

## Traumatic Hermeneutics: Reading and Overreading the Pain of Others

Colin Davis

How can I know that someone else is in pain, let alone have any real knowledge of what that pain *feels like*? Considering these questions, Wittgenstein answers them with breathtaking directness. Neither dismissing nor solving the problem, he tells us all we can know and all we need to know: “If I see someone writhing in pain with evident cause I do not think: all the same, his feelings are hidden from me” (1958: 223). I can doubt most things if I put my mind to it; and of course I cannot know precisely how another’s pain feels. But if I see a person who has been hit by a truck, it would be better to call for help than to consider the merits of philosophical scepticism. As Wittgenstein puts it in another passage, “Just try – in a real case – to doubt someone else’s fear or pain” (1958: 102). We cannot directly share it, but we know it when we see it.

The case of trauma and of trauma texts nevertheless complicates the recognition of the other’s pain. Wittgenstein refers to suffering which is visible (“I see someone writhing in pain”) and has “evident cause.” Its source and its signs cannot be misinterpreted: the truck hit a person who is now crying in agony. The causes and symptoms of trauma, however, are less obviously manifest and more easily mistakable. This is suggested in one of the most frequently quoted passages in trauma studies, where Freud describes the survivor of a train crash in *Moses and Monotheism*:

It may happen that a man who has experienced some frightful accident – a railway collision, for instance – leaves the scene of the event apparently uninjured. In the

course of the next few weeks, however, he develops a number of severe psychical and motor symptoms which can only be traced to his shock, the concussion or whatever else it was. He now has a “traumatic neurosis.” (1985: 309)

Initially at least, the survivor shows no sign of suffering. He walks away from the scene of the crash without apparent physical or mental damage. There is no visible writhing in agony and unmistakable cause that would lead an observer to the conclusion that he is in pain; yet his later behaviour will demonstrate that he is traumatized, and that he is prey to an agony which has no demonstrable physical source. Thomas Elsaesser neatly summarizes the problem of recognising trauma: “If trauma is experienced through its forgetting, its repeated forgetting, then, paradoxically, one of the signs of the presence of trauma is the absence of all signs of it” (2001: 199). Trauma *isn't there*. This is not to say that it is not real, that it does not exist; but its sources and signs are not always immediately manifest as they are in the case of the person hit by the truck.

This is where hermeneutics – and what I call here *traumatic hermeneutics* – comes in. Hermeneutics starts from the assumption that people and texts do not say only or exactly what they mean. Trauma exacerbates and radicalizes the hermeneutic search for what-is-not-quite-said because the signs which point to it may be totally absent. This inaugurates both a pressing need for interpretation and the inevitable risk of mis- or over-interpretation. How do we distinguish between signs which are absent because there is nothing for them to signify and signs which are absent because what they signify is too dark, repressed and unknowable to be given manifest form? A person or text may bear no obvious marks of trauma, quite simply, because there are none to show; or the trauma may be profoundly hidden because it is too deep to acknowledge. The call to interpretation is

exhibited very clearly in Freud's example of the train crash survivor, quoted above. The initial absence of signs of suffering is followed by what Freud calls "symptoms" which can "only be traced to his shock" (my emphasis); and Freud now confidently concludes that "He now has a 'traumatic neurosis'." Every step in this diagnosis, including the final unveiling of the name of the illness, involves interpretation. Deciding that the man's behaviour amounts to a set of "symptoms" insists on their repetitive and medical nature (How many times does an action have to be repeated before it can be designated as a *symptom*?); and the assurance that the symptoms can *only* be traced to the train crash is questionable even on Freud's own terms. Elsewhere, he will suggest that trauma often *cannot* be traced back to a single, readily identifiable event. Moreover, it is in the nature of Freudian interpretation that any action, word or dream thought may mean more than it seems on first, second or third sight. There are no stable criteria for determining what can and what cannot yield further meaning if exposed to further interpretive pressure.

