The man I married and the man he was after the war were not the same person. And I'm sure I was not the same person either... but somehow we had a need for each other because, he knew who I was, he was the only person who knew... He knew who I was, and I knew who he was...

'And we're here, we're here to tell you the story.' (Fortunoff, T98)

What is unique about the story of this woman is her conscious determination to survive precisely at the most absurd and most devastating moment of her confrontation with death. Her determination to survive, her decision to live paradoxically springs out of her most intimate and close attendance of the actual dying of her youngest brother, a boy of thirteen, who, asphyxiated in the transport wagon, literally expires in her arms:

He was going to be thirteen... And you know, when my brother died in my arms, I said to myself, 'I'm going to live.' I made up my mind to defy Hitler. I'm not going to give in. Because he wants me to die, I'm going to live. This was our way of fighting back.

After I was liberated... a Russian doctor examined me and said, "Under normal circumstances you would not have survived... It's just a medical miracle that you survived." But I told you, I really wanted to live, I said to myself. "I want to live one day after Hitler, one day after the end of the war... And we are here to tell you the story."

The woman's testimony is, therefore, a testament to how she survived in order to give her testimony. The story of survival is, in fact, the incredible narration of the survival of the story at the crossroads between life and death.

Liberation from Silence

The second videotaped testimony screened to the class narrates the story of a man who was a child survivor, one of the two children to remain alive of the four thousand children incarcerated in the Plashow concentration camp. In 1942, his parents decided to smuggle him out of the camp because they learned that all the children would shortly be rounded up for examination. At the age of four he was thus instructed by his parents to leave them, to run away and head toward a refuge place, which at the time he took to be a hospital, but which turned out to have been—as he later learned—a high-class brothel, hospitable to marginal people like himself. As his stay there became in turn risky, he had to leave and make it on his own as a member of a gang of children of the streets, who stayed alive by begging and by stealing. In moments of distress, he would turn to—and pray to—a student ID picture of his mother, given to him by her at the time of his escape, with the
promise that she and his father will come to look for him after the war and will find him wherever he will be. The promise of the picture and his trust in their future reunion gave him both the strength and the resourcefulness to endure and to survive the war.

In effect, after the war, he did miraculously find his parents, but the people who returned from the camp—dressed in prison garb, emaciated and disfigured—bore no resemblance either to the mother’s picture or to the parents he had been waiting for and dreaming of. He could not accept these strangers, could not address them as “Mom” and “Dad,” but instead insisted upon calling them “Mr.” and “Mrs.” It was during the years that followed the war, when he was finally safe, that he disintegrated, could not sleep, developed fears, and started having nightmares. Haunted, he nonetheless could not talk about the war experience. For thirty-five years he kept his silence:

This was not a subject brought up in my father’s household. It was always... something you have to forget...

I was unable to read any books... I didn’t read a word about the Holocaust... It just wasn’t there...

For the past thirty-five years I’ve been trying to convince myself that it never happened, that... maybe it happened, but I wasn’t affected. I walked under the rain without getting wet...

But I never realized that I never talked about it, neither with my wife nor with my children. (Fromnoff, T32)

It is not without dread nor without conflict that he decides to give his testimony, after having first refused to do so. Once he resolves to testify, however, his own dreams—which he recounts—bear witness to the fact that he experiences his own decision to speak up as profoundly freeing: his own sudden realization of the magnitude of his burden of silence and its dead weight on him and on his loved ones comes to him, surprisingly, at once as an exhilarating, unexpected liberation from his nightmares—a liberation that allows him for the first time to experience feelings both of mourning and of hope—and as a transfiguring illumination, a transforming insight into the extent to which this burden—and this silence—has in fact affected, and reshaped, his whole life:

The thing that troubles me right now is the following: if we don’t deal with our feelings, if we don’t understand our experience, what are we doing to our children?...

We are what we are... we can change some, but we will never be able to eradicate... what happened... The big question is: Are we transferring our anxieties, our fears, our problems, to the generations to come? And this is why I feel that we are talking here not only of the lost generation—like the term they coined after World War I—this time we are dealing with lost generations. It’s not only us. It’s the generations to come. And I think this is the biggest tragedy of those who survived.

VII

THE CLASS IN CRISIS

These reflections of the child survivor on the liberating, although frightening, effects of his own rebirth to speech in the testimonial process, on the value of his own emergence from a life of silence not just for himself, but for his children, for the conscious and unconscious legacy that history and memory—unwittingly or lucidly—leave for the forthcoming generations, were meant, in this way, to conclude the course with the very eloquence of life, with a striking, vivid, and extreme real example of the liberating, vital function of the testimony.

