

# The "Melancholization" of the Witness: The Impotence of Words, the Power of Images

Geneviève Morel

## Introduction

No one has a better claim than the witness to the experience of truth. In court, before the law, he swears to "speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." But this experience of truth is not identical to the fact of providing evidence.

Jacques Derrida has insisted on the heterogeneity of witnessing and evidence.<sup>1</sup> He gives the example of the Rodney King event, in California: a witness was there with a video camera when the police were beating up King, and filmed the scene. This was a direct image of the event, something a priori, indisputable. But in the eyes of the law the film was a debatable item of evidence that would only have value when combined with the testimony of the young cameraman, who, even though he had filmed the scene, was also obliged to testify before the bench, in person, that he had actually seen it. Going without his word, his presence, and being content with technical evidence was impossible.

Clearly certain testimonies can serve as evidence in themselves, though, when it is a case of testifying to something purely subjective, and elsewhere than before the law. I became interested in testimonies because this was the way the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan proposed that analysts should be recruited: on the basis of their own account of their relation to their unconscious, and of the real consequences on their lives of recognizing, through analysis, the existence of the unconscious. Here the evidence lies in the testimony itself, because the subject is the only one who can testify to his experience of the real of the unconscious. This implies other analysts listening and judging — a jury.

In apparent rebuttal of Derrida, also, there certainly does exist evidence that is valid without testimony: archives, documents, images of events, and now, for certain crimes, DNA. We note, however, that historians, like lawyers, always look for testimony to corroborate this evidence and allow it to be interpreted. In the case of the law, we had an example in France in the case of Guy Georges, a rapist and serial killer of women. There was DNA evidence for most of his crimes, yet not just the victims' parents but all of France was waiting for his version of events, and was relieved by his public confession in court. For historians too, archival documents don't "say" enough without the support of protagonists' accounts, in written form in the case of ancient history. Georges Duby, a historian of the French Middle Ages, writes,

I too am a positivist. In my own way. In my opinion, what is positive is not in the reality of "small, real facts": I know very well that I shall never grasp it. What is positive is concrete objects, texts that preserve an echo, a reflection of words and gestures that have been irremediably lost. In my opinion, what counts is the witness, the image that a highly intelligent man offers of the past, what he forgets, what he keeps silent, how he treats memories in order to adjust them to what he thinks, to what he believes to be true, to what those who listen to him wish to believe to be just and true.<sup>2</sup>

Historians and judges are not the only people to want testimonies as well as archives; a work of art, insofar as it has a function of transmission, can also turn to testimony. The film *Shoah* (1985), in order to transmit the Holocaust in the mode of an "incarnation," a "resurrection," its director Claude Lanz-

mann has said, uses only one archival document onscreen.<sup>3</sup> There is of course an immense quantity of historical data supporting Lanzmann's construction. (He has said that Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* [1961] was for years his bible.) *Shoah*, however, is not a historical film but a film about witnessing. The film's most intense part is the accounts of *Sonderkommando* survivors who return to the vacated sites of the tragedy, where there remain only traces, almost completely erased: the Nazis were determined to render the extermination invisible. What is filmed and staged (locomotives and a barber shop were rented for the film) is not a historical reconstitution of the event, eradicating absence as certain fiction films do, but a present act of testifying to what is left for eyewitnesses: tenuous, fragile, incomplete, and partial remains, of which the surviving witness can only speak at risk, whether of being overwhelmed or of taking on in the process a new responsibility for his acts.

Thus the witness testifies at his own risk, implicating the future in the present. The necessary repetition of testimony implies an "iterability," in Derrida's sense: the repetition of what has already been said, but with an enunciation that is different each time, and thus with consequences that are a priori unpredictable for the subject. *Shoah* shows us this, for the witnesses, their voices yet again failing, are not speaking here for the first time.

This serves to introduce our subject: the melancholization of the witness. Certain survivors of the camps, witnesses of the Shoah, such as Primo Levi — "a perfect example of the witness," according to Giorgio Agamben — or the Austrian writer Jean Améry, committed suicide after testifying to their experience of the *Lager* (camp) in their work.<sup>4</sup> There is no need to draw hasty conclusions. First, suicide is an act, and as Levi says, "No one has ever come back to relate their own death."<sup>5</sup> It is even the ultimate successful act, in the sense that there is a radical discontinuity between the action of killing oneself that it implies and the "obscure mass of explanations" that attempt, after the event, to identify the causes. This does not stop people from making interpretations, of course; Levi did not hesitate to do so for Améry, or for Paul Celan.<sup>6</sup> Second, can the experience of the *Lager* still be implicated when the suicide takes place thirty or forty years later? Does the fact of having testified to the experience of the *Lager* bear on the suicide? Has the subject's testimony protected him until then, or has it hurled him to this tragic conclusion? Of course we can only look for fragments of answers to these questions, answers that will be incomplete and different in each case.

## Truth and the Real

Bearing witness is an experience of discourse, oral or written.<sup>7</sup> As an experience of truth, it implies the dimension of "making a mistake," even of lying. One can never tell "the whole truth." Trying to tell what has happened, the witness aims for the real. But if we agree that "full speech" — that is to say, speech that is identical to whatever is spoken of — does not exist, then every testimony implies a discrepancy with the real in question. Perhaps one illustration of this is the difference between testimony and evidence discussed earlier on.