As Laplanche and Pontalis put it, "Psychoanalysis could be characterized by interpretation, that is to say, the bringing to light of the latent sense of material" (1968: 207).<sup>1</sup> Psychoanalysis is an art of interpretation, with all the risks of error that such an art inevitably brings with it. Indeed, Freud has a good claim to be regarded as one of the preeminent hermeneutic thinkers and practitioners of the twentieth century, alongside Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur. Although in the case of the train crash survivor Freud appears to rush with suspect assurance to a final diagnosis ("He now has a 'traumatic neurosis'"), in his customary theory and practice the "latent sense" to which Laplanche and Pontalis refer is generally more open and elusive, and less readily attained. Ricoeur, who appreciated Freud's hermeneutic importance more than nearly everyone, points out that

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, translations from French are my own.

the Freudian movement from the manifest to the latent cannot be regarded as “a simple relationship between coded discourse and decoded discourse” (1965: 99). The symptom or the dream are not just coded messages which the interpreter decodes in order to restore their true meaning. The language of the unconscious operates according to different rules from that of the conscious, and one cannot directly be translated into the other. We can never be confident that a dream, for example, has been fully, properly and finally interpreted (Freud 1976: 383), and in any case psycho-pathological structures regularly have more than one meaning (Freud 1976: 230-1). For practical or therapeutic reasons we may need to bring an interpretation to an end, but we can always start again the next day, exploring hitherto neglected details or fresh associations (Freud 1976: 669).

Key to Freudian hermeneutics is what he calls *overinterpretation* (*Überdeutung* in German). Overinterpretation often bears negative connotations, suggesting that the interpreter has gone too far, to the point of imposing improbable or implausible meanings on an action, utterance or work. Some critics and thinkers have nevertheless endeavoured to defend overinterpretation: by overinterpreting, we push the boundaries of what can be said, potentially discovering new questions to be answered and opening up new fields of enquiry (for discussion, see Davis 2010). This is not, though, quite the sense of overinterpretation in Freud. He is aware that his readers would be inclined to accuse him of being unnecessarily ingenious in some of his dream interpretations, though he adds soberly that “actual experience would teach them better” (1976: 670). Moreover, he argues that overinterpretation in fact belongs to the proper process of interpretation. Without it, there is no full understanding: “all neurotic symptoms, and, for that matter, dreams,” he writes, “are capable of being ‘over-interpreted’ and indeed need to be, if they are to be fully

understood” (1976: 368; my emphasis). Later in *The Interpretation of Dreams* he reinforces the point:

It is only with the greatest difficulty that the beginner in the business of interpreting dreams can be persuaded that his task is not at an end when he has a complete interpretation in his hands – an interpretation which makes sense, is coherent and throws light upon every element of the dream’s contents. For the same dream may perhaps have another interpretation as well, an “over-interpretation,” which has escaped him. (1976: 669)

Freud describes a process resembling the Derridean notion of supplementarity, whereby something is complete and yet can still be augmented. Here, he argues that an interpretation can make sense, be coherent and elucidate every element of a dream; and yet, although complete, it is not finished. This version of overinterpretation entails a conception of meaning as layered, so that further layers can always be added or found. And this process has no theoretical conclusion, although it may need to be curtailed for practical reasons. Even the most exhaustively analysed dream retains a link to the unknown, which ensures that further interpretation is always possible:

There is often a passage in even the most thoroughly interpreted dream which has to be left obscure; this is because we become aware during the work of interpretation that at that point there is a tangle of dream-thoughts which cannot be unravelled and which moreover adds nothing to our knowledge of the content of the dream. This is the dream’s navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown.

The dream-thoughts to which we are led by interpretation cannot, from the nature of things, have any definite endings; they are bound to branch out in every direction into the intricate network of our world of thought. It is at some point where this meshwork is particularly close that the dream-wish grows up, like a mushroom out of its mycelium. (1976: 671-2)

Freudian interpretation is sometimes criticized for being reductive, always finding the same, sexual content wherever it looks. This passage gives the lie to such claims. If the tangle of dream-thoughts cannot be unravelled and adds nothing to our knowledge, this does not mean that it should be definitively relegated to oblivion. It is a mystery, a connection to the unknown, which we do not yet know how to address, but which may become approachable by some accident or newly discovered association. It is not so much the end of interpretation as the guarantee that there is no such end, in principle if not in practice.

