mass Atrocity: Essays on the Holocaust and Genocide* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2006), pp. 132-47. See

Haenel's metafictional inquiry into the act of secondary witnessing persists in the text itself whose narrator repeatedly redefines a witness. Is a witness someone who, like Karski, has seen the reality to the existence of which he testifies with his very own eyes?⁴⁶ Or is it someone who, like Karski and now Haenel, is willing to speak?⁴⁷ Or is it the one who refuses to forget what he has seen?⁴⁸ Or, finally, is it the one who has suffered?⁴⁹ By asking these questions Haenel not only ruminates about his own position as a non-Jewish third-generation author writing about the Shoah, but also suffuses his metatextual meditation with intertextual echoes of canonical texts by Primo Levi, Agamben or Derrida. As for Levi, he exposes the tragic unreliability of human memory and, hence, of testimony,⁵⁰ questions the moral integrity of those who did not 'drown' but survived most probably through their prevarications.⁵¹ Finally, he goes as far as to undermine the survivors' right to testify since the real witnesses are those who have perished.⁵² Reading Levi's work, Agamben, as does Derrida, explores the meaning of the term 'witness' in various languages. In Latin, for example, there are two words: '*testis*' signifying the person who in a lawsuit is in the position of a third party, and '*superstes*' designating the one who has experienced an event and can therefore bear witness to it.⁵³ The Greek word for witness is in turn '*martis*', martyr.⁵⁴ And, although Agamben vehemently contests the idea of martyrdom in relation to Jewish deportees since it would justify 'the scandal of a meaningless death, of an execution that could only appear as absurd',⁵⁵ he concedes that 'witnessing' and 'martyrdom' are semantically linked, the Greek term deriving from the verb 'to remember': 'The survivor's vocation is to remember; he cannot *not* remember'.⁵⁶

also Annette Wieviorka, 'The Witness in History', trans. by Jared Stark, *Poetics Today* 27.2 (Summer 2006), 385-97 (pp. 95-6).

⁴⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, trans. by Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1993), 94.

⁴⁶ Haenel, *Jan Karski*, 16.

⁴⁷ Haenel, *Jan Karski*, 16.

⁴⁸ Haenel, *Jan Karski*, 33.

⁴⁹ Haenel, *Jan Karski*, 31.

⁵⁰ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. by Raymond Rosenthal (London: Michael Joseph, 1988), 17-19.

⁵¹ Levi, 62-3.

⁵² Levi, 63

⁵³ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 17.

⁵⁴ Agamben, 26.

⁵⁵ Agamben, 27.

⁵⁶ Agamben, 26. Cf. Derrida, 73-6.

Illuminated by Levi's and Agamben's remarks, Haenel's protagonist ceases to aspire to mimetic accuracy, which, according to Haenel, is in any case impossible to attain.⁵⁷ Instead, he becomes a *quintessential* and ahistorically construed witness incarnating the term's multiple meanings, encompassing the complexities related to the act of testifying and systematically erasing himself behind the message of those who could not be 'saved'. Indeed, like the prisoners described by Agamben, whose will to live is powered by the urge to bear witness,⁵⁸ it is purely through loyalty to those in whose stead he now must speak that Haenel's Karski stays alive despite literally dying of shame when faced with the spectacle of the Jews' brutal deaths.⁵⁹ Implicitly alluding to Levi's concept of the 'grey zone',⁶⁰ the protagonist probes his own position as a witness and decides that unless one is a victim one cannot avoid being on the side of the executioners. This is because '[p]ersonne n'échappe à cette abjection qui partage les hommes entre ceux qui meurent et ceux qui donnent la mort'⁶¹ Consequently, what Lanzmann saw as a sign of the uncharacteristic unmanliness of Haenel's protagonist,⁶² can be reconsidered as the witness's shame of having survived and her/his correlated quasi-pathological inability to forget, invoked by Agamben and, in Karski's case, symptomatised by insomnia, depression and what Julia Kristeva would call *asymbolia*.⁶³ By the same token, Karski's accusatory tone, so fiercely condemned by his critics,⁶⁴ turns the Polish courier into a *testis* who extends the responsibility for the Holocaust to the Allies, accusing them of having failed to save the Jews and of then having covered up their crime of non-assistance with the Nuremberg trials. Ultimately, Haenel's Karski is a *martis* who suffers in the process of fulfilling his mission, and who, like Christian martyrs, can certainly serve as an exemplar of courage, moral integrity and perseverance.

