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Geoffrey Hartman, interviewed by Xie Qiong

Geoffrey Hartman is Emeritus Professor of Comparative Literature at Yale (and connected to Cambridge through the Clark Lectures of 1983). He has published mainly on issues of literary interpretation, starting with *The Unmediated Vision* (1954), *Wordsworth* (1964), *Beyond Formalism* (1970) and *The Fate of Reading* (1976). Later books include *Criticism in the Wilderness* (1980), contrasting Anglo-American and Continental literary study, *Literature/Derrida/Philosophy* (1981), *The Fateful Question of Culture* (1997), and works on cultural and media criticism such as *Scars of the Spirit* (2002). In the 1980s he also turned to issues of Holocaust remembrance, editing *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective* (1986), and exploring, among other themes, oral history witnessing in *The Longest Shadow* (1996). His interest in trauma and its literary implication began as early as the writings on Wordsworth but intensified with the recording of memory-work comprising oral and written testimony in our genocidal era. He published the *Geoffrey Hartman Reader* in 2004 and an intellectual memoir *A Scholar's Tale* in 2007. *The Third Pillar*, assembling his essays on the Jewish tradition, including its major interpretive method of Midrash, has just been published by the University of Pennsylvania Press.

Xie Qiong, a PhD candidate in the Department of Chinese at Peking University, China, is presently a Visiting Fellow at Harvard-Yenching Institute. She works on modern and contemporary Chinese Literature. She received her BA and MA degrees in Korean language and literature at Peking University and an MA degree in literary studies at Leiden University, Netherlands. She is currently working on the representation of rape in modern and contemporary Chinese literature. Her aim is to examine how rape, a traumatic and inexpressible experience, was represented, misrepresented and manipulated in different types of discourse, such as wartime literature and class struggle literature. Her future ambition is to investigate the literary representation of women's wartime experience in China, Korea and Japan in the 20th century.

This interview is intended to introduce Geoffrey Hartman's and other scholars' thoughts and research in trauma studies to the

Chinese reading public, and to open a new space for discussion in Chinese academia on the collective traumas China has gone through in the 20th Century. A translation of the interview was published in the Chinese academic journal *Literature and Art Forum* earlier this year.

I. Theory of Trauma and the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies

Xie Qiong: Your contribution to the Deconstruction School has great influence upon literary studies in China since the 1990s. To many Chinese scholars and critics, Deconstruction, as a sophisticated critical practice, can help them find a new orientation radically different from a socialist realism that has long been supported by the government. However, their understanding of your work has rarely gone beyond Deconstruction. Could you briefly talk about your major concerns after Deconstruction?

Geoffrey Hartman: If you ask me to say something of what comes after Deconstruction, I first would have to talk about Deconstruction itself. That would take too much time, especially since I don't know what goes under the name of Deconstruction in China now. One of my previous colleagues Hillis Miller, who, I think, is well known in China, may have already consolidated an image of Deconstruction, but it probably still remains open to interpretation. I would prefer to concentrate on your interest in trauma studies.

XQ: What I know is that trauma studies as well as the establishment of the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale are part of your major work in the 1980s and 1990s.

GH: Well, it is relevant that you talk about the archive and the founding of the archive in 1980. You seem to use that as a date—an important dating—for your own thinking.

XQ: Yes, in some sense. I consider the video archive a starting point for later interdisciplinary studies in trauma in the US in the 1980s and 1990s, and I wonder, when you and colleagues began to establish the Archive, what your vision was for its impact upon future studies on trauma and the Holocaust?

GH: Before I continue let me comment on the curious need to date firmly the origins of an important movement. You chose 1980 and the founding of the Yale Archive. Such dating, I have speculated, is itself the faint residue of a psychic need to integrate a surprising turn of events by means of a neutralizing format. Quite effectively, as if trauma itself could be at once fixating and normalized, such date-determination divides before and after in a decisive, epochal way. Yet a careful analysis tends to show that these caesura-like events are always overdetermined. What I want to say initially, therefore, is that the founding of the archive around 1980 came out of a civic initiative: the 'Holocaust Survivors Film Project', inspired by Laurel Vlock, a television interviewer, and Dori Laub, a survivor and Yale psychiatrist. This enterprise received the strong support of a group of survivors in Greater New Haven (where Yale is situated) increasingly ready to tell their story, especially after their disappointment with the made-for-TV series 'Holocaust' (1978). There was as well the recognition by the founders of the Archive that the audiovisual medium of TV would be an important pedagogical resource in making testimonies about the Holocaust available.

The issue of trauma studies was not at all relevant to the Archive's founding but was associated with it later. It wasn't the case that we were immersed in trauma studies and saw a big opportunity. No. The founding of the Archive really had to do with the wishes of the Holocaust survivors to be interviewed after a long silence. Not a total silence by any means. But for many it had been difficult to talk, and even when they did speak they were often told "yes, how terrible, but it's best now to forget and get on with your life".

