1 The past remembered

> The pages before you are segments of contemplation and memory. Memory is elusive and selective: it holds onto what it chooses to hold on to . . . Very like a dream, memory takes specific details out of the viscous flow of events – sometimes tiny, seemingly insignificant details – stores them deeply away, and at certain times brings them to the surface. Like a dream, memory also tries to imbue events with some meaning . . . Memory and imagination sometimes dwell together . . . memory and oblivion, the sense of chaos and impotence on one side and the desire for a meaningful life on the other.[1]
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> Aharon Appelfeld, *The Story of a Life*

The Russian writer Andrei Vosnesensky spoke of what he called a nostalgia for the present. For a man who had escaped repression, there was nothing to yearn for, no past to be burnished by memory. Instead, he projected himself forward, already imagining looking back on himself reborn. The idea of Eden offers a powerful metaphor of innocent beginnings, recapitulating, as it does, the processes of human development from child to adult, knowledge and sin becoming coterminous. Yet there are those born with the taste of the apple already in their infant mouths or at least those whose memories will not permit the notion of a paradise lost.

This book began with a desire to celebrate the work of W. G. Sebald, a friend and colleague. Max, as he was known to his friends, began writing late. As an academic he became discontented with the self-denying ordinances of his profession, the restrictions of

an approach that seemed to militate against the imagination. He began, instead, to create works that defy precise definition. He was inclined to call them fictions but in truth they were a blend of autobiography, biography, literary criticism, intellectual history and much more. Fact and invention jostled one another. Borders of all kinds were dissolved. They were lyrical, playful, touched with melancholy. He had something of the romantic's interest in decay and dissolution, in ephemerality. His were books in part concerned with memory, its necessity, its unreliability, its generative power. In his work, memory has a moral force even as it is a mechanism for exploration, the source of reproach, a means of resurrecting the dead. It is also the cause of a certain vertigo as individual and nation stare down the vortex of time.

Like Vladimir Nabokov, of whom he was an admirer, he was aware that memory changes with place and language, drawing attention to the autobiography of a writer whose national identity was itself instructively ambiguous. An early paragraph from that work by Nabokov, significantly entitled *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, expresses precisely the awareness of death that would lace its way through Sebald's writing, as it does of the ironies which that writing would delineate with a quiet humour.

> The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness. Although the two are identical twins, man, as a rule, views that prenatal abyss with more calm than the one he is heading for (at some forty-five hundred heartbeats an hour). I know, however, of a young chronophobiac who experienced something like panic when looking for the first time at homemade movies that had been taken a few weeks before his birth. He saw a world that was practically unchanged – the same house, the same people – and then realized that he did not exist there at all and that nobody mourned his absence. He caught a glimpse of his mother waving from an upstairs window, and that unfamiliar gesture disturbed him, as if it were some mysterious farewell. But what particularly frightened him was the sight of a brand-new baby carriage standing

> there on the porch, with the smug, encroaching air of a coffin; even that was empty, as if, in the reverse course of events, his very bones had disintegrated.[2]

Part of *Speak, Memory* was first written in French. It was then translated into Russian, 'the amnesiac defects of the original, [the] domains of dimness' (9) being rectified and flooded with new light, before being translated back into English. 'Copious' additions and changes were introduced at this stage. Nabokov lived, it seemed, a different life in different languages. In seeking to describe this process he turned, unsurprisingly, to the figure of the butterfly. 'This re-Englishing of a Russian re-version of what had been an English re-telling of Russian memories in the first place, proved to be a diabolical task, but some consolation was given me by the thought that such multiple metamorphosis, familiar to butterflies, had not been tried by any human before' (10).

He was dealing, he explained, with 'the anomalies of memory', of which he was both 'possessor and victim', but it was clear that he was dealing with a good deal more than that. He was seeking to engage a self translated from language to language with, seemingly, different memories inhabiting those different languages, moments located in contrasting cultures with contrasting, if overlapping, histories. Even time was unstable since east and west located themselves according to different calendars. 'By the old style I was born on 10 April, at daybreak in the last year of the last century, and that was (if I could have been whisked across the border at once) 22 April in, say, Germany.' He travelled, though, with a passport which registered his birth on neither date. He had, he explained, 'journeyed back in thought – with thought hopelessly tapering off as I went – to remote regions where I groped for some secret outlet only to discover that the prison of time is spherical and without exits.' Initially, he explains, he 'was unaware that time, so boundless at first blush, was a prison' (18), and that, perhaps, is the starting point and destination of the autobiography as a form. It is a journey in search of a purpose.