But the eloquence of life—coupled with the eloquence of literature (with the testimonial eloquence of Albert Camus, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Sigmund Freud, Stephane Mallarmé, and Paul Celan)—carried the class beyond a limit that I could foresee and had envisioned. The unpredictability of the events that took place at this point in the class indeed confirmed, once more, in an unanticipated manner, the unpredictability of testimony. Something happened, toward the conclusion of the class, which took me completely by surprise. The class itself broke out into a crisis. And it was this crisis which made this class unique in my experience, this crisis which determined me to write about it.

That turn of events took place after the screening of the first Holocaust videotape, recounting the story of the woman. The tapes were screened in the informal privacy of an apartment, with the students sitting on the carpet, all over the floor. During the screening some were crying, but that in itself was not an unusual phenomenon. When the film was over, I purposely left the floor to them. But even though this class, throughout the course, had been particularly literate and eloquent, they remained, after the screening session, inarticulate and speechless. They looked subdued and kept their silence even as they left. That in itself is not unusual either. What was
usual was that the experience did not end in silence, but instead, festered into endless and relentless talking in the days and weeks to come; a thing that could not take place, however, within the confines of the classroom but that somehow had to break the very framework of the class (and thus merge outside it), in much the same way as the writers we examined somehow all broke through the framework of what they had initially set out to describe.

I realized that something strange was going on when I started getting letters from the students at my home at all odd hours, in a manifest avalanche to talk about the session, although they did not quite know what to say. Later learned from my colleagues, the students of my class who met in other classes could only talk about the session and could focus on no other subject. Friends and roommates of my students later wrote me letters, to tell me of the interest they had developed in my class, by virtue of their having come, as one letter puts it, the “coerced listeners” to these outside proceedings of the class and to the frantic talking of my students, who apparently could talk of nothing else no matter where they were, in others classes, study rooms or dorms. They were set apart and set themselves apart from others who had not gone through the same experience. They were obsessed. They apart, and yet not quite together. They sought out each other and yet felt they could not reach each other. They kept turning to each other and to me. They felt alone, suddenly deprived of their bonding to the world and to one another. As I listened to their outpouring, I realized the class was entirely at a loss, disoriented and uprooted.

I was myself in turn taken by surprise, and worried by the critical tensions of this crisis which the class was obviously going through, and which was gathering momentum. I realized, at the same time, that the predicted outcome of the screening was itself a psychoanalytical enhancement of the way in which the class felt actively addressed not only by the tape but by the intensity and intimacy of the testimonial encounter throughout the course. Since the class viewing of the archive films had been so effect in the presence of the psychoanalyst who was, specifically, interviewer of the two Holocaust survivors and the conceivers of the very archive of the, Dr. Dori Laub, I turned to him for counsel.

After we discussed the turn of events, we concluded that what was called for was to resume authority as the teacher of the class, and bring the students back into significance. I therefore called the students who had failed to contact me, to discuss with each one his or her reactions to the “crisis.” Next, I prepared a half-hour lecture as an introduction to the second screening in the form of an address to the class which opened, in effect, the next and final session. This address was divided into two parts: the first part summarized, and returned to the students, in their own words, the importance and significance of their reactions; the second part attempted to articulate for them an integrated view of the literary texts and of the videotapes—of the significance of all the texts together, in relation to their own reactions.

The following are excerpts from this introduction.10

THE ADDRESS TO THE CLASS

We have in this second screening session quite a task before us: the task of surviving the first session. I would like to begin by reviewing with you your responses to the first Holocaust testimony. Your reactions helped me, started me on a process of thinking in dialogue with your responses. As I told many of you over the phone, I consider this class in general and the videotape sessions in particular, as a kind of process which, as such, has an existence in time, a process that implies both a working out, and a working through, of our subject.

What your responses most of all conveyed to me was something like an anxiety of fragmentation. People talked of having the feeling of being “cut off” at the end of the session. Some felt very lonely. It struck me that Celan’s words were very accurate to describe the feeling of the class:

A strange loneliness

Was palpably present. (Celan, 1980a, 139)

There was a sort of panic that consisted in both emotional and intellectual disorientation, loss of direction. One person told me that he literally “lost the whole class,” that the emotion of the first videotape was so overwhelming that everything he thought he had acquired in the previous classes got somehow “disconnected.”