The trauma issue came up only in one respect: our protocol for interviewing. Understanding that the survivors had undergone, and often for a long time, terrible experiences, we chose a special 'open' protocol of questioning. Dori Laub helped us most to adopt that kind of

protocol. Before that time, during years in which the primary motivation of researchers was to obtain data on the perpetrators and the evolution of the Holocaust, you would pepper interviewees with very specific questions, and use for that purpose a prepared questionnaire type of interview. But we said: no questionnaire type of interview. At this point, 1980, after years of research, the historians and political scientists already know many of the important details, so we don't have to follow that path—at least not primarily. What must be done then, what would the survivors want us to do?

The survivors wanted to describe the actuality of their "death immersion" (as Lawrence Langer calls it[1]), their day-to-day struggle, actions, dilemmas, and how they come to terms with their memories. So we devised an interview focusing on their personal experience, and stipulated that the interviewers would not take the initiative away from those testifying: the interviewers were there to listen and encourage. There was no questionnaire, just an agreement that we would listen attentively and create an atmosphere in which even traumatic memories could surface. The major underlying aim became that of freeing the survivors' memories, and allowing the truest picture of daily life and death to emerge.

Trauma studies, then, did not influence directly the establishment and work of the Yale archive in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet our success in recording and preserving a significant corpus of unconstrained, freely offered witness accounts provided an impetus. To borrow a concept from Cathy Caruth's influential book on trauma: the Yale project enabled several thousands of testimony givers to reclaim their unclaimed experience.[2] Actually we found to our surprise that after thirty-five and more years the 'traumatic' memories of the survivors were astonishingly clear, often with much detail. I put 'traumatic' in quotes because while there were stark and terrible episodes singled out in the testimonies, the daily conditions of life and death in the camps and hiding places made trauma, the need to live with it, despite it, normative. So the survivors

1 Langer wrote the first sustained analysis of the testimonies in the Yale archive. See his *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991).
2 See Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

were motivated to speak not only about the persecution itself, but also about their first notice of anti-Semitic incidents, and in the aftermath of their imprisonment about problems encountered while striving to return to ordinary social and family life.

Why did they agree, willingly recording their experiences around this time? For several reasons. They did not want to leave their story in the hands of Hollywood or proxy narrators; also, they were settled and began to feel almost safe; and their children, post-war children, now grown-up, were starting their own families and asking questions more insistently. They sensed their parents' experiences becoming a 'legacy', not just a saddening burden. Many, moreover, as I have mentioned, were very upset at the 1978 film, because for them "this is not what we've gone through. It's too simplified and sanitized. So we'd better not let them take away our witness. We ourselves want to tell the story now." A further motivating factor was increased activity on the part of 'revisionists' who denied that the Holocaust had happened, or denied the extent of Jewish suffering and losses. Before the Yale Archive project, there were quite a few audio projects, but I think basically we initiated the first large-scale, fully planned video testimony effort, housed and preserved in a great university's Library, and with an archivist to guide students and visiting scholars. So the archive proved valuable for these purposes, and also certainly helped trauma studies, even though it had no particular trauma theory behind it.

Afterwards, of course, Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman wrote their book on the intricate relation of testimony and trauma,[3] and Cathy Caruth wrote her book, and so on; matters developed according to their own rhythm.

I would be careful, then, about giving the impression that we had a 'theory' or 'vision'. We really had no theory. We learnt as we went along. Nevertheless, we did collect a body of first-person oral testimonies with the potential of broadening prevalent conceptions of history writing (oral history was not popular among most historians we consulted),

3 Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York, NY and London: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1992).

as well as bringing literary studies into closer contact with basically nonliterary, colloquial forms of narrative self-expression. The affective strength of an emerging communicative genre, the survivor testimony, presaged if not a vision then a revision of literary and media studies in the light of something mainly spontaneous, vernacular, demotic, and which otherwise would rarely have been preserved; certainly not in so lively a manner. In this case, the collective element, the populist nature of an interviewing project available to all survivors, refugees, and bystander witnesses, did not dilute the intensely individual nature of the speech act transmitted by each testimony. Media witnessing (as it is beginning to be called) then built up a wealth of discussion, 'theory' or not, about the outreach and communicativeness of the audiovisual testimony.

XQ: When Dori Laub, Shoshana Felman and Cathy Caruth began to establish their own theories on trauma, were they greatly inspired by this video archive?