⁵⁷ 'Entretien avec Yannick Haenel', 238.

⁵⁸ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 15.

⁵⁹ Haenel, *Jan Karski*, 185.

⁶⁰ Levi describes the grey zone as 'ill-defined outlines which both separate and join the two camps of masters and servants'. Levi, 22-51, 27.

⁶¹ Levi, 184.

⁶² Those who personally knew Karski speak of his deep pessimism, traumas and frustration that resulted from his enduring sense of failure. See Maciej Kozłowski, 'Was It Really a Failed Mission?', *Memory and Responsibility: The Legacy of Jan Karski*, ed. by Eugeniusz Smolar (Warsaw: Jan Karski Educational Foundation, 2015), pp. 37-43 (p. 37).

⁶³ Julia Kristeva, *Soleil noir: Dépression et mélancolie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987).

⁶⁴ Karski did publically blame the world for having let down the Jews. Smolar quotes Karski addressing the International Liberators Conferences at the US State Department in 1981: 'My faith tells me the second Original Sin has been committed by humanity: through commission, or omission, or self-imposed ignorance, or insensitivity, or self-interest, or hypocrisy, or heartless rationalisation. The sin will haunt humanity to the end of time. It does haunt me. And I want it to be so.' Eugeniusz Smolar, 'The Legacy of Jan Karski: Responsibility for the Fate of Others', Smolar, pp. 263-65 (p. 263).

***Jan Karski* as a ‘a pseudo-testimony’ and ‘the aporia of Auschwitz’**

Returning to the question of meta-witnessing raised by the novel’s epigraph, Haenel systematically casts his character as a secondary witness by identifying him with the Jews who were being silenced or, to allude to Celan’s poem, reduced to *ashes* by their German oppressors. One could argue that the author thus seeks to establish an analogy between his own and the Polish courier’s position as a ‘prosthetic’ or ‘vicarious’ witness⁶⁵ who empathised with those whose message he carried. Indeed, Karski called himself a ‘Catholic Jew’,⁶⁶ married a Judeo-Polish dancer, Pola Nireńska, whose family was nearly entirely wiped out in the Shoah, and become honorary citizen of Israel. Karski’s empathy with the Jews affects not only the book’s diegetic but also textual level, through the systematic intermingling of Christian and Biblical imagery, as exemplified by the references to Moses or the Resurrection. The protagonist’s empathy with the persecuted is also visible in Haenel’s description of Karski’s appearance in Lanzmann’s *Shoah*:

Il ne s’exprime plus au passé, il révèle le message [...]. En parlant il s’anime, sa main droite se lève, ses yeux sont baissés, parfois il les ferme, il se concentre. [...] [C]e sont des paroles qu’il a prononcées mille fois [...], et pourtant les voici, prononcées par Jan Karski comme elles sont sorties de la bouches des deux hommes au milieu de l’année 1942, prononcées au présent, directement, comme si c’était eux, les deux hommes qui parlaient, et que lui, Jan Karski s’effaçait.⁶⁷

The above-quoted passage can be read as a metatextual comment about Haenel’s own novelistic enterprise and his desire to disappear behind Karski, as he attempts to do in Parts I and II, or indeed to merge with his hero, as he does in Part III where he presents himself as a medium through which the dead courier can speak his innermost thoughts.

However, Haenel’s affinity with his hero has nothing to do with the spooky identity theft performed by Wilkomirski who, though a child of a Swiss Protestant women, presented — and perhaps also genuinely believed — himself to be a Jewish Holocaust survivor. Consequently, rather than a ‘false testimony’, as Wiewiorka calls Haenel’s novel, *Jan Karski* can be redefined as a ‘a pseudo-testimony’, which is how, analysing Levi’s and Elie Wiesel’s study of the impossibility of bearing witness to the Holocaust, Agamben calls the survivor’s accounts.⁶⁸ To clarify Agamben’s expression and return to Levi’s already-mentioned remark, both Levi and Wiesel observe that it is the ‘drowned’ — not the ‘saved’ — who are the true,

⁶⁵ The two terms are used by Franklin. Franklin, 224.

⁶⁶ Haenel, *Jan Karski*, 176.

⁶⁷ Haenel, *Jan Karski*, 17-18.