He is not concerned to locate a primal trauma, rejecting, as he does, the 'medieval world of Freud' with its 'bitter little embryos

spying . . . upon the love life of their parents'. Instead, he looks down from his 'present ridge of remote, isolated, almost uninhabited time', at moments when he revelled in sharing existence, in time, with others, conscious that 'the first creatures on earth to become aware of time were also the first creatures to smile' (19).

In telling his story, however, there were not only omissions, conscious and otherwise, translations, between languages, cultures and histories, between remembered older selves and present consciousness, but erasures. To protect others, names were changed. His autobiography is crafted, as few lives are. Serendipity assumes the shape of purpose; the arbitrary becomes part of a design. Memory is selective and selected, honed over time, modified to serve the purpose of plot, the plot of a life which can only be retrospective.

Max Sebald also moved between countries and languages. At a crucial stage in *Vertigo* he (or his narrator) even loses his passport and with it a clear sense of national identity. He, too, seems to float in time, the past as real and compelling as the present which, indeed, is oddly attenuated. He was an immigrant and not an exile and yet there were aspects of his own original society that disturbed him and prevented his permanent return. He lived in England for more than thirty years but wrote in German. There were, indeed, different memories back in a country whose own memories seemed to him occluded. There were absences that eventually he felt obliged to fill, silences he felt impelled to break. And though his work was by no means all focussed on such concerns, it is nonetheless true that he was increasingly pulled, in memory and present concern, towards the question of the Jews, a principal absence in his life and the centre of troubling personal and national concerns. Born in the final year of the Second World War, he became increasingly aware of discontinuities, of the damage done even to language in the Germany of his birth, though there were others more uncompromising than he.

George Steiner spoke of the deforming influence of Nazism on language, a deformation, he suggests, which hardly ended with the war. Indeed, it seemed to him that the language was already corrupted by ponderousness and an academicism that made it vulnerable to such a crude assault. The German language, he suggested, was no

longer lived, merely spoken. It cannot, he insisted, 'be a mere accident that the essentially philological structure of German education yielded such loyal servants to Prussia and the Nazi Reich'.[3] There was, he acknowledged, a counter-current in the work of George Grosz, Bertolt Brecht and Thomas Mann, who shocked the language into different shapes. Rilke, Kafka, Musil all reached out along the shimmering international path of modernism. But to Steiner this offered little respite. What had followed was more than a linguistic reversion for, and here Steiner is absolute, 'the German language was not innocent of the horrors of Nazism. It is not merely that a Hitler, a Goebbels, and a Himmler happened to speak German. Nazism found in the language precisely what it needed to give voice to its savagery.' Hitler, Steiner suggests, 'heard inside his native tongue the latent hysteria, the confusion, the quality of hypnotic trance' (210). He sensed in German another music than that of Goethe, Heine and Mann; 'a rasping cadence, half nebulous jargon, half obscenity. And instead of turning away in nauseated disbelief, the German people gave massive echo to the man's bellowing. It bellowed back out of a million throats and smashed-down boots' (211). He quotes Klaus Mann as asking, 'can it be that Hitler has polluted the language of Nietzsche and Hölderlin?' (212). Unsurprisingly, his answer is 'It can.'

Conceding that Hitler would have found reservoirs of venom and moral illiteracy in any language, in Germany, he insists, 'they were near the surface of common speech'. After all, a 'language in which one can write the ''Horst Wessel Lied'' is ready to give hell a native tongue' (211). What happened under the Third Reich, he suggests, was not silence but wholly serviceable and practical words with which the Nazis were entirely content to address their chosen victims and to record the details of their genocide. The Jews were 'vermin' whose eradication was thus sanctioned at the level of language. There was a coded word for the transports which took them to their deaths as there was for the liquidations themselves, but for the most part they were willing for their words to be more transparent. The poet Paul Celan, who had escaped shooting by the SS in Romania but suffered two years forced labour, wrote in a German which he confessed had had to 'pass through the thousand

darknesses of death-bringing speech',[4] Steiner suggesting that he spoke German as if it were a foreign language.