GH: Certainly Dori Laub was. Dori Laub was the principal here. And through Dori Laub Shoshana Felman. As to Cathy Caruth—you should really interview her. There was another factor that entered in Dori Laub's case, which was that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was finally being recognized, together with its bearing on the experience of veterans of the Vietnam War. That issue had come strongly to the fore by 1980. If we must seek an origin to trauma studies in the US, we would have to include it.[4] I know Dori Laub was interested in post-traumatic stress generally. But we did not encourage direct psychoanalytical questions. We made it clear to the interviewers that this was not a psychoanalytic interview, and partly because the survivors themselves wouldn't want that. They wouldn't want to be subjects of a psychoanalytic inquiry. But we realized, of course, that we were gathering a documentation that would have psychological as well as historical and sociological value.

4 Recognition of PTSD in the 70s and 80s mainly resulted from studies on the psychological trauma experienced by Vietnam War veterans.

XQ: What do you think of the role of the interviewer? A listener, a stimulator, or even, later on, an interpreter of what they heard from the survivor?

GH: All of the above. The role of the interviewers is manifold. Primarily, of course, it is to support the survivor witnesses during the interviewing process. I think you recognize that this kind of interview is not simply a matter of collecting information. Having the survivors recall extreme experiences is sensitive and entails a certain risk. You stimulate memories and so one thing to be anxious about is sleep disturbance afterwards. To our surprise there was relatively little sleep disturbance. Perhaps because these survivors had volunteered, and our non-pressured way of interviewing gave them a sympathetic addressee, a person to talk with.

Moreover, *oral* testifying proved essential because so many of them had lost years of education during the war and the persecution. And when, as displaced persons, they came to America or other countries, many had still to learn a new language and establish themselves economically, so they were often not as educated as they would have been had their lives, their formal education, not been disrupted. It's likely, therefore, most wouldn't have written down what they went through. Oral history compensated them by making it transmittable. And it was much more direct and spontaneous this way. When you write a book you have some imagination of audience of course, but usually there isn't someone right in front of you. And here they had someone right there interested in what they were saying. Through the interviewer they must often have felt they were communicating with a much larger audience.

In each interview something inter-personal usually develops, a testimonial alliance, a 'chemistry' or bond between interviewer and testimony giver, though that may, of course, falter at times. Mostly we were able to maintain an essential trust relationship. This dynamic aspect was crucial to the testimonial event. Later on, one can speculate about the possible relief the interview gave, about psychic release and catharsis. That dynamic one can explore: its relevance to trauma and trauma theory. But we focused on enabling the survivors to tell the story, what they felt and saw, before, during, and after.

II. Collective Trauma and Personal Trauma; Nationalism in Particular

XQ: You talked about the communication of a collective trauma such as the Holocaust through personal testimonies and the chemistry between interviewer and interviewee. Yet I found in my research that many scholars are more interested in collective trauma rather than personal trauma. I want to hear more about your opinion on the relation between personal trauma and collective in this area. And do you think literature can help link the personal and the collective? In this sense, I am impressed by your analysis of Wordsworth's own psychological trauma in relation to national revolutions and politics. Could this be used as a model for literary analysis? That such an analysis channels a person's psychological crisis through large-scale social and political events?

GH: I would like to answer this question together with your next. You follow up with:

> As we can see in China and other parts of the world, public discussions of collectively-experienced traumatic events often lead to strong nationalist sentiments. The sentiments are not always and exclusively manipulated by the political authority. Rather, sometimes the emotional outbreaks among the victim community are deeply rooted in the particularity of the local culture and history. Personally I think that one of the major functions of trauma studies is to provide an antidote to the traumatized communities' radical nationalist sentiments. How you do understand the tension between trauma studies and the pervasiveness of competing nationalism around the world?

In response—one that may be a bit long and unwieldy—I would first confirm that my interest in trauma had, as you suggest, a distinctive literary focus years before I turned to the Holocaust and recognized the role of media witnessing. My main literary source was indeed Wordsworth, his reconnection in maturity with strong childhood

memories during a time of crisis in which his sense of personal as well as collective (British) Identity was threatened.

Wordsworth eventually composed an original kind of autobiography in verse, our first epic-length account of the "Growth of a Poet's Mind". He depicted a psychological development that included overwhelming yet formative childhood experiences, in which Nature appeared as an influential presence, a living environment fostering him by fear as well as beauty. These experiences, however different they were from massive and collective trauma, qualify as a personal traumatism. But the poet also describes an extreme moral and political shock in his early twenties ("a stride at once / into another region…")[5] when Britain turned in 1793 against France and its Revolution, betraying the hopes of a young generation. This betrayal is clearly traumatic, a definitive psychological shock—this time 'collective' in scope.