Psychoanalysis posits an opposition between truth and the real. Truth has to do with speech and language, in other words with the register of the symbolic; the real is excluded from this. According to Lacan, the real is even "excluded from meaning": on rereading Freud's "Negation" (1925), he shows how, on the basis of a preliminary perception, the subject constitutes itself out of a primary expulsion (*Ausstossung*) of the real, motivated by the pleasure principle.<sup>8</sup> Whatever is too bad or too good, whatever is in excess with regard to this principle of homeostasis and equilibrium, "I" reject, although not without retaining a trace of it in a symbolic affirmation (*Bejahung*) that constitutes my unconsci-

ous. The real is thus rejected (*verworfen*) at the very outset by this primary judgment of attribution, and from then on it lies outside symbolization and representation. It is consequently linked to the logical modality of the impossible.

Reality is constituted in a second phase by a judgment in which objects in the existing world are sought and found outside the self on the basis of a representation (*Vorstellung*) that imaginarily reproduces the perception of the first object of satisfaction. The objects of reality never coincide with this representation, and reside side-by-side with the real that was earlier rejected. Reality, then, is co-extensive with the fantasy that masks this real that the subject will involuntarily encounter, and in a way that is invariably traumatic, when seeking his objects of pleasure.

When a subject speaks, in analysis or in bearing witness, he mobilizes the unconscious traces of the rejected real. Touching on what for him borders on the real — the signifiers of the trauma — can make this unrepresentable real emerge in the form of unpredictable acts, whether these be hallucinations or, more banally, phenomena of *déjà-vu*. Let us consider the latter. Phenomena of *déjà-vu* are accompanied by feelings of strangeness, a reluctance to speak, an impression of temporal distortion. Lacan describes *déjà-vu* as "the imaginary echo that arises in response to a point of reality that belongs to the limit at which it has been cut off from the symbolic" — thus the imaginary echo of the real expelled by the subject.<sup>9</sup> These imaginary phenomena, which he likens to Platonic reminiscence, must be differentiated from those recollections that have a relation to the subject's history, insofar as it is symbolically accepted.

Whoever wants to bear witness thus exposes himself to such phenomena at moments when something in his discourse evokes this severed and symbolically unaccepted real. In this hiatus between the symbolic and the real, the imaginary reveals itself as having affinities with the real that the symbolic does not have. The subject can be exposed to the return or creation of certain painful images that have great suggestive power over him. This is all the more true in that images, the imaginary, incite belief much more than discourse does, as is demonstrated by the experience of dreaming, hallucinating, or, more prosaically, a captivating movie.

## Melancholy

In melancholy, the ethical "illness" in which the subject responds to a loss with a feeling of overwhelming guilt, the power of the imaginary can prove fatal. Melancholy, we know, can strike those who are mourning someone close, or who have suffered the loss of an ideal or who have themselves provoked such a loss (by voluntarily renouncing something that was nevertheless precious to them, say). The Freudian paradox of melancholy is that the libidinal tie with the lost object is shed in the unconscious after a long struggle — that is, the work of melancholy — even as the subject maintains a tie with the object that becomes completely formal, leading us to think that he remains fixed to it in a process of mourning that is eternal and idealized. One condition for this powerful libidinal rejection of the object is that, earlier on, the beloved object was also hated, or was at least the site of a certain ambivalence. But the remaining formal fixation on the object is completely imaginary. In fact, once the object has been rejected, it is introjected into the ego, which it splits into two: on the one hand, the part of the ego that is marked by identification with the lost object; on the other, the superego that is unleashed against this first part, and that is marked by the same hatred that the subject previously felt for the object. The superego's hatred for the part of the ego identified with the object can be so extreme as to lead to suicide. The moment at which the subject expresses self-reproach indicates the end of the work of melancholy, which is in general invisible, and the introjection of the object that has finally been rejected.

Clinical experience teaches us that suicide is often triggered by the return of an image of the lost and idealized object that "comes to collect" the subject and leads him toward death.

## A Killing Smile

"Adieu," a short story of Balzac's from 1830, shows the power of such mummified images of the lost object.<sup>10</sup> Let us briefly recall the story. Colonel Philippe de Sacy (P.) loves Stéphanie (S.), who has become the countess de Vandières on marrying the old general of that name. The three protagonists flee Russia in the Napoleonic war of 1812. As they are about to cross the Berezina River, the retreating French set the bridge on fire so as to halt the Russians' advance. To save S., P. has a raft built to take her across the river. But everyone rushes onto it in panic, and only two places remain for the three of them. P. gives up his place. "Adieu," says Stéphanie on leaving her lover. But the general falls into the water and is decapitated by a piece of ice before their very eyes. "Adieu," Stéphanie repeats.

In 1820, having survived to wander for pleasure through the French countryside, P. finds Stéphanie by chance. Since 1812 she has gone mad; failing to recognize him, she behaves like a wild child. Her only words are "adieu," repeated without meaning, empty returns. Her uncle has taken her in and is devotedly trying to help her get better. But P. has another idea. Two psychiatric conceptions of the time are contrasted here; it is that of Jean Etienne Esquirol that inspires P., who buys a neighboring property where he sets up a realistic recreation of the army's retreat across the Berezina. He wants to produce a beneficial shock that will awaken S. from her madness. On the determined day, S. is brought, asleep, to the site and awoken by the sound of the cannon. Before the raft, writes Balzac, "she contemplated this living memory, this past life translated before her, turned her head toward Philippe, and saw him." Her face transformed by the beauty of rediscovered intelligence, she recognizes P., "comes alive," then suddenly "becomes a corpse" and dies, saying: "Adieu, Philippe, I love you, adieu!" Distressed, P. then notices the radiant smile that lights up the dead woman's face: "Ah!, that *smile* . . . look at that *smile*! Is it possible?"<sup>11</sup>

Ten years later, in 1830, P. has once more taken up a busy social life. He seems comfortable and happy. A woman compliments him on his good humor:

"Ah! Madam," he says to her, "I pay at great cost for my fun in the evening when I am alone."