⁶⁸ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 34.

the integral witnesses and so the ‘saved’ must ‘speak in their stead, by proxy’.⁶⁹ Yet, and this is the locus of the ‘aporia of Auschwitz’ also voiced by Celan,⁷⁰ the ‘drowned’, states Agamben, have nothing to report, no story, no voice and no thoughts, which means that ‘whoever assumes the charge of bearing witness in their name knows that he or she must bear witness in the name of the impossibility of bearing witness.’⁷¹ This thought is echoed by ‘Aschenglorie’, which, while using poetic language, articulates the failure of words in the face of what Derrida assumes to be the Holocaust.⁷² This is because the possibility of testifying has been, together with the actual witnesses, annihilated, as figured by the recurrent image of ash and the total consumption by fire it implies.⁷³ Indeed, the poem’s final stanza could, according to Derrida, be understood as an affirmative statement regarding ‘the irreplaceability of the singular witness’⁷⁴ or even, if interpreted as a proscription, forbidding altogether the act of witnessing for a witness,⁷⁵ since testifying can only take place in the first person.⁷⁶ And yet Celan’s recourse to poetics defies his poem’s gloomy message, suggesting that, in Derrida’s words, ‘all responsible witnessing engages a poetic experience of language’, whereby it potentially grants the poet a license to speak of the unspeakable.⁷⁷ Haenel appears to share Derrida’s interpretation, for by replacing the pessimistic ‘No one’ with the questioning ‘Who’ he lightens its weight of, if not resolves, the conundrum the poem poses, consequently reopening the possibility of testifying to the Holocaust. That this was Haenel’s intention is corroborated by the novel’s paratext; in an interview the author asserts his duty as a writer to testify through ‘intuitive fiction’ for lack of other possibilities of writing about the Holocaust in the post-witness era:⁷⁸ ‘[U]ne fiction scrupuleuse [...] sera l’un des modes possibles de transmission de certaines vérités sur des sujets aussi difficiles que la Shoah. [...] Il s’agit à ce moment-là d’aller jusqu’à l’irreprésentable, et c’est là que la littérature a un rôle à jouer.’⁷⁹ To conclude this section, one could conceive of Haenel’s relation to Karski’s story as analogous to Derrida’s relationship to Celan’s writing, the French philosopher’s work being a counter-

⁶⁹ Levi, 83-4. Cf. Elie Wiesel, ‘For Some Measure of Humanity’, *Sh’ma: A Journal of Jewish Responsibility*, 5.100, 31.10.1975.

⁷⁰ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 12.

⁷¹ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 34.

⁷² Derrida, 68.

⁷³ Derrida, 68-9.

⁷⁴ Derrida, 67.

⁷⁵ Derrida, 87.

⁷⁶ Derrida, 88.

⁷⁷ Derrida, 66.

⁷⁸ Yannick Haenel, ‘Le recours à la fiction n’est pas seulement un droit, il est nécessaire’, *Le Monde*, 25.01.2010, online.

⁷⁹ ‘Entretien avec Yannick Haenel’, ‘239.

signature of the poet's testimony to those killed. And, just as with his deconstruction of Celan's poetry Derrida inscribes the Holocaust into Western philosophical tradition,⁸⁰ Haenel, as we will see later, re-inscribes Karski's feat into the history of not only World War II but also mankind, war for the novelist being a continuum rather than a period neatly terminated with peace treaties and the public punishment of culprits.

Testimony Vs 'historism', or Jan Karski's mission as a differend

If Haenel's re-presentation of Karski advocates the use of fiction in the face of the unlikelihood of fresh eyewitness accounts, his choice to speak in a witness's stead paradoxically promotes the role of Holocaust testimony in historical inquiry and, by extension, implies the superiority of memory over History. Since the novel's both self-contradictory position and stance against conventional historiography can be regarded as a signature of the postmodern,⁸¹ one can reposition *Jan Karski* within the advent of testimony in the 1970s that coincides with, or perhaps even results from, the postmodern re-evaluation of individual experience and especially of the experience of those hitherto silenced and marginalised.⁸² Also, as I will do in the remaining part of this article, one can reconsider Haenel's novel in the light of the Lyotardian conception of 'Auschwitz' — a term the French philosopher uses metonymically — as a sublime event, that is as something that eludes both reason and representation and therefore requires historians to abandon their traditional critical apparatus and instead to take into account testimony and the underlying feeling.