Remarkably, Wordsworth's recall of his earlier, intense and often frightening Nature experiences, which made him describe childhood as a heroic age, now comes to his aid. He sees those experiences as a providential pedagogy preparing him internally for later identity shocks. Nature's return via these recollections also returns to him his identity at this disorienting moment. He recovers his vocation of poet by removing from it the slur of *otium*, of ignoble leisure, envisioning his task that of assisting Nature, its role in human development at this turbulent time. In a period marked by the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and the Napoleonic wars (as well as industrial side effects such as urbanization and stimulus-flooding), his poetry would be devoted to preventing schismatic schemes of social reform.

He is particularly concerned with the gulf that had opened up between an older, agrarian sensibility and the absolutist fervor of radical 'New Man' ideologues. He had to preserve a sympathetic imagination, to widen the human sensibility rather than impose by revolutionary violence abstract ideas of progress—abstract in the sense of having been abstracted from and disregarding emotions deeply seeded by his early nature dependency. Nature, he claims in *The Prelude*, has its own way of developing the psyche toward the ideal of liberty. He

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5 William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805), Book 10, ll. 240-1.

interposes therefore what he had been tempted to disown: memories containing the vivid record of his early relation to the natural world, poetic testimony about the commonplace grandeur of the developmental process itself.

I come, then, to your crucial question of what antidote trauma studies might have for extreme nationalist sentiments. I will try to answer not as a student of clinical trauma (being totally unqualified to do that) but as one interested in psycho-aesthetics, and humanistic issues generally.

My simplest observation is that extreme nationalist sentiments are often fed by resentments, by "narratives of national victimhood". All political thought at that level of abstraction tends to be at once bloody and idealistic. The blood of martyrs for a great Cause, such as the establishing, perpetuating, or saving of a nation, seems to be imperative. Also, of course, the blood of the enemies of that Cause. At the founding of Rome an omen is said to have been discovered during excavations when the Capitol was built: a Bleeding Head.

The very hope, moreover, in a basic principle of equity, of social or international justice, together with its absence except as a fitful utopian lure, offers fertile grounds for disenchantment and civil strife. What Kenneth Burke called a "sinister unification", and attributed to Hitlerian national politics, had to find and did find a scapegoat, and led Germany to the Holocaust. The memory of a real or imaginary disaster (Germany losing the First World War because of a 'stab in the back', the postwar, catastrophic inflation of the early 1920s, the specter of Civil War) remains dangerously latent; and when the Nazis come to power a scapegoating propaganda is made to obsess the public mind. A hidden history of betrayal and subversion targets the Jews, unifies individual discontents, and inspires a hyper-nationalist ethos of cultural purity and exclusion. Today it seems incredible that the Nazis portrayed their murderous persecutions as a 'Defense of Culture'.

Then what can be the antidote, what remedy *could* trauma studies suggest to a political force deriving its legitimacy from trauma? If trauma always involves the terror of separation and isolation, perhaps we can adapt the thesis put forward in *The Fateful Question of Culture*. It argues that 'culture', as a word-concept, has accrued since the later

eighteenth century a specific semantic range pointing to our alienation from what is deemed to be 'natural'; from that kind of 'organic' relation to land or social organization, to 'agri-culture' in its broadest aspect. It is as if the increasing demands of modernity, such as specialization, the division of labor, and social classes defined by that division—in fact mankind's increasing sophistication generally (including the arts)—had wounded nature while freeing us from many of its limitations. The metaphor of 'wounding' is Friedrich Schiller's in the sixth letter of his *Aesthetic Education* (1795), where he portrays in large strokes a vast cultural trauma, the echo of which still resonates in Freud's *Culture and its Discontents* (1930).

The antidote to that wounding, that psychic trauma, is an uncertain cure, but it seeks to convert longing into belonging. What you call a "victim community deeply rooted in the particularity of the local culture and history", but feeling the loss of that rootedness, has an aspiration to live life fully and harmoniously again, in an embodied way, as a vital part of a sociality with perhaps a destined mission. The concept of 'nation' (together with family, tribe, and church as major collectives) is vital to that sense of belonging. Thus nationalism also has a normative side, expressive and bonding. By talking about its danger we are focusing on our historical experience of its abuse.

Looked at in itself, the solidarity of belonging consoles (if anything can) the solitariness of individuation. Nationalism, then, can be a force for the good or the bad. There is always a precarious balance. I am trying to think of a movie to make my point and illustrate the complexities. Consider Luis Puenzo's film about a child happily adopted by a woman who then gradually discovers that it had belonged to a 'disappeared' Argentinian mother.[6] Her sense of justice and obstinate pursuit of the truth threatens to break up the family, alienating the wife from a husband who is tainted by his association with the 1970s Junta, and who had arranged the adoption knowingly. It is hard to talk about

6 In Geoffrey Hartman's article 'Public memory and its discontents', he discusses this film, *The Official Story*, set in Argentina under the military dictatorship. It could also, he notes there, have been set in Easter Europe during the time of Soviet domination. See Hartman, 'Public memory', *The Geoffrey Hartman Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), pp. 415–31, esp. p. 417.

antidotes because there is so often the complicity of being trapped by a past political crime or national trauma, wishing to move beyond it, yet forced back into separation instead of community: into alienating doubt, despair, renewed isolation, dispiriting compromise.