Freud's discussion here is specifically concerned with the interpretation of dreams. He makes it explicit, though, that his comments are equally applicable to literary works (see 1976: 368); and following Ricoeur's lead in modelling the interpretation of meaningful action on the hermeneutics of the text (see Ricoeur 1971), we can extend the relevance of Freud's discussion to other forms of human behaviour. The significance of this for traumatic hermeneutics is twofold: first, identifying and interpreting trauma entails – even more than other interpretive occasions – looking for what is not there (initially at least, the survivor of the train crash shows no signs of trauma, but this does not mean that he is not or will not become traumatized); and second, insofar as the tangle of (absent) signs of trauma reaches down into something unknown, interpretation always invites and even requires a further interpretation, an overinterpretation, which adds ever more layers of meaning. The rest of

this article explores these issues through examination of some stories and texts which encapsulate the problem of traumatic hermeneutics: the sad case of Phineas P. Gage, which is one of the starting points of modern neuroscience; and some of the works of the Holocaust survivors Jorge Semprun and Charlotte Delbo.

### **Gage was no longer Gage**

In 1848 Phineas P. Gage was a twenty-five year old construction foreman of good character in charge of a gang laying railroad tracks in Vermont. In order to lay a level path, the gang needed to use explosives to break a way through the rock. Gage was an expert at this; and one day in September 1848 he prepared a charge with a specially designed iron bar. But something went wrong. Here is Antonio Damasio's account:

The explosion is so brutal that the entire gang freezes on their feet. It takes a few seconds to piece together what is going on. The bang is unusual, the rock is intact. Also unusual is the whistling sound, as of a rocket hurled at the sky. But this is more than fireworks. It is assault and battery. The iron enters Gage's left cheek, pierces the base of the skull, traverses the front of his brain, and exits at high speed through the top of his head. The rod has landed more than a hundred feet away, covered in blood and brains. Phineas Gage has been thrown to the ground. (2006: 4)

Astonishingly, Gage survived this accident. Or did he? Was the person who survived the accident still Phineas Gage? After two months, apart from losing vision in one eye, he seemed to have recovered physically. But his character had changed. The temperate, energetic foreman became irresponsible, obstinate, profane and capricious. He was unable

to hold down a steady job, became a circus freak, and then died in obscurity at the age of 38. He was not the person he had been: "Gage was no longer Gage," as his acquaintances observed (quoted Damasio 2006: 8). He survived, but he was not the person he was before the accident. His character had changed fundamentally. Damasio spells out the importance of the case. The brain lesion suffered by Gage raises issues about what it means to be human:

Gage's story hinted at an amazing fact: Somehow, there were systems in the human brain dedicated more to reasoning than to anything else, and in particular to the personal and social dimensions of reasoning. The observance of previously acquired social convention and ethical rules could be lost as a result of brain damage, even when neither basic intellect nor language seemed compromised. Unwittingly, Gage's example indicated that something in the brain was concerned specifically with unique human properties, among them the ability to anticipate the future and plan accordingly within a complex social environment; the sense of responsibility toward the self and others; and the ability to orchestrate one's survival deliberately, at the command of one's free will. (2006: 10)

So this industrial accident turns out to have philosophical significance. It raises questions about free will, identity, responsibility and ethics. The literal, physical trauma to Gage's brain seemed to reach deep down in to his soul; and in the process it also drew attention to the extent and limits of knowledge about the brain in the nineteenth century. As Damasio puts it, "Gage posed more questions than he gave answers" (2006: 18). These concern, according to Damasio, his very status as a human being: "May he be described as having



free will? Did he have a sense of right and wrong, or was he the victim of his new brain design, such that his decisions were imposed on him and inevitable? Was he responsible for his acts?" (2006: 19). Having shown the limitations of nineteenth-century science and its inability to answer such questions, Damasio goes on to suggest that modern scientific techniques allow us to understand fully what happened to Gage, which parts of his brain/mind were affected, and therefore why he became a different person in his post-traumatic years. We can now arrive at what Damasio calls "certain conclusions" about the extent and consequence of the "selective damage to the prefrontal cortices of Phineas Gage's brain" (2006: 33). We know what happened and why its consequences were what they were.