However puzzling this may sound, ever since the end of the war there has existed a bias against the use of survivors' testimonies in writing about the Shoah, a bias which was particularly strong in the war's immediate aftermath and which, even more surprisingly, was not restricted to the circle of historians. While Tony Kushner quotes names of early Holocaust historians, such as Léon Poliakov or Raul Hilberg, who favoured executioners' against survivors' testimonies,⁸³ Wieviorka speaks of the historian's stupefaction before the suffering conveyed by the survivor's story.⁸⁴ Stone invokes in turn the scepticism of prominent Holocaust historian, Lucy Dawidowicz, or of *Oulipien* and Holocaust survivor Georges Perec who, despite his own traumatic experience of wartime loss, advocated historiography as

⁸⁰ I am indebted here to Gabrielle Hiltmann's review of Derrida's book which appeared in 2008 in the *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 39.2 (217-18) (p. 18).

⁸¹ Hutcheon, 5.

⁸² Wieviorka, 'The Witness in History', 391-92.

⁸³ Kushner, 277.

⁸⁴ Wieviorka, 'The Witness in History', 395-96.

opposed to eyewitness accounts.⁸⁵ In contrast to Dawidowicz's or Perec's position, Stone appears to collude with Jean-François Lyotard's conception of 'Auschwitz' as a 'différend', which, as opposed to 'litigation', means that the 'victim' (as opposed to the 'plaintiff') has no means of proving the 'wrong' (as opposed to the 'damage') that s/he has suffered. Hence, although the 'wrong' is *a priori* inexpressible in the dominant idiom and/or according to the prevailing rules, the historian must somehow account for it, taking into consideration not only the testimony but also 'mais ce qui reste du témoignage quand il est détruit [...], le sentiment'.⁸⁶ Evidently, the key terms here are 'témoignage' and 'sentiment', and indeed, following Lyotard, Stone founds his apology of eyewitness accounts on the fact that Holocaust memory is traumatic and thus obeying a different, that is non-linear temporality. Nor does trauma-affected memory dutifully rest in the past, incessantly engulfing the present with affect.⁸⁷ Conversely, 'historism', as Stone calls a philosophy of history commanding that narratives conform to the rules of chronology, logic and resolution,⁸⁸ tries to domesticate the trauma and insists on both the essential 'pastness' of the past⁸⁹ and a sense of closure. The latter is achieved by imposing on Holocaust memory 'the doctrine of salvation [...] whether this comes in the shape of the liberation of the camps, the founding of the state of Israel or resettlement in America'.⁹⁰

Unlike Laurent Binet's *HHhH*, which has been praised by one of *Jan Karski's* critics for ending with a cathartic sense of closure,⁹¹ Haenel's novel breaks with the traditional pattern of popular cultural representations of the Holocaust, such as Spielberg's *Schindler's List* that follows the Christian model of conversion and redemption through rescue.⁹² Instead, *Jan Karski* proposes a view of history as an interminable circle of differends where the victims' wrongs are never heard in a world operating according to the rules dictated by 'the masters of humanity', if one may extend the use of Karski's designation of Roosevelt to the entire political establishment.⁹³ One sign of Haenel's refusal to impose on Karski's story the

⁸⁵ Perec, 87-114. Perec lost his mother in the Holocaust, an experience that gave rise to the novels *La Disparition* (1969) and *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (1975).

⁸⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, *Le Différend* (Paris: Minuit, 1988), p. 83.

⁸⁷ Stone, 138-39.

⁸⁸ Stone, 136.

⁸⁹ Stone, 137.

⁹⁰ Stone, 136.

⁹¹ Golsan, 66. Unfortunately, Golsan fails to explain how Binet has achieved this sense of closure.

⁹² Kertész and Cooper, 24.

⁹³ This is how Karski remembers Roosevelt in an interview with E. Thomas Wood.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YtvXsoQgIoE>. See also E. Thomas Wood and Stanisław M.

conventional narrative pattern used by historians and novelists alike, is his book's composition that breaks with linearity instead privileging a reiterative model. The sense of closure is also denied through Haenel's understanding of World War II, which, implicitly drawing on the concept of the 'grey zone',⁹⁴ flatly rejects the Manichean categories of 'perpetrators' and 'humanity'. Rather, by accusing the latter of the crime of non-assistance, it implicates us all in the execution of the Final Solution, and redefines the Holocaust as a crime committed *by* — rather than *against* — humanity. And so to the fictional Karski Yalta becomes a new Munich, while the Nuremberg Trials, which were supposed to offer some redemption to the victims' families and a sense of closure, a cover-up for the Allies' partial responsibility for the Holocaust. Finally, since 1945 saw the atomic bombings of Japan, it becomes 'la pire année dans l'histoire du XX^e siècle' and not the year of triumph over fascism, liberation of German-occupied territories and reestablishment of peace.⁹⁵