"Are you ever alone?"

"No," he replied, smiling, with an expression that would have made anyone shiver.

Indeed, in the ten years since the death of the object S., the subject has not been alone, for he has been struggling against the lost object that he was trying to shed. This exhausting combat is the work of melancholy. The moment when he smiles at his worldly questioner indicates the end of this melancholic work; the shadow of the object falls on the ego, as Freud writes.<sup>12</sup> The subject introjects the smile, the sign of the lost object, S. P.'s look that "makes one shiver" evokes the avenging super-ego. Indeed the conversation continues briefly with the woman:

"Why do you not get married? . . . life is smiling at you."

"Yes" he answered, "but there is a smile that is killing me."

That very night he shot himself in the head.

If "adieu" is the signifier of trauma — here, of separation, loss, and death — the smile taken from the idealized lost object condenses love and guilt (P. feels he has killed S. with his traumatic historical reconstitution). After melancholic work lasting ten years, the lost object is introjected into the ego, as

we have said, with the smile on P.'s lips indicating this introjection. But the smile is also the image of S., which still fascinates him and pushes him to suicide. "The ego is crushed by the object."<sup>13</sup>

## Primo Levi

Let us return to the surviving witnesses of the Shoah.<sup>14</sup> Bruno Bettelheim described "the feeling of absolutely irrational guilt that one feels for the very fact of surviving," for having "been the absolutely powerless witnesses of the daily assassination of [one's] fellow men," "the fact of having lived for years under the direct and continuous threat of being killed for the single reason that one is part of a group destined for extermination." He transcribes the dialogue between the reason and the conscience of the survivor: "A voice, that of reason, attempts to answer the question: 'Why was I spared?' in this way: 'It is purely a question of luck, of pure chance. It is impossible to answer otherwise.' Whilst the voice of conscience replies: 'That is true, but if you were lucky enough to survive, it is because another prisoner died in your place.'"<sup>15</sup> Levi disliked Bettelheim, on the one hand because of his relatively privileged position (thanks to relatives, Bettelheim was able to leave Dachau and Buchenwald for the United States, at a time when this was still possible<sup>16</sup>), on the other because of his psychoanalytic theories identifying prisoners with defenseless children and the Nazis with cruel and dominating fathers — a notion that is indeed more than questionable.<sup>17</sup> In Levi's last work, however, *The Drowned and the Saved*, we nevertheless find almost exactly the same debate, between a subject and a super-ego-like and accusatory "you," outlined by Bettelheim:

You are ashamed because you are alive instead of someone else? ... This is only an assumption or less: the shadow of a suspicion that each man is his brother's Cain. ... It is an assumption, but it gnaws away at you; it has lodged itself so deeply in you like a worm, you cannot see it from the outside, but it gnaws and screams. ... I could have taken someone's place, which in fact means killed someone.<sup>18</sup>

These lines, written forty years after Auschwitz, evoke a feeling of their author's shame, and are thus the sign of the melancholization of the subject. In Levi's case, I would like to suggest, the two processes that I described earlier, and that I have condensed in the expression "melancholization of the witness," are superimposed. On the one hand, there is an effect, specific to bearing witness, of seeing the gulf between the symbolic and the real widen, with the risk of one or more images becoming "the imaginary echo" of the real that preys upon the subject. On the other, there is an experience of death, on which we will elaborate, that provides these images with their content and their fatal power.

Levi committed suicide on April 11, 1987, by throwing himself down the stairwell of the house in which he had been born and still lived with his wife and elderly mother, who was senile and had cancer. Some minutes earlier he had telephoned the great rabbi of Rome and had said to him, "I do not know how to continue. I can no longer bear this life. My mother is suffering from cancer, and each time I look at her face, I remember the faces of the men lying on the planks of the beds in Auschwitz."<sup>19</sup> An image of the faces of the dying men in the camp, the "Muslims,"<sup>20</sup> then, is superimposed onto that of a loved one threatened with death. It seems that this image of the faces of the dying men had imposed itself for some time already on Levi, who was also trying to get over a painful operation. Indeed, in a poem of 1984, "The Survivor," we read:

He sees the faces of his comrades again.  
Ashen, at the dawn of day,  
Cement grey,

Veiled in fog,  
Colour of death in restless sleep:  
...  
"Back, out, shadow people  
I have not driven anyone out,  
I have taken no one's bread,  
No one is dead instead of me. No one.  
Return to your fog. It is not my fault if I live and breathe,  
If I eat and drink, I sleep and am clothed."<sup>21</sup>

We find here the same correlation between the image of the Muslims' faces and the protest against a reproach addressed to him by the dead. In an interview of that same year, Levi nevertheless said that he was hopeful and that he felt at peace with himself for having borne witness.<sup>22</sup> This suggests variations in mood: he is the site of an intimate combat with himself, in which his testimony is what enables him to fight against guilt.