On the other hand, a number of people said that they suddenly realized how much this class counted for them, and the way in which it counted seemed crucially important, though unsettling. The videotape viewing was described as “a shattering experience”; it was felt that the last session “was not just painful, but very powerful,” so powerful that it was “hard to think about it analytically without trivializing it.” Most people said that they were much more affected twenty four hours after the session, and as time went on, than on the spot. Some felt a need to write down their reflections and emotions. They kept diaries of every word thought or said. Some kept diaries of their dreams.
There was a great need to talk about the class experience, and everybody mentioned that. People frantically looked for interlocutors, but expressed their frustration at the fact that everything that they could say to an outsider to convey a sense of the event was just fragments: they could not convey the whole experience. “I was compelled,” said one student, “to speak about the Holocaust testimonies, the class, etcetera, to friends who were not disinterested but who were perhaps a bit surprised. This speaking was at best fragmentary, dissolving into silence; at moments, lapping into long, obsessive monologues. It was absolutely necessary to speak of it, however incoherently. It was the most fragmented of testimonies. At times, I felt that I would simply have to abduct someone and lock them up in my room and tell them about the ‘whole’ thing.”

One person suggested an analytic view of the whole situation. “Until now and throughout the texts we have been studying,” he said, “we have been talking (to borrow Mallarmé’s terms) about ‘the testimony of an accident.’ We have been talking about the accident—and here all of a sudden the accident happened in the class, happened to the class. The accident passed through the class.”

In trying to address the fragmentation in the class and bring it back into significance, the first articulate response that I, in turn, could offer, was to reread them again a text that we had read together in the course: an excerpt from Celan’s “Bremen Address,” about what happened to the act of speaking, and to language, after the Holocaust. In setting out, however, to re-cite this text again, I now referred it to the resonances of what happened in the class:

I will suggest that the significance of the event of your viewing of the first Holocaust videotape was, not unlike Celan’s own Holocaust experience, something akin to a loss of language; and even though you came out of it with a deep need to talk about it and to talk it out, you also felt that language was somehow incommensurate with it. What you felt as a “disconnection” with the class was, precisely, an experience of suspension: a suspension, that is, of the knowledge that had been acquired in the class: you feel that you have lost it. But you are going to find it again. I will suggest it is this loss Celan precisely talks about, this loss that we have all been somehow made to live. You can now, perhaps, relate to this loss more immediately, more viscerally, when you hear the poet say that language was “all that remained.” Here again is Celan’s language, that remains: lost and regained again through the videotape experience.

Within reach, close and not lost, there remained, in the midst of the losses, this one thing: language.

This, the language, was not lost but remained, yes, in spite of everything. But it had to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through a frightful falling mute, pass through the thousand darknesses of death-bringing speech. It passed through and yielded no words for what was happening—but it went through those happenings. Went through and could enter into the light of day again, “enriched” by all that. (see Felstiner, 1982, 23)

This, I would suggest, is also what has happened now precisely to the language of the class: it passed through its own answerlessness.

Another possible response to the answerlessness through which the class is passing now, can be given in the context of our thought about the significance of testimony. You remember the very impressive moment in the first videotape, where the woman-survivor speaks about her husband whom she lost during the war, but with whom she reunited after liberation. As if to explain the necessity—and the significance—of this miraculous and improbable reunion, she says: “He knew who I was.” You will remember Dr. Laub’s comment right after we viewed the tape, suggesting, with elliptical abruptness, that “who she was was precisely her testimony.” “Who she was,” in other words, is here implicitly expressed by the survivor as a radical and irretrievable loss, one of the most devastating losses—dispossessions—inflicted by the Holocaust, one of those “answerlessnesses,” of those answerless questions, through which the Holocaust inexorably made one pass. The narrator herself does not know any longer who she was, except through her testimony. This knowledge or self-knowledge is neither a given before the testimony nor a residual substantial knowledge consequential to it. In itself, this knowledge does not exist, it can only happen through the testimony: it cannot be separated from it. It can only unfold itself in the process of testifying, but it can never become a substance that can be possessed by either speaker or listener, outside of this dialogic process. In its performative aspect, the testimony, in this way, can be thought of as a sort of signature. And I would suggest, now, that this signatory value of the testimony is engaging in exactly a reverse process to the Nazi process—and endeavor—of standardization of the people sent to death. What constitutes the outrage of the Holocaust—the very essence of erasure and annihilation—is not so much death in itself, as the more obscene fact that death itself does not make any difference, the fact that death is radically indifferent: everyone is leveled off, people die as numbers, not as proper names. In contrast to this leveling, to testify is to engage, precisely, in the process of re-finding one’s own proper name, one’s signature.
As the next step in the course, I want to ask you to write a paper for next week. I would like you to think about this paper in relation with, and as a function of, the timing of this act of writing. The writing is designed to be, in other words, an essential element of your working through this experience. And as such, it needs precisely to encroach on your reactions to the first screening session. Many of you, indeed, quite literally said that you felt you did not count after the first session, that, had you been there in the camps, you are certain that you would have died.