Again, it is not that national feelings and strivings for solidarity cannot be valued. On this issue fictional mimesis—film, theater, novel—are immensely helpful. They usually depict the personal struggle as well, and do not inevitably demonize opposing purposes or teleologies. Which is to say that respect for the individual remains essential. Otherwise the dominant political system, especially if it lacks a constitutional 'balance of power' among the main governing branches, will be able to enforce the kind of fear and terror that causes rather than mitigates trauma.[7]

It is good that you pick up on "Wordsworth's personal psychological trauma in relation to national revolutions and politics" and its potential "as a model for a literary analysis that channels a person's psychological crisis through large-scale social and political events". This channeling is what the field of cultural studies is inclined to do. If I deal somewhat critically with it in *The Fateful Question of Culture* it is because we should not lose sight of the personal element in trauma.[8]

I hope I have shown that Wordsworth's case is especially telling in that his individualistic quest runs parallel to a critical socio-economic phase of a society in transition. Today we call that phase modernization. Many developing countries are still compelled to pass from a basic agrarian economy with its peasantry and family farms to an industrialized economy, and so to the massive use of machinery (foreshadowing, alas, the deadly rather than productive machinery of war). Ironically, 'cultural' intervention itself can exacerbate the trauma when government tries to achieve by a coercive scheme of re-education a great leap forward from its agrarian base to industrialization.

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7 After the interview Geoffrey Hartman additionally introduced here the reparative (anti-traumatic) concepts of 'Homo Ludens' and Herbert Marcuse's post-Schiller aesthetic reflections; see Johann Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-element in Culture* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1949). He also mentioned his essay 'Art, consensus, and progressive politics', published in *A Critic's Journey: Literary Reflections 1958–1998* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 272–82.

8 *The Fateful Question of Culture* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1998).

But I wish to return to the work of the Yale Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies. That work assures our not forgetting the personal instance. There is a collective dimension, of course, a confirmation and convergence of the historical facts and those reported in the witness accounts. Yet the reportage itself speaks to the enduring individuality of people in the camps stripped of everything but the barest subsistence. In social realism, however, the subject in the subject position is always the collective. It is important to have the testimonies, whether or not they add to what we know of the historical facts. Each testimony is the cry of an individual. One should honor the spirit of such documentation projects, otherwise you risk losing hope in individual agency, given the enormity of what happened.

XQ: According to what you have said, an antidote to using, or rather abusing collective traumas of the past in order to establish and promote nationalism, would be to 'go down' to personal memories and individual memories rather than collective ones…

GH: Well, but how do you get to individual memories?

XQ: Literature might be a good choice, like fiction and memoirs…

GH: Yet I would never claim our oral testimonies are literary. At least not in the conventional sense—although striking figures of speech do occur in them. Yes, literature is larger than fiction, but still the testimonies are demotic. You know what I mean. They are not the organized response of an elite. The testimonies are spontaneous on the whole; they have a texture and diction which are much freer, even if in the modern period literature has freed itself to be as vernacular as it likes. But you feel the spontaneity. You feel that this oral "literature of testimony" is more alive than the usual transcriptions of memory. You don't feel it to be a mediated transcription of something. It comes directly at you. And this is part of the subjective, performative aspect, which one does not want to leave out of mind while stressing the collective aspect.

Now in recent literature we do have creative experiments like the 'non-fiction novel' or 'faction'. John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, and Truman

Capote's *In Cold Blood* (based closely on a real life incident) present us with a mimesis where reality is more recognizably present than in fiction. Yet the testimonies are not 'vernacularized' for effect but speak to us expressively, even when in faltering English. That is why we can call them a new genre. A new communicative genre. That is also why I emphasize a link between education and video testimony: the testimonies should be known and thought about, not only for their important, moving content but also in the hope that viewers will understand that their talking head simplicity is counter-videomatic. It communicates, that is, not by a simulated reproduction of the narrated events but by coming as close to an 'I-Thou' situation as possible.