## On Testimony as a Symptom

Defining the symptom as the thing that never stops writing itself, Lacan situates it as a need enveloping the drive, always on the border of the impossible, that is, of the real. In this sense the symptom supports the subject, even as it costs him dearly and causes him suffering. Bearing witness had this function for Levi: "I think that I am situated at the very extreme limit of those who tell their stories, I have never stopped telling my story," he says.<sup>23</sup> His decision to bear witness was rooted in a recurrent nightmare he had had in Auschwitz, a dream in which, returning home, he would tell people about his experience only to find that they neither listened to nor believed him. His compulsion dated from the moment at the camp when he for the first time held a pencil and paper in his hands. (This was at the IG-Farben factory, where the Nazis used him as a chemist.) On his return to Italy, his dream was realized when he tried to narrate his experiences to a group of Poles and quickly found himself alone, "bloodless."<sup>24</sup> Indeed we know that he had trouble making himself heard in Italy, and had to wait ten years for *If This Is a Man* to be reissued by a major publisher there.

Nevertheless, Levi found at least one person who would listen to him, his wife, whom he met in 1946 and married, as he later said, because she listened to him more than other people did.<sup>25</sup> He chose writing as "equivalent to a spoken report" with the intention of liberating himself, as though the act of writing were equivalent to "lying down on Freud's couch."<sup>26</sup> He felt writing had to be clear and precise, and had to attain an ideal of transmission in keeping with his chemist's dream of the written formula that is identical to experience.<sup>27</sup> Clear writing was perhaps also an antidote to death, to "obscure writing," a model of which was provided for him by that of Celan, which appeared to him as "a bestial groaning" heralding the "final chaos" for which the poet was destined.<sup>28</sup> The compulsion to "return, eat, relate" was accompanied by a violent anxiety evident in the opening poem of *The Truce*, written in January 1946, at the same time that Levi was writing *If This Is a Man*:

We have returned home,  
Our bellies are full,  
Our report is finished.  
It is time. Soon we shall hear once more  
The foreign command:  
"Wstawac."<sup>29</sup>

Testimony is thus torn between two types of anxiety: on the one hand, of not being heard; on the other, of finishing one's account and finding oneself back in the camp. Levi continued his testimony in *The Truce*, published in 1963, after the success of *If This Is a Man*. He published further memories of the camp in *Lilith*, in 1981, and in his last work, *The Drowned and the Saved*, in 1986. In between, having once again taken up his career as a chemist, he also wrote short stories (often based on his dreams<sup>30</sup>), works of fiction, and an autobiography, *The Periodic Table*, which is also an account of his work as a chemist and was written when he was about to retire. At the time he wrote his short stories, he thought he had used up his stock of testimony about the camps and felt the need to express his experience in another form, "by adopting another language" that was more ironic, strident, oblique, and antipoetic.<sup>31</sup> From that time on, notably in about 1977 and more so in around 1984, he gave many interviews expressing a growing pessimism — one in fact justified by the rising phenomenon of negationism, and by a certain deafness on the part of the younger generation and even of his own children, whose language he felt he could no longer speak.

Levi sometimes experienced a certain exhaustion of memory: he could only remember the camps through what he had written, which became a kind of "artificial memory" for him.<sup>32</sup> His first book functioned like a "prosthetic memory," an external memory that was interposed between [his] existence today and that of the time," like a "filter" or "barrier."<sup>33</sup> What was left out of what he had written was reduced to "a few details" — or else he claimed to have written only the "Technicolor," while the essential part, on the contrary, was the "everyday gray," the "disintegrated material," impossible to convey, that encircled the prisoners. He reproached himself with having described the life of the Muslims when they had not spoken; this preceded the self-reproaches in *The Drowned and the Saved* for not having taken their place.<sup>34</sup> In *Other People's Trades* he says of writers that they "inevitably end up copying themselves. Silence is more dignified, whether temporary or permanent."<sup>35</sup> One has the impression that he himself arrives at this as the hero of his two short stories "Creative Work" and "In the Park": a writer who creates an autobiographical character, his double and himself, and who finds himself in a "park" with the heroes of all the literary works ever written, then disappears, his body little by little becoming transparent, for this inconsistent literary character has been forgotten in the world.

Back from the *Lager*, the work of memory was living, creative work, an experience of truth that interposed itself between the camp and himself. Testimony was thus a symptom, a work in progress, that supported him. Afterward, however, his books deprived him of his living memory; his literary venture failed to tie the death drive now raging in his conscience into a new sublimation. As in his poem, "The Truce" is over and he remains alone, confronted with the image of the Muslim who has come back like a reminiscence, an imaginary echo of the real.

## On Seeing the Gorgon

Discussing the testimonies of the *Sonderkommandos*, Levi wrote in *The Drowned and the Saved*, "It is clear that those things that were said, and the others, countless others, that they must have said among themselves, but that did not get to us, cannot be taken literally."<sup>36</sup> Why, then, should we take him literally in the following much-remarked-on passage:<sup>37</sup>

We, the survivors, are not the real witnesses. ... we are those who, thanks to prevarication, ability or luck, did not touch the bottom. Those who did, who saw the Gorgon, did not come back to tell us, or came back mute, but it is they, the "Muslims," those who were swallowed up, the complete witnesses, whose depositions would have had general meaning.<sup>38</sup>

Should we then deduce that Levi is not a "real" witness? This is not my reading, but I do read it also, between the lines.