With its circular structure that undermines closure and fixity, *Jan Karski* also implicitly endorses Stone's conception of the unusual temporality of Holocaust memory, which follows from its traumatic nature. The novel insists on the presentness of Karski's past, which it communicates with a systematic (con)fusion of temporal levels. For example, in Parts I and II Haenel uses the present tense and emphasises Karski's own use of the present during the interview, as well as his consequent ability to be transported back into the past by his words: 'il parle au présent, il n'y a plus de distance avec ce qu'il décrit.'⁹⁶ Moreover, the past and the present come together when, as mentioned earlier, Karski becomes one with the Jewish leaders; like the two men in 1942, it is now Lanzmann's interviewee who is breaking down and losing control of himself, so that, unable to restrain his tears and sobs, he has to move out of the frame. How profoundly affected Haenel's protagonist is by his experience also becomes evident in Part III where the fictional Karski spares us no details regarding his

Jankowski, *Karski: How One Man Who Tried to Stop the Holocaust* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1994), 197.

⁹⁴ Haenel's implicit extension of the notion of 'grey zone' to the Allies has met with the disparaging criticism of Frédérique Leichter-Flack who accuses the writer of 'moral relativism' and of demeaning the sacrifice of American forces. She considers it 'the most striking expression of a commonplace mistake made about the notion of the "grey zone"'. Leichter-Flack, 75-6. Conversely, Luc Rasson has praised Haenel for introducing nuance into the black-and-white conception of the war, without, however, downplaying the Germans' responsibility for the conflict and the Holocaust. Luc Rasson, "'Frankenstein romancier': Littell, Haenel, Binet', *Études romanes de Brno* 33.1 (2012), 27-37 (p. 32).

⁹⁵ Haenel, *Jan Karski*, 167.

⁹⁶ Haenel, *Jan Karski*, 28. Sadly, neither the writer's use of the present tense in Part II nor indeed his choice to present his protagonist's monologue in Part III as a running narration without paragraphs have been carried through in the novel's English translation.

body's violent reaction to his past, including repeated bouts of nausea, chronic insomnia and melancholia.

Finally, *Jan Karski* reveals traditional historiography's inadequacy when it comes to the Holocaust by presenting itself as a testimony to a differend, which in the novel is constituted not only by the combination of the Jews' mass murder and their inability to voice their plight, and the Allies' betrayal of the Poles, but also — if not chiefly — by Karski's failure to deliver his message to Churchill and Roosevelt with the effect of stopping the Holocaust and saving Poland from being transferred to the Soviet zone of influence. The unspeakability of Karski's highly traumatic experience is a running theme of Haenel's novel that indeed derives its thrust, like so many texts about the Shoah, from its entanglement in the conflict between the impossibility and the imperative of testifying. In his summary of Lanzmann's interview Haenel describes Karski's sentences as 'entourées de silence', as bearing a trace of the difficulties the former Polish resister experienced when he moved out of the frame, and, oxymoronically, as 'fidèles à l'impossibilité de parler.'⁹⁷ The inability of language to describe what is beyond reason manifests itself again when Karski relates his visit to the ghetto. Full sentences give way to individual words, which are in turn punctuated by tears running down the witness's face.

Les phrases de Karski n'ont pas de souffle. Elles sont minuscules, un mot, deux mots, pas plus. [...] Maintenant, le langage n'a plus de vie, il ne cherche plus à convaincre ni à expliquer, il ne pourra secourir personne. De pauvres visions s'accrochent à de pauvres mots: oignons, biscuits, yeux, seins. Ces mots-là ne sauvent pas.⁹⁸

The theme of the failure of language to *save* those who themselves have been brutally silenced returns in the much debated scene of the protagonist's interview with Roosevelt. According to some, the scene violates the historical record by misrepresenting the American President as a simultaneously apathetic and lustful conformist, as well as Karski's impression of him.⁹⁹ Contrary to Golsan, for whom this episode of Haenel's novel 'borders on the ridiculous, or worse',¹⁰⁰ I argue that, despite the element of the grotesque, its overall tone is tragic. This is because Karski is figured here as a witness to a differend — a violence which had been done without witnesses and was covered up as much as possible so that it may not be represented. Furthermore, he too quickly finds himself in the position of a victim, for, as it

⁹⁷ Haenel, *Jan Karski*, 14.