This allows me to turn back to the very first question you raised: you asked about what has interested me after deconstruction (not that I ever was a 'boa-deconstructor'). I would say that media witnessing, and thinking about the role of the media generally, are absolutely essential today and require constant critical wariness. This is the case for some very obvious reasons and not only because the media reach a potentially vast (if virtual) audience. Media literacy is necessary because our capacity for the reality-testing of what they communicate is increasingly jeopardized. Since Marshal McLuhan's optimistic boosting of the Mechanical Bride, the issue of the dark side of the media, how they habituate and shape our sensibility, has come to the fore. Call it a necessity to explore the media's apparent realism and less apparent derealization. The fact that so much information today is technologically mediated when 'apparently' it is unmediated, and that television in particular makes communication seem very direct, even while we know perfectly well that its production backs onto a huge machinery of people and electronic devices—may this not eventually atrophy our ability to test the reality of what is being shown? "What is truth," says every jesting politician, and skilled editor-splicer. A rational fear arises "that the world of appearances and the world of propaganda have merged through the power of the media".[9]

9 'Public memory and modern experience', in *A Critic's Journey*, pp. 262–71, quotation, p. 267. Similar points are also elaborated in Hartman's *Scars of the Spirit: The Struggle against Inauthenticity* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

This state of affairs points to a collective trauma—or are we already too desensitized to realize it?

Even the testimonies could be affected. I look at this screen image and after a while imagine someone saying, "How do I know this witness is not an actor?" Everything has to be authenticated; in an era of simulacra the struggle against the inauthentic is unceasing.

III. True and Falsified Memories; Politicized and Ideological Memory

XQ: In your article 'Public Memory and its Discontents'[10] you seem to be very critical towards a politicized and ideological memory. You label it "falsified memory". I have two questions based on my understanding of your ideas: First, do you believe that there exists a true memory in, for example, testimonies given by individual survivors? Otherwise, how can one effectively differentiate 'true' and 'false' memories? Second, if it is impossible to articulate the 'true' traumatic memory in certain contexts (for example, a victim community may find it impossible to put their experience into words right after the traumatic event), do you think politics and ideology can ever play a positive role to help the victim speak out their experiences, even though in a modified or distorted way? Can the tension between different political powers lend impetus to the discovery or re-discovery of the true memory?

GH: My remarks on "falsified memory" come in the context of political tampering, such as the remaking of a historical event by effacing from a published photo the presence of a politician fallen from favor. There is an intent to change the Official Story and doctor further a collective memory. Falsification within the *personal* memory, however, as in the context of trauma, requires a deeper analysis than that yielding a 'true'/'false' result. But when you ask how you can differentiate true from false memories, let me first clear something away.

I assume, then, we are not talking about simple mistakes that involve easily corrected dates (such as placing something in 1942 rather than 1944) or more interesting mistakes, like that discussed by Dori Laub,

10 Hartman, 'Public memory', p. 426 in particular.

when a survivor claims four crematoria were blown up by the inmate revolt at Auschwitz rather than one.[11]

You emphasize trauma, and at the same time wish to keep the true/false dichotomy. If there was and still is trauma, however, some alleged facts may be false in one (literal) respect and true in another (i.e. figuratively)—as in literature with its figures of speech or dream-logic condensations (and in this respect testimonies are sporadically literary). An example is that so many prisoners claim they saw Mengele at work.[12] He would have had to preside over selections 48 hours a day. 'Mengele' has become retrospectively a symbol, the (distinguished!) metonymy for a judgment scene deciding for each new KZ arrival life or death. A more complex instance is when, challenged by the true/false dichotomy, we cannot answer trenchantly except to say that a certain memory may be false… and true. Thus, so many years after the Nazi regime, can we be certain that everything recounted has been actually experienced in person by the testimony giver, and not influenced here and there by the media, say by Spielberg's *Schindler's List*? Or, a more hypothetical case, what if a survivor adopts as his own the camp experiences of a companion, who, before dying, may have asked him to remember his story, perhaps even encouraged him to live on in order to transmit it? To whom does that life-and-death story 'truly' belong?

XQ: But if the person who survived, quite consciously, deliberately appropriates another's story without that 'permission' or urging…?

GH: Given the traumatic circumstances, the story can be judged to be more important than an exact attribution. There was a time in literary history when oral transmission was anonymous and a collective enterprise. This does not mean, however, that one should condone someone like Binjamin Wilkomirski, who writes a memoir in which he claims to have been held in a concentration camp in Poland for four years

11 In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Dori Laub writes about a woman survivor's testimony on the Auschwitz uprising. She recalls that she saw four chimneys were going up in flames, while only one chimney was blown up (pp. 59–63).
12 Mengele was a medical officer at Auschwitz. He met incoming prisoners and decided who was to be killed and who was to be retained for work.

as a young child. That is being a memory thief.[13] Yet even there you can apply trauma theory and ask what psychogenic process is involved when someone without any relation to the Holocaust writes so hauntingly and persuasively about it. We are again faced with an appropriation, inauthentic this time, yet showing once more how difficult it is to police the truth of something that has entered so publicly and widely the literary domain. In the case of Wilkomirski I suspect memory envy. There are those who prefer to distinguish themselves by 'entering history' through painful memories rather than live without a significant past.