"Seeing the Gorgon means ceasing to be oneself, ceasing to be alive, in order to become like her, the Power of death," says the Hellenic scholar Jean-Pierre Vernant.<sup>39</sup> Staring at the mask of the Gorgon means becoming the mask, its double, one's own, in the afterlife. I think Levi experienced seeing the Gorgon, and bore witness to it from 1945 onward:

Oh lifeless man who was once strong:  
If ever we meet face to face,  
Up there, in the sunlit tenderness of the world,  
How will we look to one another, how?<sup>40</sup>

At around the age of six months, the ego constitutes itself through an identification with the image of the body in the mirror. This occurs through the intervention of a third party, usually the mother, who fixes this identification with the recognition, "That is you."<sup>41</sup> This moment, the "mirror stage," is a moment of jubilation, for the child, who is still dependent on the other in its movements and whose experience is a chaos of different drives, experiences in it an artificial unity. The imaginary relation to other people acquires its ambivalence from this moment, made up of both presence and rivalry. Primary narcissism is constituted here. The image plays a large role in our relation to the other, especially in love; although it is deceptive, it nevertheless masks what it is in the other that fills us with either desire or antipathy, Lacan's object *a* — what we seek to attain, and sometimes to destroy, in the other's image.

Certain subjects experience in madness what Lacan called "the death of the subject." In a catastrophic return to the primordial moment in which the identity is constituted, the relation to the specular other is reduced to "its lethal side." Identity is reduced to a confrontation with the double, as though a "leprous corpse were leading another leprous corpse."<sup>42</sup> The inhuman conditions of the *Lager* could artificially produce a similar experience, with a dual consequence.<sup>43</sup>

On the one hand, on the level of the image, the Muslims appeared as "shells,"<sup>44</sup> men with "lifeless faces,"<sup>45</sup> as undifferentiated ("they disappeared without leaving traces in anyone's memory"), and even as men without faces: "They people my memory with their faceless presence."<sup>46</sup> "There are no mirrors, but our images stand before us, reflected by a hundred livid faces."<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, this image covers the real, the object *a* shall we say, that Levi calls "man in the process of disintegration"<sup>48</sup> or the "nonman," he who, on this side of injustice and murder, which are still human, "has been an object in the eyes of man," "he who allows himself to share his bed with a corpse."<sup>49</sup> I think, then, that Levi experienced such a death of the subject, which indeed inspired a supernatural short story, "A Serene Retirement," in which a piece of apparatus, "the Torec," allows one repeatedly to experience one's own death.<sup>50</sup> This experience of subjective death is expressed again and again, in many forms. "To get used to" or "to get accustomed to" the *Lager* is "to lose one's humanity."<sup>51</sup> Levi insists on the theme of bestiality, cherished by the Nazis to the point of using gas to kill equally people and lice.<sup>52</sup> He describes "the death of the soul" in the prisoners,<sup>53</sup> or "the nonman in whom the divine spark has gone out."<sup>54</sup> He refers to ghosts.<sup>55</sup> This experience of the death of the subject can also be induced from what he wants to say and reproaches himself for being unable to describe on behalf of "those who have been swallowed up": the abolition of space-time;<sup>56</sup> the time that goes mad for Mendel, a character in *If Not Now, When?*;<sup>57</sup> the feeling of chaos, or of "gray and cloudy emptiness";<sup>58</sup> and the oppressive blanks in thought.<sup>59</sup> There are also the references to the formlessness of Genesis and to Dante's Hell, and finally there is the title of Levi's first book, *If This Is a Man*.



Levi fought with all his might against this experience of death, retaining the desire to "always see in [his] companions and in [himself] men and not things."<sup>60</sup> One sees this especially in the episode in the *Lager* in which he recounts a false dream to Kraus, whom he senses is lost. He tells him he has dreamt of returning to Turin and of receiving Kraus at his home. He thus attributes to him a value of desire, a human value. He himself, progressively and not without suffering, comes out of this state of nonman. First, his meeting with his friend Lorenzo, who has remained a man (he does not live in the *Lager*), makes him feel like a man himself, as though he were reexperiencing the mirror stage.<sup>61</sup> Then, when he regains his status as a chemist, even if a degraded one, in the Buna laboratory, he rediscovers mirrors and sees his reflection in a woman's eyes.<sup>62</sup> When the SS leave, the bonds of speech and exchange, social bonds, are reinstated between himself and his companions in the infirmary where he has stayed.<sup>63</sup> Finally he rediscovers his childhood home, which "he inhabits like [his own] skin,"<sup>64</sup> and where he will remain for the rest of his life. He also finds love for his wife.

And he begins to write. I am struck by the fact that *If This Is a Man* is composed of portraits of the dead, at least one per chapter: Gattegno (chapter 1), Schlomo (chapter 2), Steinlauf (chapter 3), O18 and Piero (chapter 4), Alberto (chapter 5), etc. In fact Levi wanted to avoid speaking of the living in order to avoid doing them moral violence or giving them a negative image of themselves.<sup>65</sup> In his portraits of those who have disappeared "without leaving traces in anyone's memory," except perhaps his own, he tries, in several collections of writings, to re-create a face over what he saw: a face "the color of death," the mask of the Gorgon. This, he would later say, constituted the hopeless task "of clothing a man in words."<sup>66</sup> This colossal labor — an infinite and indeed impossible work of mourning, since it concerns people beyond number — is in fact the invisible and long work of melancholy of which we spoke earlier. Indeed, the subject has the same profoundly ambivalent relation to the Muslim that one has with one's double in the mirror: with this "*Mitmensch*," this "cohuman,"<sup>67</sup> he was in competition for life. One senses reproach and a certain animosity against O18, who "is no longer a man," and who, indifferent to all, is the cause of a wound to Levi's foot, which has heavy consequences for him.<sup>68</sup> The episode in the passage for October 1944, where he thinks "without any particular emotion" that he owes his life to an error, to an exchange with someone in a better state than he, and then later to his privileged status as a chemist, also indicates this ambivalence, which is later transformed into a melancholic reproach (being "his brother's Cain").<sup>69</sup> One also senses animosity in his revulsion at the idea of seeing some of those who were with him at the camp again, such as "Henri," alias Paul Steinberg, who would also testify to his experience, although only after fifty years of silence.