And I am inviting you now to testify to that experience, so as to accept the obligation—and the right—to repossess yourselves, to take, in other words, the chance to sign, the chance to count.

I invite you thus to write a paper on your experience of the testimony, and on your experience of the class. To do that, you need to think of the Holocaust videotapes in the context of the significance of the entire course, and in relation to the other texts we studied. I want you to work on precisely what you said was so difficult for you to achieve: you felt a disconnection, and I want you to look, on the contrary, for the connections. What has this experience taught you in the end? What did it change in your perception of those other texts? What difference did it make in your global perception of the class?

What I am suggesting is, in other words, that you view this paper as your testimony to this course. I admit that it would be a precarious testimony: I know you feel you are not ready. But perhaps the testimony has to be precarious, perhaps there is no other way. I wish to remind you of the fact that the writers we have read also, and quite often, give expression to the feeling that their testimony is precarious. Mallarmé, you will remember, says: "Il convient d’en parler déjà," "it is appropriate to talk about it now already"—

It is appropriate . . . to talk about it now already, much like an invited traveler who, without delay, in breathless gaps, discharges himself of the testimony of an accident known, and pursuing him, . . .

Should I stop here, and where do I get the feeling that I have come relatively to a subject vaster and perhaps to myself unknown—vaster than this or that innovation of rites or rhymes; in order to attempt to reach this subject, if not to treat it. (Mallarmé, 1945, 643–44)

Celan in turn puts an emphasis on the precocity of testimony:

I have gotten ahead of myself (not far enough, I know). (Celan, 1978, 33)

But after all, literature, too, often shoots ahead of us. La poésie, elle aussi, brûle nos étapes. (ibid., 34)

I am inviting you, in turn, to "shoot ahead of yourselves" precisely in this way and to give, in turn, your precious testimony.

Upon reading the final paper submitted by the students a few weeks later, I realized that the crisis, in effect, had been worked through and overcome and that a resolution had been reached, both on an intellectual and on a vital level. The written work the class had finally submitted turned out to be an amazingly articulate, reflective, and profound statement of the trauma they had gone through and of the significance of their assuming the position of the witness.

VIII

PEDAGOGICAL TRANSVALUATION

I have since had the occasion—and the time—to reflect upon what I have learned from that class and to attempt to think out and rethink the nature of what took me then so completely by surprise. Because what happened then happened as an accident—an unpredictable vicissitude of teaching—without the full control of my deliberate and conscious understanding, I am recounting it (to borrow Mallarmé's words once again), as my own testimony to an accident. And yet, I would submit that the very singularity, the very idiosyncrasy both of the accident and of my testimony to it (like the idiosyncratic and yet archetypal status of the Irma dream) comprises a generic story, and the validity of a generic pedagogical event and thus of a generic lesson.

I would venture to propose, today, as the accidental and yet generally valid lesson I have learned from that class, that teaching in itself, teaching as such, takes place precisely only through a crisis; if teaching does not hit upon some sort of crisis, if it does not encounter either the vulnerability or the explosiveness of an (explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps not truly taught; it has perhaps passed on some facts, passed on some information and some documents, with which the students or the audience—the recipients—can for instance do what people during the occurrence of the Holocaust precisely did with information that kept coming forth but that no one could recognize, and that no one could therefore truly learn, read or put to use.

Looking back at the experience of that class, I therefore think that my
job as teacher, paradoxical as it may sound, was in fact that of creating in the class the highest state of crisis that it could withstand, without "driving the students crazy," without compromising the students' bounds.

THE EVENT OF TEACHING

In the era of the Holocaust, of Hiroshima, of Vietnam—in the age of testimony—teaching, I would venture to suggest, must in turn testify, make something happen, and not just transmit a passive knowledge, pass on information that is preconceived, substantiated, believed to be known in advance, misguidedly believed, that is, to be (exclusively) a given.

There is a parallel between this kind of teaching (in its reliance on the testimonial process) and psychoanalysis (in its reliance on the psychoanalytic process), insofar as both this teaching and psychoanalysis have, precisely, to live through a crisis. Both are called upon to be performative, and not just cognitive, insofar as they both strive to produce, and to enable, change. Both this kind of teaching and psychoanalysis are interested not merely in new information, but, primarily, in the capacity of their recipients to transform themselves in function of the newness of that information.