⁹⁸ Haenel, *Jan Karski*, 29.

⁹⁹ Jacques-Pierre Amette, 'Le torchon brûle autour de Jan Karski', *Le Point*, 1.02.2010, online. Golsan, 'L'Affaire Karski', 93.

¹⁰⁰ Golsan, 'The Poetics and Perils of Faction', 63.

happened in London where Karski met with Anthony Eden, his message now falls on Roosevelt's deaf ears. The incompatibility of the speaker's and the listener's idioms and the resulting impossibility of communicating the wrong of the Jews being murdered are conveyed here with a range of bi-polar oppositions, such as that between the absolute horror of the camps and ghettos, and the bourgeois comfort of Roosevelt's office filled with plush sofas, porcelain tureens and elegant women. As the Jews are being refused their most basic rights before being indiscriminately sent to their death, the American President, comfortably seated in an armchair, stifling his yawns and eyeing up his secretary's legs, is digesting his evidently copious dinner while building up his appetite for further pleasures. Roosevelt's peaceful digestion is then opposed to Karski's violent vomiting in the aftermath of his visit to the camp and to his subsequent recurrent nausea, which can be read as a sign of his body's attempt to evacuate the abject constituted by the sight of a corpse, of countless corpses, of bodies between life and death and of children being murdered, which, to put it in Kristevan terms, with their disturbing inbetweenness threatened his position as a subject and sense of security.¹⁰¹

Conclusions: Yannick Haenel as a witness to a differend?

Continuing to structure my discussion with Lyotard's rhetoric, in its remaining part I will comment upon Haenel's relationship with Karski's failed mission, which the author seems to model on his protagonist's own relationship with Holocaust victims. In other words, by relating the Polish resister's story, Haenel implicitly follows Lyotard's recommendation that writers and philosophers identify and then bear witness to differends as a means of redressing the wrongs suffered by the victims.¹⁰² However, rather than using the dominant discourse to do so, whereby they would run the risk of doing the victims further injustice, they ought to 'romp[r]e avec le monopole consenti au régime cognitif des phrases sur l'histoire, et s'aventure[r] à prêter l'oreille à ce qui n'est pas présentable dans les règles de la connaissance', so that the differend disclosed by the feeling may be expressed.¹⁰³ By the same token, since Lyotard states that 'Auschwitz' abolished the possibility of the pronoun 'we', as the deportees were, on the one hand, surrounded by solitude and silence, and, on the other, forever excepted from the 'we' by their race, one must not attempt to occupy the victims' position. If, rather than merely representing the differend, the writer/philosopher tries to speak in the victims' stead or to offer a solution to the differend, s/he will merely misinterpret those

¹⁰¹ Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980).

¹⁰² Lyotard, *Le Différend*, 11.

¹⁰³ Lyotard, *Le Différend*, 92.

victims, do violence to the wrongs they have already suffered and make them victims once again.¹⁰⁴ This is indeed the risk Haenel is taking in writing a text in which he patently identifies with his hero and, to the outrage of many critics, speaks on his behalf. Moreover, instead of limiting himself to meta-witnessing, as Lyotard recommends, Haenel tries to *solve* the differend by vociferously accusing humanity, and the Allies in particular, of letting down the Jews or even of quietly rejoicing in their disappearance from the face of the earth.¹⁰⁵ One could argue therefore that, unable to respond to Haenel's representation of him, Karski is once again victimised and that the novel does no more than replicate the violence the Polish hero suffered when his desperate plea met with no response.