But more to the point of your main concern:

> Can politics and ideology ever play a positive role to help the victim speak out their experiences, even though in a modified or distorted way? Can the tension between different political powers lend impetus to the discovery or re-discovery of the true memory?

These are loaded questions. You switch from issues of truthful testimony to what can facilitate the victim speaking out. Surely you would agree that untruth or distorted truth is harmful, whatever its positive, cathartic effect. You imply, I think, as I add your follow-up query, that all discourse has an ideological/political slant, so that in a situation where there is some freedom of expression, where there still is a choice that allows "tension between different political powers", it should be possible to inscribe oneself (by what Derrida calls "paleonymy") into an existing and permitted mode of speech.

It may be possible; but my hunch is that fiction has a better chance to outwit censorship. To explain let me first turn to a self-imposed instance. In order to be heard, to gain an audience, both Aharon Appelfeld and Jorge Semprun, Holocaust survivors, indicate that their novels *understate* the harsh reality of their experience. To try and tell

13 See Binjamin Wilkomirski, *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1996). The author claimed the book to be his own biography, but later it was proved to be fully fabricated. 'The Memory Thief' is a 2007 film by Gil Kofman.

it as it was, would risk disbelief. Fiction, to be effective, must respect the criterion of probability. Semprun's formula is that he aims at the 'veridique' rather than the 'vrai'.

While I am skeptical, then, that a 'true memory' can be communicated, should the pressure for modifying it come from a specific politics or ideology, I do have some confidence that even with such repressions in force artists are skilful enough to convey a direction by indirections. I appreciate, moreover, that you raise your questions in a Chinese context after the Cultural Revolution, when "it was difficult for us to recall the past right after those traumatic experiences, because they were too miserable and sometimes they mean a total negation…". But you still insist, "Though the experience was distorted in some way, I will nevertheless think that without that ideology the story cannot be told at all."

I can think only of one constraint that does not qualify as an internalized political ideology. From early on, from Horace and then Chaucer to the authors I have already mentioned, there are formulas that hint at the fact that the hard truth will have no reception without 'sweeteners', as they are sometimes called.

I refer to a response intrinsic to literature as an institution, and that counters—even outwits to a degree—the external pressures you have outlined. Within literature, as within social conventions generally, there is a strong *euphemistic* element, and as some of these euphemisms wear out, new, more potent or ingenious periphrastic euphemisms are invented. In that way a civilized—or at least an acceptable and even intriguing mode of expression—at once allows and restricts an unsettling realism.

What is experienced in periods of trauma, personal or collective, cannot be directly communicated without renewing the memory of an offense. It is not only, in extreme cases, the victim who is wounded again, or a society unwilling to be reminded, but our species image, our very conception of humanity itself.

I venture, then, to define verbalized trauma as a compromise formation, as speech under the condition of speechlessness. That means you do manage creatively to express yourself although the basic situation is the presence of too much mental pain. Yet you find your voice by a

process that can be characterized by a remarkable metaphor: “the voice of the shuttle”.[14]

That fragmentary phrase, quoted by Aristotle’s *Poetics* from a Greek play now lost, is based on the House of Atreus core of stories. They furnish quite a few plots for the extant corpus of Greek tragedies. The “voice of the shuttle” sounds enigmatic but condenses the story of Philomela who was raped, then had her tongue cut out. She suffers a double violation. The way she handles it is by weaving a tapestry depicting her rape; this, the “voice of the shuttle”, becomes her voice. It is an image pointing to a saving metamorphosis, and it is always in my mind when thinking about trauma and the possibility of art finding a ‘speechless’ speech to express trauma.

IV. Theory and After Theory

XQ: How do you locate trauma studies among the cross-currents of various schools of critical theories? For example, its relation to other preceeding theories such as deconstruction. If, as some critics have claimed, the time of theory has already passed, what theoretical approaches remain valid and relevant in trauma studies? Moreover, what new possibilities do trauma studies suggest for the future of theoretical thinking?

GH: I have always been wary of *isms* by which we establish our brand. Such *isms* are forced on us for marketing or power-purposes. You are talking with someone who is basically an essayist, exploring ideas already swarming all around, as well as those generated directly by his own sensibility. I find a beauty in the construction of large ideas; but what was constructed can also be deconstructed. The dismantling, or disclosing and critique of underlying assumptions, does not necessarily invalidate them: it shows a need to discover an Archimedean point strong and stable enough to provide a true center, or lever for thought,

14 See Geoffrey Hartman, ‘The voice of shuttle: language from the point of view of literature’, in *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays, 1958–1970* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 337–55.

a leverage called theory… There can be, then, no after-theory, just less or more theory than usual.