In the age of testimony, and in view of contemporary history, I want my students to be able to receive information that is dissonant, and not just congruent, with everything that they have learned beforehand. Testimonial teaching fosters the capacity to witness something that may be surprising, cognitively dissonant. The surprise implies the crisis. Testimony cannot be authentic without that crisis, which has to break and to transvaluate, precisely, previous categories, and previous frames of reference. "The poem," writes Celan, "takes its position at the edge of itself" (1978). In a post-traumatic age, I would suggest that teaching, equally, should take its position at the edge of itself, at the edge of its conventional conception.

As far as the great literary subjects are concerned, teaching must itself be viewed not merely as transmitting, but as accessing: as accessing the crisis or the critical dimension which, I will propose, is inherent in the literary subjects. Each great subject has a turning point contained within it, and that turning point has to be met. The question for the teacher is, then, on the one hand, how to access, how not to foreclose the crisis, and, on the other hand, how to contain it, how much crisis can the class sustain?

It is the teacher's task to recontextualize the crisis and to put it back into perspective, to relate the present to the past and to the future and to thus reintegrate the crisis in a transformed frame of meaning.

TEACHING AS TESTIMONY

In much the same way as psychoanalysts, in their practice of dream interpretation, will register as literally as they can the manifest dream content and the incoherent flow of dream associations, so did I take down, word by word, the emotional upheaval of my students' statements and the spectrum both of their responses and of their literal expressions. This documentation and this written record served as the material basis upon which interpretation—in the guise of a returned testimony—could indeed begin to be articulated.

In much the same way as the psychoanalyst serves as witness to the story of the patient, which he then interprets and puts together, so did I return to the students—in their own words—the narrative I had compiled and formed of their own reactions. When the story of the class—the story I am telling now—was for the first time, thus, narrated to the class itself in its final session, its very telling was a "crisis intervention." I lived the crisis with them, testified to it and made them testify to it. My own testimony to the class, which echoed their reactions, returning to them the expressions of their shock, their trauma, and their disarray, bore witness nonetheless to the important fact that their experience, incoherent though it seemed, made sense, and that it mattered. My testimony was thus both an echo and a return of significance, both a repetition and an affirmation of the double fact that their response was meaningful, and that it counted.

In working through the crisis that broke the framework of the course, the dynamics of the class and the practice of my teaching exceeded, thus, the mere concept of the testimony as I had initially devised it and set out to teach it. What was first conceived as a theory of testimony got unwittingly enacted, had become itself not theory, but an event of life: of life itself as the perpetual necessity—and the perpetual predicament—of a learning that in fact can never end.

EPILOGUE

In conclusion, I would like to return to my students' words and to quote two excerpts from two papers that were written as the last assignment of the class, both to illustrate the way in which the students met the challenge of emerging from the crisis, and to highlight the words and the significance that they in turn returned to me.

The first excerpt, written by a Chinese woman, reflects on the testimony of the child survivor.
The testifier seemed to be a man of great compassion. He wondered aloud what sorts of testimony one leaves to one’s children, when one does not confront the past. I thought at first, what sorts of burdens will I pass on to my children, in the unlikely event that I have any. And then, I thought of my father, who lived through the Chinese Civil War, and four years of incarceration as a political prisoner on the Island of Taiwan. What sorts of burdens has he passed on to me?...

In an odd sort of way, I feel a strange sort of collectivity has been formed in the class. This, of course, is a most frightening thing. As I mentioned above, my mode of interaction with those whom I do not know, has always been one of radical differentiation, rather than of collectivization. My autonomy has been rendered precarious, even fragile. Somehow, though, I have managed to survive, whole and a bit fragmented at the same time; the same, but decidedly altered. Perhaps this final paper can only be testimony to that simple fact, that simple event.

The second paper was, in contrast, written by a man (a man who—I might mention in parenthesis—was not Jewish).

Viewing the Holocaust testimony was not for me initially catastrophic—so much of the historical coverage of it functions to empty it from its horror. Yet, in the week that followed the first screening, and throughout the remainder of the class, I felt increasingly implicated in the pain of the testimony, which found a particular reverberation in my own life.

Literature has become for me the site of my own stammering. Literature, as that which can sensitively bear witness to the Holocaust, gives me a voice, a right, and a necessity to survive. Yet, I cannot discount the literature which in the dark awakens the screams, which opens the wounds, and which makes me want to fall silent. Caught by two contradictory wishes at once, to speak or not to speak, I can only stammer. Literature, for me, in these moments, has had a performative value: my life has suffered a burden, undergone a transference of pain. If I am to continue reading, I must, like David Copperfield, read as if for life.

Notes

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1. ‘J’apparai en effet des nouvelles. Les plus surprenantes. Même cas ne se vit encore. Ils ont touché au vers. Il convient d’en parler déjà, ainsi qu’un invité voyageur

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