One might wonder, though, whether this account of neuroscience overestimates its ability to answer fundamental questions about the meaning of human action. By contrast, it is striking that early psychoanalytic attempts to understand the nature of trauma more subtly concede the speculative, interpretative and provisional nature of their conclusions and weave it into the fabric of their thought. The psychoanalytical conception of trauma grew out of the industrial and medical concerns of the nineteenth century, and was then forced to refine its thinking in the dark light of the First World War (see Luckhurst 2008: 19-76). The early analysts became intensely preoccupied with victims of shell shock, or what might now be called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). New questions arose which further problematized the identification of the sources of trauma in the life of the subject. In the case of the train crash, why is that two people sitting side by side, surviving the same accident, react totally differently? One shrugs off the event as an unfortunate but meaningless accident, and gets on with her life; the other finds himself haunted, maybe years later, by nightmares which repeat the crash over and over again. In relation to the war

neuroses, why do some suffer from debilitating shell shock whilst others do not, when their experience in the trenches is nearly identical? In part the answer lies in the future, through the process of deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*), whereby a later trigger re-creates the past as traumatic. But the answer also lies in more distant past. Karl Abraham introduces his paper on the war neuroses by referring to another accident, this time involving a tram:

I might mention the case of a young girl who met with a slight tram accident when she was in the throes of a serious erotic conflict. The analysis shows that the accident in a certain measure gave a pretext for the outbreak of the neurosis. The symptoms were in connection with the conflict in question; the importance of the trauma receded quite into the background. I might add that some litigious cases of traumatic neurosis which I observed in greater detail all suffered from impotence; this disturbance was produced by the accident, but seemed to have its real basis in old and unconscious sexual resistances. (1921: 22)

The accident requires a subsequent trigger before it becomes traumatic. However, the event and the trigger acquire their traumatic potential only because of a prior predisposition which lies deeper in the past. As Freud says of the German National Army in the Great War, it was the “condition and fruitful soil, for the appearance of war neuroses” (1921: 3). But that is not to say that the war was their direct and sole cause. The traumatic event is the actualization of a possibility which may lie unrealised in the absence of a further accident, that is, the trigger which will give it deadly potency. In classical psychoanalysis, then, trauma lies in a deep past which has not yet been, and in a fractured present which

cannot yet be. We may all be accidents waiting to happen, or accidents which have already happened without our knowledge.

We might wish to debate the rights and wrongs of this account of trauma, both in general and in particular cases. A key point, though, is that it *can* be debated, that it allows for the possibility and even the inevitability of re-interpretation, because it concedes its interpretive nature. As Ricoeur puts it, “Psychoanalysis is interpretation from beginning to end” (1965: 76). The role of the analyst is to explore the interplay of meaning and event, sense and nonsense, in the construction of a life story. The French philosopher Catherine Malabou contrasts this starkly with an approach based in neuroscience. Malabou prefaces her book *Les Nouveaux Blessés* by referring to her grandmother, who suffered from Alzheimers disease. Her grandmother, like Phineas Gage (whose case she also discusses; see 2007: 46-7), poses a fundamental philosophical question about the continuity of identity through time. Is the Alzheimers sufferer the same person as she was, or has a former identity been changed into something new, with diminishing connections to a disappearing past? Gage was no longer Gage, we were told. The implication of this phrase is that a new being has taken the place of the existing one. The guiding idea of Malabou’s book is that the “new wounded” of her title are not the victims of some long-buried trauma retrievable through interpretation; rather, they have become different people without temporal continuity with pre-existing identities, which are now forever lost. There is no interplay of meaning and event; instead, there is a radical *accident* which comes entirely from the outside and makes permanent changes. What this also means for Malabou is that there is no hermeneutics of cerebral trauma because there is no interpretable continuity between former and present selves: “*any hermeneutics [of the event] is impossible. [...] Cerebral accidents are wounds which tear apart the thread of history, putting it outside itself,*

suspending its course and remaining hermeneutically 'irrecuperable,' whilst the mind continues to live" (2007: 29; emphasis in original).

Between classical psychoanalysis and this version of neurophilosophy, there is a stark division. We have on the one hand a practice which embraces its hermeneutic nature, and on the other hand an open declaration of hostility towards hermeneutics: "*The enemy, today, is hermeneutics*", declares Malabou (2007: 259; emphasis in original). This division goes together with a fundamental difference of approach to the analysis of trauma. For psychoanalysis, the traumatic event needs to be carefully interpreted in the light of earlier and later events in the life of a subject so that its meaning as trauma can emerge; for Malabou there is nothing to interpret because trauma bears no meaning; it marks the radical, unpredictable, uninterpretable invention of a new subjectivity. To explore this division further, I shall now look at works by two Holocaust survivors, Jorge Semprun and Charlotte Delbo, which raise the problems of the interpretability of trauma.