This ambivalence prevents the subject from separating itself for good from the object *a* that is constituted by the Muslim, the lost object that he cannot abandon. And he feels its presence in the form of a "*Doppelgänger*, a mute and faceless brother" whom he is "condemned to drag" behind him when he writes.<sup>70</sup>

On the one hand, then, there is a dead faceless object that he introjects at the end of a work of melancholia lasting forty years, and that he is finally able to reproach with being mute, in the conscious form of the terrible self-reproach of having never really testified — this from the man everyone had come to know as the "perfect example of the witness." The Freudian superego is avid for such paradoxes. On the other hand, there is a hazy image, "a vile specter," the face of a Muslim, "a negative epiphany,"<sup>71</sup> the mask of the Gorgon who attacks him and kills him at a moment when he is weak and threatened with a new loss.

## Conclusion

"The melancholization of witnesses" thus designates the overlapping of two processes. The first is linked to the gap created by any enunciation that attempts to express the real, and to the possibility that imaginary phenomena may arise and be evoked by borderline points between the symbolic (language and speech) and the real. This can happen to anyone who bears witness in an intense or repeated way, or to anyone who talks in psychoanalysis, as soon as the traumatic signifiers of his history are evoked. It must be understood that we all have such signifiers in our unconscious, even if we have not experienced extreme situations. The second process, melancholization, is linked, rather, to the experience of tragic loss, terrible suffering, and death in these extreme situations. We have shown that the case of Levi is paradigmatic of the superimposition of these two structures, and of the power that sinister image can acquire, despite the immense work of memory, speech, and writing that the writer undertook.

As a psychoanalyst, I am aware of the therapeutic power of speech to reconstruct and invent, but I also appreciate its limits. It is perhaps useful to draw attention to those limits in the face of the large-scale publication of works of surprising optimism that develop the concept of "resilience," a concept, apparently, that owes a lot to research on trauma undertaken since the Holocaust and the Korean and Vietnam wars. Thus Boris Cyrulnik writes in a recent book, "Resilience is the art of navigating within torrents," and, "Time softens memory and accounts metamorphosize feelings," and even, "A work of fiction that enables the expression of tragedy thereby has a protective effect."<sup>72</sup> To activate this "resilience," which will give meaning to one's experience, one only needs "a helping hand" and "to try to understand." What can one do about the real, though, which is precisely meaningless?

In his book *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Memory, history, forgetting), "a plea for the defense of memory as a matrix of history,"<sup>73</sup> Paul Ricœur links two roughly contemporaneous Freudian texts, "Mourning and Melancholia" (1916) and "Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through" (1914). He deduces parallels between the "work of mourning" and the "work of memory," on the one hand, and between melancholy and passages to action, on the other. These two pairs are moreover opposed: one is either on the side of memory and mourning or, on the contrary, on the side of melancholy and passages to action.<sup>74</sup> This reading could be improved, it seems to me, if it took into account Freudian contributions after 1920 that pose the death drive as something inevitable and that complicate this opposition. The simple fact of speaking and trying to remember — in analytic treatment, of course, but I think one can extend this to testimony — brings to light, in the form of uncontrollable repetition, experiences that "even at the time could not bring satisfaction" and that the subject cannot remember.<sup>75</sup> It is indeed the account itself and the effort to remember that, in place of memories, can induce a passage to action linked to trauma, a real that has therefore been ejected from the symbolic, as we said earlier.

It is indispensable that witnesses and victims should speak, be heard, and transmit their historical experience, but let us not forget the risks they thereby run. We should also the fact that the German word for the "reconciliation" with the repressed of which Freud speaks in 1914 is *Versöhnung*, whose meaning has been extended to the idea of a compromise but which has the same root as *Sühne*, expiation or indeed sacrifice.