My attraction to literature, to poetry in particular, and to a process of interpretation undoing previous attempts by questioning the positivity of what was alleged, and keeping the mind open as long as possible for a new determination of meaning, simply transfers to the reading of texts a principle of "negative capability", an empathetic openness of feeling (countering our "grasping after fact and reason") the poet John Keats considered essential to the creative, poetic mentality itself.

Linguistic dexterity signaling ventures in discursive types of thought can be creative too; I often appreciate innovative technical terms even in the humanities (that word itself had to be coined, once upon a time). So I engaged with Derrida's *Glas*, a book immensely inventive in tackling the very idea of closure and of 'The Book'. Derrida overcomes the container effect by cleverly heightening it, making us conscious of caesura-like cuts, the square angles of the page, the justified print. Think of architects playing with, because they cannot prevail over, the boxiness of houses.

Glas is full of linguistic devices as well, and daring juxtapositions of two major prose genres: philosophy and literature. One cannot touch down in it without being ambushed by expansive allusions to the realm of modern French culture, from Surrealism to its reception of Hegel and Heidegger despite two bitter wars with Germany. Derrida's referential webwork produces a near-poetic type of density, a texture the opposite of what is now called texting, yet which occasionally uses similar devices. *Glas* speaks to us already through its facades, a left-hand column starting with a quote from Hegel's *Phenomenology*, and a right-hand column with a quote from Genet, and adopting the double columned page of the Genet work from which that quote comes. It speaks also of the defining even wounding power of words, of their excess and detritus.

Embedded, perhaps via Sartre's interpretation of Genet's biography, is a word-vocative, something like the "you thief!" that may have wounded Genet and determined his persona, if not also his identity.[15]

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15 See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, trans. Bernard Fretchman (New York, NY: George Braziller, 1963).

(Is Derrida too a thief of sorts, self-accused, stealing as it were by a necessary recycling, bricolage, or higher plagiarism the words of others?) By a path too devious to trace here, but which suggests a link to trauma studies, Derrida shows how Genet 'redeems' his mother through an extraordinary *illustration* (in the French meaning of the word) of the mother tongue: its enrichment, here also a sublime desecration, within the defiantly abject context of a male convict's homosexual imagination.

In brief, language is always what remains and cannot be totally remaindered. It is the indefeasible part of any subject of discourse, and not just the means to an end, to a transcendent meaning or concept. As to the subject of literature in particular, that would seem to be strongly involved with the intricate relation of words and wounds[16]—wounding because too defining or not defining enough, promissory and deceptive, socially shaming (a *faux pas*) or outright, deadly slanderous.

Others will have to define my contribution to the present scene of criticism, beyond my interest in psycho-aesthetics. What I tried to do from the sixties through the eighties in *Criticism in the Wilderness* and *Saving the Text: Literature/Derrida/Philosophy* was to acquaint the Anglo-American intellectual milieu with some of the riches of Continental thought. My follow-up interest in Midrash, the major exegetical Jewish commentary tradition tied to the Hebrew Bible, continued this attempt to broaden the literary-critical spectrum.

But how long can criticism escape an ideological or teleological commitment, that kind of closure? It does have, I think, a generic commitment not to displace the literary text by whatever sociopolitical (or other anti-superstructural) perspective is applied. Socialist Realism, which you mention, in so far as in treating literature as social text its insights do not diminish or seriously distort, is as valuable as Sartre's *Situations*, or Lucasz on the novel, or Auerbach in *Mimesis*. The same holds for the New Historicism's conversion of literature into social text. But if interpretive reading harbors a secret wish to get rid of the text, as if thinking could or should do without it, we lose too much. Similarly if

16 See Hartman's 'Words and wounds' in *Saving the Text: Literature/Derrida/Philosophy*. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), pp. 118–57. Reprinted for the most part in *The Geoffrey Hartman Reader*.

interpretive reading harbors the wish to get rid of all texts but one, we eventually kill off thought as well. The interpretive activity in that case becomes missionary propaganda or *dirigisme*. Both may have been necessary as a phase when Mao converts his own writings into a Scripture (albeit a secular Scripture) and binds together his foundational followers by what David Apter called "exegetical bonding".[17] Exegetical bonding itself is a good: the problem lies in having but a single imposed, all-thought-displacing text.

I seem to have wandered far from your original starting point: trauma theory and its potential contribution as an antidote for ideologically imposed or "discursive" violence. But an exploration of 'Words and Wounds' seems, at the very least, a prerequisite. We have to recognize and analyze the power of words, especially on younger persons, the formation of the collective, cultural memory, and do exactly what you are doing: describe this as calmly as possible, and show how that power, that control, may have been abused. So thinking and writing about it are essential. They are the only weapon we have. I don't see any other but an intellectual critique undoing that kind of damage.

17 See David E. Apter and Tony Saich, 'Exegetical bonding and the phenomenology of confession', in *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao's Republic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 263–93.

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