### **Semprun and Delbo**

By any standards Semprun had a remarkable life. He was born in Spain in 1923. His Republican family left their homeland and eventually settled in France in the 1930s in order to escape the Spanish Fascists. During the German Occupation of France Semprun joined the Communist Resistance. He was captured in 1943 and deported to Buchenwald. After the war he became a leading member of the Spanish Communist Party in exile, and wrote an award-winning, semi-fictionalized account of his deportation, *Le Grand Voyage* (The Long Voyage, 1963), before being expelled from the Party for ideological differences in 1964. He then went on to become a novelist, autobiographer, screenwriter, and eventually Minister

for Culture in the first Spanish Socialist government after the death of General Franco. He died in 2011.

Semprun's first published book, *Le Grand Voyage*, is an astonishing literary debut. It was immediately recognised as incorporating a unique combination of political and moral seriousness with modernist literary techniques. In short, it cut across and in its way resolved contemporary French debates which appeared to demand a choice between commitment and experimentation in literature. Describing the deportation of Resistance fighters to Buchenwald, its historical, testimonial importance was unimpugnable; and adopting complex time frames, involving flashbacks and flash-forwards, it also brought an intense literary self-knowingness to the treatment of its material. What is striking about the book is that it is *not yet* – though it is *almost* – a trauma text. What I mean by this is that, whilst describing terrible things, those things do not quite entail a wholesale collapse of the narrator or author's ability to recall, recount, and comprehend what is happening. The particular tension of *Le Grand Voyage* comes from the first-person narrator's continued assertions of command over his experience and his text, coupled with the spectre of a possibility that his self-assurance is on the verge of falling apart.

In this context it is important to recall that the earliest accounts of deportation and the experience of the concentration camps to appear in France were written by Communist deportees, such as David Rousset in *L'Univers concentrationnaire* and Robert Antelme in *L'Espèce humaine*. These works describe awful, unimaginable experiences, but they are not *traumatic* in the sense of radically undermining beliefs and identity. The things that happened to their authors were certainly terrible; but they *made sense* within their established world view: if you are opposed to Fascism, and you take arms against it, then it is not all surprising if the Fascists do bad things to you when they capture you. There is

something of this logic still in Semprun's *Le Grand Voyage*: the account of the deportation to Buchenwald and early experiences there is harrowing, but to a significant extent the narrator retains his self-confidence, even to the point of sometimes appearing irritatingly arrogant. When he wrote the work, Semprun was still a Communist insider. His political beliefs provided him with a framework in which his experiences could be processed and understood. They made sense within a conceptual system which ensured that they remained intelligible, possessable and bearable. That system would not survive long.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was published in France in 1963 shortly after Semprun completed *Le Grand Voyage*. In a political climate still heavily influenced by Communism, the publication of Solzhenitsyn's work implicitly encouraged comparison between the Nazi camps and the Soviet Gulags. It undermined the moral authority of Communist opponents to Nazism, suggesting that the regime in whose name they were struggling may have been no better than the one they were fighting against.

Semprun's experience *becomes traumatic* at the point when the political framework which had made it intelligible was no longer tenable for him. As he wrote in 1980 in *Quel beau dimanche!*, his later account of his time in Buchenwald, the sense of his experience changed retrospectively. It became traumatic not, or not only, because of its inherent nature, but because of an enforced revision of the context in which it was understood:

The whole truth of my testimony [in *Le Grand Voyage*] had, as an implicit but constraining reference point, the horizon of an unalienated society: a classless society in which the camps would have been inconceivable. [...] But the horizon of Communism was not that of the classless society, I mean, its real, historical horizon. The horizon of Communism, there was no way of avoiding it, was that of the Gulag.