*Translated from the French by Beatrice Khiara*

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## References

- 1 Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Échographies de la télévision* (Paris: Galilée, 1996), p. 107.
- 2 Georges Duby, *Dames du XI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, vol. 2: *Le souvenir des aïeules* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), p. 77.
- 3 See Bernard Cuau, et al., *Au sujet de Shoah, le film de Claude Lanzmann* (Paris: Belin, 1990), p. 66.
- 4 Giorgio Agamben, *Ce qui reste d'Auschwitz*, trans. P. Alferi (Paris: Rivages, 1999), p. 16. Eng. trans. as *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2000). Primo Levi was deported to Auschwitz in 1944, as an Italian Jew. Jean Améry, whose real name was Hans Mayer, was deported to Auschwitz in 1943, as a Jew, after being tortured by the Gestapo for his resistance work in Belgium.
- 5 Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati*, 1986, French trans. as *Les Naufragés et les rescapés: Quarante ans après Auschwitz*, trans. A. Maugé (Paris: Arcades, Gallimard, 1989), p. 83. Eng. trans. as *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Summit Books, 1988).
- 6 For Levi, suicide was above all a human act, and he said that people in the camps did not commit suicide much because "human beings tended to resemble animals" and were far too busy trying to survive to think about killing themselves. Levi interpreted Améry's suicide in 1978 as the result of his defiant attitude, even in the camp, where he recounts punching back a Pole who had attacked him. Levi thinks this decision to "hit back" "led to standpoints of such severity and such intransigence that they made him incapable of finding any joy in living, and even of living." *Ibid.*, p. 134. In the case of Paul Celan, whom he compares to Georg Trakl, he remarks that "their common destiny brings to mind the obscurity of their poetics as a readiness-for-death, a not-wishing-to-be, an escape-from-the-world crowned by deliberate death." Levi, *L'altrui mestiere*, 1985, French trans. as *Le Métier des autres*, trans. Martine Schruoffeneger (Paris: Folio, Gallimard, 1998), pp. 73-74. Eng. trans. as *Other People's Trades*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Summit Books, 1989). He invokes each of their histories, crossed with History, but seems to think that obscure writing on their part is a sort of disavowal of responsibility to the reader. For Levi's relation to clear writing, see below.
- 7 When testimony is written, it is often in continuity with an oral account. This was the case with Levi: "And then, I chose writing as the equivalent of accounts given orally." Quoted in Ferdinando Camon, *Autoritratto di Primo Levi*, French trans. as *Conversations avec Primo Levi*, trans. A. Maugé (Paris: Le messager, Gallimard, 1991), p. 50. Eng. trans. as *Conversations with Primo Levi*, trans. John Shepley (Marlboro, Vt.: Marlboro Press, 1989). But it is not always so. Paul Steinberg wrote *Chroniques d'ailleurs* after fifty years of silence; Améry was silent for twenty years, until the Auschwitz trials, before writing *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne* (1966).

- 8** Jacques Lacan, "Réponse au commentaire de Jean Hyppolite sur la , Verneinung' de Freud," 1954, in *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), pp. 388-89. Eng. trans. as "Introduction and Reply to Jean Hippolyte's Presentation of Freud's Verneinung," *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-54*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. with notes by John Forrester (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998).
- 9** *Ibid.*, p. 391.
- 10** Honoré de Balzac, *Adieu*, 1830 (reprint ed. Paris: Le livre de poche, 1999), p. 89.
- 11** Here and in later quotations the italics are added.
- 12** Sigmund Freud, "Deuil et mélancolie," 1917, in *Métapsychologie*, trans. J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), p. 156. Eng. trans. as "Mourning and Melancholia," in *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology*, ed. Philip Rieff, 1963 (reprint ed. London: Macmillan, 1997).
- 13** *Ibid.*, p. 161.
- 14** My work on Levi is a continuation of the essay "Testimony and the Real: Psychoanalytical Elucidation," in Franz Kaltenbeck and Peter Weibel, eds., *Trauma und Erinnerung/Trauma and Memory: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2000), p. 113.
- 15** Bruno Bettelheim, "Comportement individuel et comportement de masse dans les situations extrêmes," in *Survivre* (Paris: Pluriel, Hachette, 1979), p. 43. Eng. trans. as *Surviving and Other Essays* (New York: Knopf, 1979).
- 16** Bettelheim was deported first to Dachau, then, in 1938, to Buchenwald, as an Austrian Jew. He was able to leave for the United States in 1939.
- 17** Bettelheim, "Comportement individuel et comportement de masse," p. 101; Levi, *Le Devoir de mémoire: Entretien avec Anna Bravo et Frederico Cereja*, trans. J. Gayraud (Paris: Ed. Mille et une nuits, 1995), pp. 44-50.
- 18** Levi, *Les Naufragés et Its rescapés*, pp. 80-81.
- 19** See Myriam Anissimov, *Primo Levi ou la tragédie d'un optimiste* (Paris: Lattès, Le livre de poche, 1996), p. 735. Eng. trans. as *Primo Levi: Tragedy of an Optimist*, trans. Steve Cox (Woodstock, N.Y.: The Overlook Press, 1997).
- 20** Levi writes, "Muselmann': c'est ainsi que les anciens du camp surnommaient, j'ignore pourquoi, les faibles, les inadaptés, ceux que étaient voués à la sélection" ("Muslim": this is what the elders in the camp, why I do not know, called the weak, the unadapted, those who were fated for the selection). Levi, *Si c'est un homme*, trans. Martine Schruoffeneger (Paris: Pocket, Julliard, 1987), p.94, note 1. Eng. trans. as *If This Is a Man*, trans. Stuart Woolf (London: Bodley Head, 1966).