Nor was culture a defence, and here was the source of a deep anxiety. For Matthew Arnold it was a protection against anarchy. For the Nazis it was enrolled in the cause of anarchy. In *Auschwitz*, Peter Barnes's 1978 play, a character recalls that 'Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler himself decreed that our first complex should be built in the forest outside Weimar, the very seat of German classical tradition. Didn't he leave Goethe's famous oak tree standing there in the middle of the compound and construct the ramps, and block houses around it? You see, even in times like these, in places like that, for people like them, German culture is made available to all. We think transcendentally. We raise our eyes to the hills; the soul, the soul, the German soul!'[5]

The Jews were not permitted to have a history. Their religion existed only to be mocked, its self-evident failure to protect them a further mark of their absurdity. Meanwhile, the language which specified the instruments of torture, the logistical complexities, swirled around the vortex of an inhumanity so profound as to defy articulation. There was a bureaucratic language drained of pain, abstracted from the living flesh, but this was designed precisely to bear no organic load, no history outside of its own reflexive exigencies. It carried no memories but, filed away, would provide the skeletal meaning of actions otherwise denied by those few called to account for their actions despite their apparent success in burrowing down into a postwar Germany concerned only to reconstruct.

What to do, however, when language is compromised? 'Should a German writer', asked Thomas Mann, 'made responsible through his habitual use of language, remain silent, quite silent, in the face of all the irreparable evil which has been committed daily, and is being committed in my country, against body, soul and spirit, against justice and truth, against men and man?' (214). The answer was clearly, no. Yet he could ask and answer that question because he, in common with so many other German writers, was in exile, though the very fact of exile threatened both memory and language, now detached from the reality it had once expressed. Others, such as Walter Benjamin and Stefan Zweig, chose a radical silence, committing suicide. Sebald was

aware of those others who had been drawn to suicide, including Jean Améry, whom he admired and about whom he wrote.

Aharon Appelfeld speaks of another kind of silence:

> we didn't speak during the war. It was as though every disaster defied utterance: there was nothing to say … In the ghetto and in the camp, only people who had lost their minds talked, explained, or tried to persuade. Those who were sane didn't speak … I've carried with me my mistrust of words from those years. A fluent stream of words awakens suspicion within me. I prefer stuttering, for in stuttering I hear the friction and the disquiet, the effort to purge impurities from the words, the desire to offer something from inside you. Smooth, fluent sentences leave me with a feeling of uncleanness, of order that hides emptiness. (102–3)

There is a chain of memory (Freud's phrase) in Sebald's work, his own, along with that of others, real and fictional, and he travels along that chain, reaching back into the past through photographs, his own recovered youth, and through writers, writers in particular, though by no means exclusively, drawn to the plight of the Jews. I have followed him, writing, as he did, about Rolf Hochhuth and Peter Weiss (and Arthur Miller who attended the same Auschwitz trials as Weiss and who Sebald came briefly to know at the end of his life), as about Améry. But Améry, in turn, led to Primo Levi, while Levi led to another survivor of Auschwitz, Elie Wiesel. These had shared a plight, as they had with a young woman who had thought herself secure only to find herself in that anus mundi, the name given to Auschwitz by a contemptuous German officer. Her name was Anne Frank.

And so the chain of memory extends. Nor does it end there. For others also sought to use their memories or, indeed, their very identities, to reach back to an event whose significance, so long denied, now seemed a key to understanding history and human possibilities. This book, then, is a meditation on memory, on the ways in which memory has operated in the work of writers for whom the Holocaust was a defining event. But it is also an exploration of the ways in which fiction and drama have attempted to approach a subject so resistant to the imagination.

For Elie Wiesel, a novel about Auschwitz was either not a novel or not about Auschwitz. Irving Howe insisted that the Holocaust was not, essentially, a dramatic subject: 'Of those conflicts between wills, those inner clashes of belief and wrenchings of desire, those enactments of passion, all of which make up our sense of the dramatic, there can be little in the course of a fiction focused mainly on the mass exterminations.'[6] As Aharon Appelfeld observed of the 1950s when he began to write, 'What had been written about World War II had been mainly testimonies and accounts that had been deemed authentic expressions; literature was considered a fabrication' (105). Others felt no such inhibition. Indeed, there were even those who would seek to appropriate the lives and experiences of those who had known the reality of the camps, even if the truths they offered were defined by the particularities of their experience, survivors of places from which no one had been supposed to escape alive.