At a stroke, the whole truth of my book became a lie. I mean that's what it became for me. (1980: 384-5)

Semprun's account of his transformed relation to his earlier experience fits well with the classical psychoanalytic model of trauma as something occurring in a deep past, but not becoming traumatic until it is awoken, triggered, by events which may occur decades later. To put it schematically, the Holocaust was terrible but not yet traumatic for Semprun in 1963, 18 years after the liberation of Buchenwald. He was still a committed Communist and he had not read Solzhenitsyn. His persecution by the Nazis had purpose, value and meaning for him because it made sense in the context of his political convictions. In 1964, having read Solzhenitsyn and been expelled from the Communist Party, the past became traumatic because its meaning had been abruptly transformed. The truth of his earlier testimony became a lie. His destiny now changes. From being a Communist militant actively involved in the clandestine fight against Fascism, he will now become an author and public witness to the trials, tribulations and failures of the political Left in twentieth-century Europe. Does this transformation entail the realization of what he could have been all along, or the invention of a new identity, utterly transformed by the encounter with trauma? Rather than answering this straightaway, I want to place it alongside the work of another Holocaust survivor, Charlotte Delbo.

In the literature of Holocaust memory, Charlotte Delbo (born 1913, died 1985) is one of the few authors who is as fascinating, brilliant, technically sophisticated, demanding and finally humane as Semprun. Like Semprun, Delbo was captured and deported for working in the Communist French Resistance. Delbo was 28 in March 1942 when she was arrested in occupied France along with her husband Georges Dudach. She was allowed to visit her

husband for the final time in May of that year on the day he was executed. She was subsequently deported to Auschwitz and later to Ravensbrück. She was one of the 39 survivors of the 230 women in her convoy to Auschwitz. After the war she published, amongst other things, three remarkable works grouped together as a trilogy under the title *Auschwitz et après*, which describe and comment on experiences in the camps and in post-war France. Set in Auschwitz, the first volume of the trilogy poses the problem of survival in the most brutal possible terms. It is entitled *Aucun de nous ne reviendra*. In a banally literal sense, the claim in this title – that none shall return from the camps – is untrue: the fact that she is writing the volume is material proof that she has in fact returned. Return is possible. Yet the title poses the question of whether return does in fact occur. Can one come back from this place called Auschwitz, is the person who returns the same person who went away? One of the questions which dominate Delbo's work, like Semprun's, is the meaning and possibility of return; and what this also concerns is the relation between a before and an after, between the subject who went away and the subject who comes back. Are they the same, or at least joined together in a temporal continuity, or are they forever torn apart, thrown into a new temporality? To return to my refrain, is Gage still Gage, is Semprun still Semprun, is Delbo still Delbo? Does the traumatized subject re-discover something more ancient, or does she experience something terribly new?

The third volume of *Auschwitz et après*, *Mesure de nos jours*, describes the post-war lives of some of those who returned from the camps. The opening section is entitled "Le Retour" (The Return), posing again the question of what it means, whether it is possible, to return from Auschwitz. The section on the character given the name "Loulou" is particularly interesting here. Loulou is a male deportee whom his former comrades are seeking to find for a reunion due to take place 20 years after the liberation of the camps. A week before the



reunion, he is found and his story re-constructed. When he returned in June 1945, the whole world he knew had disappeared. His family were gone, their home was occupied by strangers. Without money or place to say, he was arrested; without a good explanation of how he came to be where he was, he was taken to be suffering from amnesia and interned in a lunatic asylum. Although there seemed to be nothing particularly wrong with him, he stayed there for twenty years and grew fat. When his former comrades find him, they eventually recognise him and he recognises them. He is who he was; and yet his world is changed, utterly changed. He has lost his notion of time; his memory is intact, but his experience is not his own: "Otherwise, he remembers everything. He probably remembers it better than you or I do – for him the past is much closer than for us – it's just that he has the impression that it didn't happen to him. He has a past which isn't his own, so to speak" (1971: 133).

The continuity with the past is preserved whilst also being, paradoxically, completely broken. Delbo's work suggests that there is something incommensurate between the before and the after; an absolute divide now separates them. This is magnificently described in one of the fragments which ends the second volume of *Auschwitz et après, Une connaissance inutile*:

I return from another world  
in this world  
which I had not left  
and I do not know  
which is true  
tell me did I return

from the other world?