Yet, by shifting attention from *Jan Karski's* thematics to its aesthetics, Haenel's recognisably postmodern narrative technique may provide a counterargument to the afore-stated charges. By adopting the traditional approach to telling the life-story of an actual person, which in this case would be biography with its reliance on documents and adherence to the principles of objectivity and veracity, Haenel would have to inscribe Karski's life into a rhetoric that, as suggested earlier, accounts only for hard facts and not for *feelings* and thence cannot do justice to a differend. It would also inevitably impose on Karski's story a dry-eyed, logical and chronological approach, thus, to take up Stone's reflections, denying or domesticating the trauma, and/or 'rendering it subject to a sense of finality' and in the process of doing so 'failing to respond to what is truly fearsome about trauma.'¹⁰⁶ Moreover, writing a biography would oblige Haenel to accommodate Karski's story to the metanarrative of the Allies' moral superiority over the Germans, with the image of Nuremberg as the ultimate accomplishment of the free world's triumph over fascist barbarity. This is because in his official pronouncements Karski, who wrote *Story of the Secret State* when there was still a glimmer of hope for saving the Poles from Stalin and the Jews from Hitler, and who broke his silence when the Cold War was already in full swing, largely maintained the predominant view of the United States as bastion of freedom, civil rights and democracy.

Hence, though his ambition to resolve the differend and speak for his hero may be considered, whether viewed in Lyotard's terms or otherwise, unethical, Haenel redeems himself by seeking a novel form and language for rendering Karski's and, less directly, the Jews' plight. In so doing he fulfils the task assigned by Lyotard to postmodern writers who

¹⁰⁴ Jacob M. Held, 'Expressing the Inexpressible: Lyotard and the Different', *Journal of the British Society of Phenomenology* 36.1 (2005), 76-89 (p. 83).

¹⁰⁵ Haenel, *Jan Karski*, 129-30.

¹⁰⁶ Stone, 138.

must be able to put ‘l’imprésentable dans la présentation elle-même; ce qui se refuse à la consolation des bonnes formes [...], ce qui s’enquiert des présentations nouvelles [...] pour mieux fait sentir qu’il y a de l’imprésentable’.¹⁰⁷ Declaring a war on the idea of totality (*le tout*), mimesis and pre-established rules, the work of postmodern writers must not be evaluated by applying familiar categories or determinist judgment, since it creates its own rules and has the quality of a landmark event (*l’événement*).¹⁰⁸ By creating a heterogeneous, fragmented and reiterative text that proclaims its double-coded nature as of its cover and then methodically refuses all generic classifications, Haenel evidently heeds Lyotard’s call on writers. Likewise, by bringing back into the spotlight Karski’s failure to save Europe’s Jews and the Polish hero’s later exploitation by Lanzmann, who first misled his interviewee about the nature of *Shoah* and then grossly misrepresented his mission by editing the interview,¹⁰⁹ the novelist follows the philosopher’s appeal to artists to become witnesses to all difference and differends,¹¹⁰ and thus save the honour of the written word (*le nom*).¹¹¹ Additionally, Haenel voices the wrong done to Karski’s homeland, which despite its heroic resistance against the Germans was allowed by the Allies to slip under Stalin’s yoke. Then, having been the theatre of the Holocaust, Poland has often been erroneously lumbered with the responsibility for the Final Solution, while the Poles themselves have been stigmatised as virulent anti-Semites by, among others, one-sided representations such as *Shoah*.¹¹² That Haenel himself believes in his ability as a writer to articulate — if not to undo — all the wrongs of the past to which his text testifies, transpires from the recurrent motif of the power of literature that, in order to merit its title, ought to seek to alter the course of history.¹¹³ The other sign of Haenel’s belief that his book can breathe life back into Karski is the theme of resurrection structuring his narrative and suggesting that, as Elie Wiesel reportedly said to the Polish courier, ‘[o]n peut redonner vie à la parole, par la parole.’¹¹⁴ And this is indeed what Haenel has managed to achieve even despite — or perhaps rather largely thanks to — the harsh criticism levelled at his book by Lanzmann, Wieviorka and others, while simultaneously asking important questions about Holocaust memory in the encroaching

¹⁰⁷ Lyotard, *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants* (Paris: Galilée, 1988), 31.

¹⁰⁸ Lyotard, *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants*, 31.

¹⁰⁹ For a discussion of Lanzmann’s manipulation of the material in *Shoah* and the more recent *Le Rapport Karski*, see Bragança.

¹¹⁰ I have chosen this phrasing since the word ‘différend’ is rendered in the English translation as ‘difference’.

¹¹¹ Lyotard, *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants*, 27.

¹¹² Haenel, *Jan Karski*, 180-81.

¹¹³ Haenel, *Jan Karski*, 144.

¹¹⁴ Haenel, *Jan Karski*, 182.

absence of firsthand witnesses, and destabilising the dominant and perhaps all too simplistic understanding of the responsibility for the extermination of the Jews.