There was, of course, drama, and other entertainments, within the ghettos and, indeed, the camps themselves, often, though not invariably, at the behest of those in command. Those who worked away to forge British banknotes as part of a plan to destabilise the economy took time out for a regular cabaret which they confessed to enjoying as much as the guards. In Sweden, in 1943, Nelly Sachs, who escaped from Berlin in 1940, set herself to write *Eli: A Mystery Play of the Sufferings of Israel*, in which a voice is given to the chimneys through which the smoke of the dead passed. To write so soon was unusual. It was 1967 before Liliane Atlan, whose brother was sent to Auschwitz and who herself survived the war years in hiding, wrote *Mister Fugue or Earth Sick*, later creating *Un Opéra pour Terezin*. It was plainly possible to address the subject of the Holocaust. The question was to what effect?

A nine-year-old girl in the concentration camp at Majdanek secreted a piece of paper, on which she had written a verse, under the sole of her shoe, along with instructions as to the tune to which it was to be sung. In Eva Hoffman's translation it reads:

There was once a little Elźunia,
She's dying all alone now.

The past remembered

For her daddy's in Majdanek,
Her mummy in Auschwitz-Birkenau.[7]

The tense of the first line suggests that she was already projecting a future in which she herself would no longer exist, a future to which she wished to bequeath her truth. She was a witness to something more than her own desolation.

Zalmen Gradowski, a member of the Auschwitz *Sonderkommando*, buried his diary near the crematoria at Birkenau shortly before his death. He, too, could imagine the future he would not live to see and understood the need to bear witness. That imagination was his only victory. At a time when all the evidence was of the total victory of those who had set themselves to liquidate an entire race, he and others like him sustained the idea of another world in which there would be those anxious for the truth, ready to initiate justice. Others secreted messages for the future they would never see in sealed bottles and jars which they placed amidst the pits of human ashes in the belief, or perhaps simply the desperate wager, that they would one day be disinterred. Their memories were preserved against a tomorrow in which they should have ceased to believe. Gradowski's diary was later discovered. The justice was long delayed and deeply imperfect.

When Claude Lanzmann set out to capture the past in his film *Shoah*, he did so less through memory than by taking those who had experienced it and placing them in the world they thought to have escaped. He distrusted memory. He was concerned to stage a drama. As he explained, 'The film is not made with memories; I knew that immediately. Memory horrifies me. Memory is weak. The film is the abolition of all distance between the past and the present; I relived this history in the present.'[8] What he shows is real enough, even as it is contrived and, whatever he says, it is suffused with memories, but memory alone is insufficient for him. It lacks the immediacy of the present suffering which he sets himself to orchestrate, taking survivors back to the place where they suffered. Yet any mediation in such a context breeds suspicion, still more any attempt to imaginatively recreate that past, the imagination being both inadequate and suspect. As Dominick LaCapra observes, 'For both

survivors and those born later, the imagination may prove superfluous, exhausted, or out of place with respect to limit-events; even their allegorical treatment, transformation, or reduction in scale poses difficult, perhaps intractable, problems of tact and judgement' (181). Somehow, the unadorned fact seems to carry authenticity, moral authority, but are memories ever truly unadorned more especially when they are retrieved and articulated to serve a purpose?

Then again, since these are memories of trauma, there is another degree of problem. Dominick LaCapra has spoken of 'the difficulties of memory with respect to traumatic events that are invested with devastating phantasms' and which 'generate anxiety-ridden uncertainties, create disorienting holes in experience' (183), while insisting that much can still be reconstructed subsequently. Aharon Appelfeld, author of *The Story of a Life*, in which he describes his experience as a child in the Ukraine, his parents murdered by the Nazis, observes that 'Profound experience, I've already learned, is easily distorted.' He still, he confesses, had not 'found the words to give voice to those intense scars on my memory' (50).

There is an etiquette for approaching the past. A certain respect, if not a protocol, is required along with an acknowledgement that its shape shifts under the pressure of attention. A rear-view mirror, as drivers are warned, can make the calculation of distance hard to achieve. There is risk of spatial and temporal distortion. There is a tide running. A memory frequently invoked wears smooth like a pebble on the foreshore tumbled by each incurving wave until it seems a work of art, inviolable, complete. Remembering remembering risks an hermetic reflexiveness. As Michael Frayn has suggested, memories 'are like legends. They take particular form when they are told – and when they are told again they are made incarnate in a different body.'[9] Memories are stories and stories have their own history. As Primo Levi said of his own story of Auschwitz-Monowitz, *If This is a Man*, 'I've constructed a sort of legend around that book, that I wrote it on impulse, that I wrote it without reflecting at all ... Now that I think about it, I can see that this book is full of literature, literature absorbed through the skin, even while I was rejecting it.'[10] As he confessed of his second book, *The Truce*, which details his return after his time in Auschwitz, 'It tells the