- 21** Levi, *À une heure incertaine*, trans. L. Bonalumi (Paris: Arcades, Gallimard, 1997), p. 88. Eng. trans. in *Collected Poems*, trans. Ruth Feldman and Brian Swann (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1988).
- 22** Levi, *Conversations et entretiens* (Paris: Pavillons, Robert Laffont, 1998), p. 217. Eng. trans. as *The Voice of Memory: Interviews 1961-1987*, ed. Marco Belpoliti and Robert Gordon, trans. Robert Gordon (New York: New Press, 2001).
- 23** *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- 24** Levi, *La Trêve*, trans. E. Genevois-Joly (Paris: Grasset, 1966), p. 61. Eng. trans. as *The Reawakening*, trans. Stuart Woolf, 1965 (reprint ed. New York: Macmillan, 1993).
- 25** Levi, in Camon, *Conversations avec Primo Levi*, p. 72.
- 26** *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.
- 27** *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- 28** Levi, *Le Métier des autres*, p. 76.
- 29** Levi, *À une heure incertaine*, p. 20.
- 30** Levi, *Conversations et entretiens*, p. 205.
- 31** *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- 32** Camon, *Conversations avec Primo Levi*, p. 22.
- 33** Levi, *Conversations et entretiens*, pp. 212, 252.
- 34** *Ibid.*, p. 213.
- 35** Levi, *Le Métier des autres*, p. 57.
- 36** Levi, *Les Naufragés et les rescapés*, p. 53.
- 37** Especially by Agamben, in *Ce qui reste d'Auschwitz*, p. 105. See also "Testimony and the Real," p. 113, and Anne-Lise Stern, "Passe (,Passe, du camp chez Lacan' II)," in *Essaim: Revue de psychanalyse*, no. 6 (2000): 5-19.
- 38** Levi, *Les Naufragés et les rescapés*, p. 82.
- 39** Jean-Pierre Vernant, *La Mort dans les yeux* (Paris: Hachette, Textes du XXe siècle, 1990), pp. 80-82.
- 40** Levi, "Buna," in *À une heure incertaine*, p. 15.

- 41** Jacques Lacan, "Le Stade du miroir comme formateur du jeu," 1949, in *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), p. 93.
- 42** Lacan, "D'une question préliminaire à tout traitement possible de la psychose," 1958, in *Ecrits*, p. 568.
- 43** The Sonderkommando witnesses who testify in Shoah also speak of the experience of a subjective death. See S. Felman, "À l'âge rage du témoignage: Shoah de Claude Lanzmann," in Cuau et al. *Au sujet de Shoah*, p. 78.
- 44** Levi, *Conversations et entretiens*, p. 91.
- 45** Levi, *À une heure incertaine*, p. 5.
- 46** Levi, *Si c'est un homme*, pp. 95-97.
- 47** *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- 48** *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 49** *Ibid.*, p. 85. A borderline experience that Levi and his friend Arthur almost shared after the departure of the Germans; see Levi, *Si c'est un homme*, p. 185. Jorge Semprún, who was imprisoned in Buchenwald, recounts an analogous experience in *Le Mort qu'il faut* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), p.43: he had a Muslim friend, of whom he writes, "This living corpse was a younger brother, perhaps my double, my Doppelgänger: another myself or myself as another." It had been planned that he would secretly take the place of this man after his death, in order to escape possibly being put to death by the Nazis himself. He noted down his friend's last words and spent the rest of the night with his corpse. His book is dedicated to this story.
- 50** Levi, *Histoires naturelles, Vice de forme*, trans. A. Maugé (Paris: Arcades, Gallimard, 1994), p. 223.
- 51** Levi, *Conversations et entretiens*, p. 228.
- 52** *Ibid.*, p. 256; Levi, *Le Devoir de mémoire*, p. 66.
- 53** Levi, *Si c'est un homme*, p. 75; Levi, *Les Naufragés et les rescapés*, p. 59.
- 54** Levi, *Si c'est un homme*, p. 96.
- 55** *Ibid.*, p. 173.
- 56** *Ibid.*, p. 127.
- 57** Levi, *Conversations et entretiens*, p. 96.
- 58** Levi, *La Trêve*, p. 245.
- 59** Anissimov, *Primo Levi ou la tregédie d'un optimiste*, p. 580.

- 60** Levi, *Si c'est un homme*, p. 214.
- 61** *Ibid.*, p. 130.
- 62** *Ibid.*, p. 152.
- 63** *Ibid.*, p. 172.
- 64** Levi, *Le Métier des autres*, p. 18.
- 65** Levi, *Le Devoir de mémoire*, P. 24; Levi, *Lilith*, trans. Martine Schruoffeneger (Paris: Liana Levi, 1993), P. 70.
- 66** Levi, *Le Système périodique*, trans. A. Maugé (Paris: Biblio, Le livre de poche, 1998), pp. 58, 159. Eng. trans. as *The Periodic Table*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal, 1984 (reprint ed. New York: Knopf, 1996).
- 67** Levi, *Les Naufragés et les rescapés*, pp. 56, 80; Levi, *Le Devoir de mémoire*, p. 30.
- 68** Levi, *Si c'est un homme*, pp. 44-47.
- 69** *Ibid.*, p. 137; Levi, *Le Devoir de mémoire*, p. 60.
- 70** Levi, *Le Métier des autres*, p. 70.
- 71** A term invented by the photographer Susan Sontag to qualify the permanent impression produced in her by the first photos of the camps during the Liberation; cited in *Mémoires des camps, photographies des camps de concentration et d'extermination nazis* (Paris: Marval, 2001), p. 126.
- 72** Boris Cyrulnik, *Les Vilains petits canards* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2001), pp. 259-61.
- 73** Paul Ricœur, *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), p. 106.
- 74** *Ibid.*, pp. 83-89.
- 75** Freud, "Au-delà du principe de plaisir," 1920, in *Essais de psychanalyse* (Paris: PBP, Payot, 1981), p. 60. Eng. trans. as *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990).