For me

I am still back there

and I die

back there

every day a little more

I die again [*je remeurs*]

the death of all those who died

and I no longer know which is true

that world

the world back there

now

I no longer know

when I am dreaming

and when

I am not dreaming. (1970: 183-4)

The subject has both returned and not returned; she is both alive and dead, dying again, in the impossible verb “*je remeurs*” (I die again), used doubly impossibly because here it is transitive: she dies, and she (re-)dies the deaths of others. The disjunction is made palpable in the coexistence of two temporal frames: a past which cannot be escaped, so that the present does not exist except as the continual re-enactment of something lying in the past, and in a present which has now lost all contact with a pre-traumatic reality. In the Freudian model, the traumatic event is traumatic insofar as it revives potential meanings which lie

deeper in the past. Delbo's work suggests something closer to Malabou's interpretation of neuroscience, because trauma appears as an absolute end and an absolute beginning. The subject who returns is now irrevocably cut off from the subject who went away.

In trauma studies, Cathy Caruth's notion of unclaimed experience has now become canonical (see Caruth 1996). This refers to the trauma victim's sense that her experience is not yet her own, that it has not (yet?) been integrated into her life and her life story. It would be easy enough to push the story of Delbo's Loulou into this model, given that we are told that "he has the impression that [his past] didn't happen to him. He has a past which isn't his own, so to speak." This looks like classic "unclaimed experience," but there is a crucial proviso. "Unclaimed experience" suggests that trauma is *waiting* to be claimed, that it perhaps *can* be claimed, made one's own, and integrated into a meaningful narrative. What Delbo suggests on the contrary is that no such integration is available. Experience is both unclaimed and unclaimable, because the life story of the traumatized subject has been radically, irreversibly broken. The before and the after have been torn apart.

## **Conclusion**

Wittgenstein may be right that it is difficult to doubt the pain of others when we are called on to witness it. This, though, does not make the work of *interpreting* another's pain any easier. Suffering has a story; it is part of a world of meaning(s) – albeit often ambiguous, conflicted or elusive meaning(s) – which appears tantalizingly in the interplay between what is said and what is not said in life narratives and fictions. The paradox of trauma is that it may interrupt or even utterly break the sequence of a story because it does not belong to that story in any way, it comes completely from the outside; but it is also part of the sequence which it interrupts, or at least it can always be re-read as part of that sequence.

This is why Malabou is wrong to say that there is no hermeneutics of trauma. There certainly is; and indeed she raises one of the fundamental questions of this fraught hermeneutics by problematizing the link between continuity and discontinuity. As we have seen, the writings of Semprun and Delbo profoundly reflect and reflect on this problematic link. Traumatic hermeneutics does not provide final answers but, on the contrary, it allows a practice of reading and understanding which has no definitive criteria for determining when interpretation slides into overinterpretation.

On this issue Freud is more subtle than his revisionists and detractors. Once the meaning of a dream narrative has become clear, he insists that the analyst needs to start again (1976: 231); full meaning can be achieved only by his over-interpretation (1976: 383), though this means that it is never full enough. What is already full can always be filled further. As Freud puts it, "it is in fact never possible to be sure that a dream has been completely interpreted. Even if the solution seems satisfactory and without gaps, the possibility always remains that the dream may have yet another meaning" (1976: 383). Freud wants satisfactory solutions whilst entirely knowing that there is always more to be said; and what he says of dreams here can be extended to other forms – all forms, I suggest – of text and narrative. The constraints of time, energy, human finitude and mortality may ensure that we cannot and should not carry on indefinitely trying to tease out further strands of meaning; but in principle the limitlessness of semantic possibility and the interminability of hermeneutic endeavour mean that even the fullest, most convincing interpretation can be followed, supplemented or contradicted by ever more overinterpretations and over-overinterpretations.

Of course the time comes when we have to stop. By way of provisional conclusion, and to defer the final word, I want to add another term to the discussion, and that is

*responsibility*. In a widely quoted passage, Semprun has written that the story of the concentration camps must be “an unlimited narrative, probably interminable, illuminated – closed off as well, of course – by this possibility of being continued to infinity” (1994: 23-4). That must be as true of the interpretation of the story as it is of the story itself. But what of my *responsibility* as a reader and interpreter? By responsibility, I mean my ability to respond (“response-ability,” as Felman puts it; 1992: 200) to the work, but also my moral responsibility for it, and for my reading of it. How can we justify interpreting and overinterpreting the pain of others, when what it may be thought to require most pressingly is *acknowledgement*? It would be foolish and wrong to give an easy answer to this. My only suggestion is that it may be better to give continuing, respectful and caring attention to the stories of pain – even at the risk of overreading – than to think that we have understood them once and for all.

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